



'A dark, twisted thrill ride ... and a beautiful tribute to friendship and family'

LAINI TAYLOR

# THE BRINK OF DARKNESS

TO SAVE YOUR FUTURE,  
WOULD YOU FACE THE PAST?

JEFF GILES

BLOOMSBURY

THE  
BRINK  
OF  
DARKNESS

J E F F G I L E S

BLOOMSBURY

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# Prologue

HE SAW HER AT last—she was up on the grassy dune above the harbor, a pale shape cut out of the darkness.

How long had it been since X had seen her? He had no way of knowing. He'd been in his cell in the Lowlands, deep in the earth, where there was no clock, no sun, no future, only the dead and damned.

She hadn't noticed him yet. She was searching for him, her eyes everywhere. He stood on the dock below her. It creaked and floated up and down, like the water beneath it was breathing.

"Here!" he called.

She turned toward him. She beamed.

"I know that face," she said.

X spread his fingers, and a soft corridor of light appeared—a trail for her to follow to the water. She started down the hill too quickly. She stumbled, fell on her knees, pushed herself up without bothering to brush off the sand.

“Hi, I’m Zoe and I’m a runway model,” she said.

He smiled. He hadn’t in a long time.

“I love your voice,” he said, “even if your meaning eludes me on occasion.”

“My meaning eludes everybody on occasion,” she said.

He tried not to rush at her when she reached the dock. He was afraid he’d alarm her. She ran at *him* anyway. She kissed his cheeks, his chin, his forehead. He did the same to her, and they laughed at how frantic they were: they couldn’t find each other’s lips.

“How much time have we got?” she said.

“A few hours, at most,” he said. “Then I must return to the Lowlands with the soul they sent me to capture.”

Zoe slid her hands under his shirt. Something like silver spread through his chest.

“We need a boat,” she said. “I’m having a sudden urge to lie in a boat with you.”

“I would lie in a boat with you until the sun dried up all the sea,” he said. “When I was young—”

She breathed into his neck.

“Less talking and more boat-getting,” she said.

X scanned the harbor. There was a cluster of fishing boats. Otherwise the water lay empty. He peered at the end of the dock, where it seemed to narrow to a point in the dark, and saw an orange rowboat tied to an iron cleat.

Zoe stepped into it first, spreading her arms for balance as it rolled beneath her. A seat—a wide wooden plank—bisected the boat.

“We can’t lie down in here,” she said. “There’s not enough room.”

X shattered the plank with his fist, then tossed the scraps onto the dock.

“That’ll work,” said Zoe.

X laid his coat on the floorboards, and went to untie the boat. The knot was complicated, so he just yanked the cleat off the dock. Again, the sound of splintering wood ricocheted through the harbor.

“Man, they are *never* gonna give you a job here,” said Zoe. She frowned. “I’ve got to stop with the jokes. I just can’t believe you’re here—and by the time I *do* believe it, you’ll be gone.”

Whoever owned the boat had taken the oars. X crouched next to Zoe, and pushed the craft away from the dock with a superhuman shove. They flew backward so fast that the boat nearly left the water. Waves rose on either side, and spilled in around their feet.

X had a plan he longed to tell Zoe about, but he was impatient to feel her hands again.

“I beseech you,” he said, “do not darken the moments we can be together by dwelling on the moments we cannot.”

Zoe pulled him down by the front of his shirt.

“I like it when you beseech me,” she said. “Beseech me some more.”

# ONE

SOMETIMES ZOE FELT AS if she were being hollowed out bit by bit. She had lost so many people in the last six months, and every one of them had carried part of her away. Eventually, she'd be like one of those chocolate Easter bunnies that the stores were suddenly selling again—you could poke her with your finger and her heart would cave in.

It was a Saturday morning in Montana. Early March. Zoe was driving her decrepit old Taurus to a memorial service for Bert and Betty Wallace. The farmlands were drab, gray brown, just starting to recover from winter. Zoe was thinking about the Wallaces, but also about her father and X. She'd had to say good-bye to them all in one way or another. She prayed that her father would never come back—and that somehow X would. She hadn't seen either of them since a terrible day in the snowy woods.

Her friends Val and Dallas were in the car, too. Val looked beautiful, though she hated church clothes: half her head was shaved,

the other half a futuristic silvery blue. Dallas was dressed like a jock at an awards dinner (navy blazer with gold buttons, khaki pants, tie decorated with baseballs), and there was a round Band-Aid on the cleft of his chin, where he'd cut himself shaving. Zoe used to go out with Dallas. Kind of, sort of, a little. She thought he looked adorable. Val, she knew, had no patience for him. Val was convinced that Dallas still had a thing for Zoe—he insisted he was going to ask out a girl named Mingyu, but kept putting it off—plus, Zoe had told Val that Dallas used to flex his pecs when they made out.

Zoe had agreed to give Bert and Betty's eulogy even though she dreaded public speaking. The Wallaces had been like grandparents to Zoe and her little brother, Jonah. She'd written out every word of her speech on orange index cards, which sat in a stack on the dashboard. She needed the cards because once she stepped up to the lectern, she expected to go into a terrified fugue state where anything, including ancient Egyptian, might come out of her mouth.

She turned onto Twin Bridges Road. The stack of index cards collapsed, and slid across the dashboard in a smooth orange stripe. Val gathered them up.

"You okay?" she said.

"No," said Zoe. "I'm kind of underwater."

"Do you want me to make fun of Dallas?" said Val. "Would that help? I'm willing to do that for you."

"No, but thank you," said Zoe. "You're sweet."

"Wait, whoa, how is that sweet?" said Dallas.

He leaned forward between the seats. Val pushed his fuzzy, buzz-cut head away, saying, "Back in your cage."

Zoe drove across Flathead Valley. In the distance, the mountains still shone with snow.

“Do you want me to talk about nature?” said Val. It was a joke: Val liked being indoors. “Look at all the nature!”

“You’re not helping, dawg,” said Dallas. “I’m going to rap for you, Zoe. Val, give me a beat.”

“On what planet do you think I would give you a beat?” said Val. She looked at Zoe. “Don’t you dare give him a beat.”

Dallas rapped anyway: “My lyrics *devastate* / Check this *flow* I create . . .”

“Really?” said Val. “This is happening?”

Zoe smiled, but just couldn’t swim up to the surface—it was like her legs were tangled in seaweed. She glanced at the cards in Val’s hand. She had rewritten the first sentence of the Wallaces’ eulogy 11 times, crumpling so many index cards in the process that the wastebasket by her desk looked like it was full of orange flowers.

Betty had taught Zoe how to use an ax—and Jonah how to knit. Bert, even when he’d gotten senile, used to cut pictures of cute animals out of the newspaper and mail them to the Bissells. Jonah taped them all over his walls. And then, two months ago, a man named Stan Manggold had burst into the Wallaces’ home looking for money, and beaten them to death with a fireplace poker.

One of the things that Zoe found hardest was that she couldn’t tell Val and Dallas the whole story—the before and the after. How could she? It sounded implausible even to her. So just when she needed to talk most—to vent and grieve—her life had become about managing secrets.

Should she tell them that the nightmare had started with her father? That he had been such a failure as a businessman that he’d sunk to committing crimes with a childhood friend—and that the childhood friend was a sociopath named Stan Manggold? Should

she tell them that her father had suggested they rob the Wallaces? That he got scared and had second thoughts? That, when Stan blackmailed him, he was such a coward that he faked his own death in a cave, abandoned his family and ran?

Zoe tried not to let the memories in. But as she pulled up to a stop sign, the Taurus bounced hard in a rut and in that instant, in that tiny moment of fear, her defenses went down and everything came rushing back, like birds to a bare tree.

Stan had gone through with the robbery alone, and murdered Bert and Betty while he was at it. Weeks later, during a blizzard, he returned to their house, convinced they had money stashed somewhere. Zoe and Jonah were there, waiting out the storm. It made Zoe sick just to remember Stan's face: the pockmarked skin, the pink slash of a mouth, the creepy white eyebrow that wriggled like a caterpillar.

Zoe checked for traffic before turning left. There was a fluorescent green SUV coming. It slowed to let her pull out. Dallas was still freestyling—his rap seemed to be exclusively about how good his rap was—but he paused long enough to say, “Look out for the deer.”

There were two of them up ahead in the wet field, a doe and her fawn. They were just nosing around in the dead grass. They weren't going anywhere.

“I see them,” said Zoe.

Dallas started rapping again.

“My rhymes are *unstoppable* / Like a photo that's *uncroppable*.”

Val, miserable, banged her forehead against the dashboard.

Zoe remembered seeing X for the first time. He had come to take Stan's soul to the Lowlands. X was just a blur, a streak of light shooting across the frozen lake near the Wallaces' house. Zoe begged X

to let Stan go. She told him that it was wrong to kill somebody—that it wasn't his job. She hadn't known then that it actually was.

Zoe checked the rearview mirror. The SUV was too close. It was a new model, its front end designed to look like a sports car. Even if it hadn't been a pukey green, it would have looked ridiculous. Its license plate was RELOADN.

*Great, thought Zoe, a hunter.*

She slowed, and waved the driver around, but the guy just flicked his high beams so she'd hurry up.

"Seriously?" she said.

She glanced at the deer. They had started toward the road, but she'd be gone by the time they made it there.

How do you tell your friends that you've fallen for a bounty hunter from the underworld? How do you tell them that you jeopardized your life for him, and that you would do it again right now, right this very second? Val and Dallas wouldn't even know what the Lowlands were. She'd have to call the place hell. How do you say a sentence like that out loud? Would it help if she told them that X was an innocent, that he was *born* in the Lowlands? That he was a prisoner himself—and for no reason? The lords sent X to collect evil souls from the world from time to time, but that just reminded him of the life he could never have. The minute he returned with a soul, the lords threw him back into his cell, like it was a mouth they were feeding.

X had forged a family in the Lowlands. One of the lords who ruled the place, Regent, protected him as much as he could. And there was a badass British woman named Ripper who'd trained X to be a bounty hunter. She had worn the same golden ball gown since 1832, when she was damned to the Lowlands for beating a clumsy servant to death with a teakettle. Zoe had met Ripper and

loved her, despite the thing with the teakettle. Ripper was on the run from the Lowlands now. She was up in the real world somewhere, searching for her children's graves, which she had never seen.

So, yes, there were people who cared about X even in that hole in the earth. But the unfairness of him spending his life in a cell when he'd never done *anything* wrong, when he'd never even lived—it hollowed Zoe out.

She couldn't tell Val and Dallas any of this. How could she? They were right there, but they were a thousand miles away.

Zoe gripped the steering wheel harder, and sank into her thoughts. She was only dimly aware of Dallas rapping, of Val riffling the orange index cards impatiently, of the SUV surging behind her, of the farmlands flowing past.

"*Deer,*" Dallas said again.

Zoe nodded, and sped up. The driver in the SUV closed the gap between them, then flicked his high beams again.

People: the worst.

Zoe remembered X carrying her and Jonah home through the woods after she convinced him to let Stan go. She remembered how dazed and feverish he got because he hadn't done what the lords told him to do. X spent days recovering at the Bissells' house, sleeping in Jonah's bed, which was shaped like a ladybug, and bathing in the freezing river. But then Stan murdered someone else. X, battered by guilt, left Zoe to hunt him down again and bring him to the Lowlands. Zoe remembered the way X kissed her good-bye—he'd lifted her off the slushy driveway because she only had socks on.

Once X was back in the underworld, he had demanded his freedom. The lords made him a cruel offer: he could be free forever if he returned to the world and brought them one more soul.

But the soul was Zoe's father.

X had searched for him, and found him in the woods in Canada. He brought Zoe there so she could confront her father about what he'd done to her family.

In the end, X couldn't bring himself to take the man's life. The lords of the Lowlands were enraged. They lashed out at Zoe's family to remind X that he'd failed again and that he was theirs forever. An unhinged lord named Dervish led the attack, destroying the Bissells' house and nearly killing Jonah. So X dove back into the earth. He had sacrificed himself because he refused to do anything that hurt Zoe. But his leaving—what could have hurt her more?

Hundreds of times a day, Zoe would think of him and, just for an instant, it was like he stood in front of her: gorgeous, pale, afraid of nothing, wanting only her. A half second later she'd remember that he was gone. The heat and the hope would vanish and it was like she'd been punched in the gut. But this was the thing: That instant before the pain leveled her? The moment before the remembering? It was worth it.

"DEER!" said Dallas. "Zoe, what the hell?"

The doe and the fawn had jumped the ditch that ran along the side of the road. They were racing to cross in front of the car.

A spike of dread hit Zoe's blood.

She stepped on the gas, but the pathetic, piece-of-shit car had zero pickup. Val clenched for a crash.

The SUV was practically on top of them.

RELOADN—what did *he* care if Zoe hit the deer? He'd have the doe strapped to his roof within minutes. He didn't see deer, he saw venison.

You weren't supposed to swerve to avoid a deer. It was better to

run into them than to cause an accident. Zoe knew it. Everybody in Montana did. The guy who'd taught Driver's Ed—sad-faced and chubby and always wearing the same chocolate-brown sweater, which was unraveling at the wrist—started every class by saying, "I want to go to your weddings, not your funerals."

Zoe had maybe a second and a half to decide what to do.

She had seen what deer looked like when they died. She'd heard the deceptively soft *thump* they made when the bumper hit them. She'd seen how they went rigid in a split second, how they flew through the air, stiff as stuffed animals.

She knew she should hit the doe and the fawn, but—maybe it was because she'd been thinking about X—all she saw when she looked at them was innocent creatures.

The fawn struggled to keep up with its mother. Its rickety legs were a blur, its frail back speckled white, as if with snowflakes. She could see its big, wet eyes.

*Dammit.*

Zoe stomped on the brake.

The car stopped so suddenly it seemed to jump. They shot forward in their seats.

The deer darted safely across the road.

Val screamed involuntarily when the SUV struck them from behind.

ZOE TRIED TO PULL off the road, but the vehicles' bumpers had twisted together. The driver jabbed his horn three times—long, longer, longest—then burst out of the SUV.

He stalked up to Zoe's window, and banged on it hard.

“Roll this down!” he said. “Right this goddamn second!”

He looked about 50—doughy and pale, with blue eyes set too close together. He wore a baseball cap with a sexist silhouette of a woman and the words “Booty Hunter.”

Zoe made sure Val and Dallas weren’t hurt, then looked at the clock on the dash. They had ten minutes to get to the church.

She fished for her insurance card in the glove compartment. When she found it, she breathed out, and rolled down the window.

“My name is Zoe Bissell,” she said. “I’m sorry about your car.”

“It’s not a *car*,” he said. “It’s a friggin’ *truck*.”

He was seething. His pupils were so dilated that Zoe suspected he was high on something.

“I’m sorry about your truck,” she said carefully.

“I don’t give a shit about your *I’m sorry*,” he said.

From the passenger seat, Val spoke under her breath.

“I don’t like this guy—and his hat is pissing me off,” she said. “I’m getting out.”

“Stay,” said Dallas.

“Did you just tell me to *stay*?” said Val.

“You’re gonna make it worse,” said Dallas. “I’ll handle this.”

“No, I will handle it,” said Zoe. “*Both* of you stay.”

She went to open her door, but the man stood too close. He was trapping her in. He seemed to be deciding if he was going to let her out. Finally, he backed up.

Not much damage had been done to Zoe’s Taurus—it was hard to make the Struggle Buggy look any worse—but the SUV’s sporty front end was decimated. The headlights were smashed, the grille was sagging. The hood had popped open and been folded in half.

“You see what you damn did?” the man said. “That is a brand-new, thirty-eight-thousand-dollar vehicle right there, fresh off the motherfrickin’ lot—and that color green costs extra!”

“I didn’t want to kill the deer,” said Zoe.

“Oh, the deer!” said the man. “The precious friggin’ deer! Who gives a rat’s ass if they live or die. There’s about a billion of them, you dumb bitch!”

At the word “bitch,” Zoe’s friends got out of the car.

Dallas, whose first instinct was always to calm people down, offered the man his hand.

“What’s your name?” he said.

The man looked at him like he was nuts.

“My name is *go to hell*, you little prick,” he said.

“Okay, stop,” said Zoe. “You’re going to have to *turn down your crazy*. It’s just a car.”

“IT’S A FRIGGIN’ TRUCK!”

He screamed it so loud that a bolt of pain seemed to go through his head. He doubled over, and covered his face with his hands. When he straightened up again, Zoe blanched: the guy had burst a blood vessel in his left eye. A red cloud crept across the white of the eye toward the iris.

“Come on, what’s your name?” said Dallas. “I’m Dallas.”

“It’s Ronny, for god’s sake,” said the man.

“Hey, Ronny,” said Dallas. “This doesn’t need to be a thing.”

“It’s already a damn thing!” said Ronny. “It *became* a damn thing when she made me crash the thirty-eight-thousand-dollar vehicle my mother *just* gave me for my birthday!”

He was getting more angry, not less. Zoe didn’t like how close he was. He had morning breath.

“Could you take a step back, please?” she said.

He ignored her.

“She asked you to step back,” said Val.

Ronny looked Val up and down. He made a show, as men often did, of being appalled by her half-shaved head and the sci-fi color of her hair.

“What are you, her girlfriend?” he said.

“No,” said Val, “I’m into fat, middle-aged guys.”

“Val!” said Zoe.

Ronny snorted.

“You couldn’t even handle what I got,” he told Val.

“I’m calling the police,” said Val.

“Yeah?” said Ronny. “They’re gonna be too late.”

He charged to the back of his SUV, and returned with a rifle.

“Whoa, Ronny,” said Dallas. “*Whoa.*”

Ronny hit Dallas in the stomach with the butt of the gun.

“STOP! CALLING ME! RONNY!”

Dallas fell to all fours, gasping. The tie with the baseballs dangled down toward the road. Zoe went to him.

“I’m okay,” said Dallas, when he could speak again. “I’m okay.”

Ronny beat Zoe’s hood with the rifle.

“How do *you* like it?” he screamed. Zoe couldn’t tell if he was talking to her or the car. “This feel good? Does it?”

Dallas tried to stand—he wanted to stop Ronny.

“No,” Zoe said. “Let him do it. I don’t care.”

She looked around for help, but they were in the middle of nowhere: fields, trees, sky. No cars for miles.

Then something caught her eye across the farmland: a bluish glow in the woods.

The rifle went off. Ronny was shooting out her headlights. The *cracks* echoed across the valley.

“How’s *that* feel?” he said. “How about *this*?”

Val filmed Ronny on her phone as he bashed the car: evidence.

Zoe turned back to the trees. The light was morphing. It had been diffuse, like a mist on the ground, but now it gathered itself into a ball.

She went to the side of the road. A blurry figure hurtled toward them.

It had to be X.

How had he gotten out of the Lowlands? How had he known to come? Zoe squinted into the distance. He was still out of focus, still a smudge.

“There’s stuff I didn’t tell you guys about X,” she told Val and Dallas.

“This is a good topic for *later*,” said Val.

“Yeah, why are you bringing this up now?” said Dallas.

He leaned against the SUV. His shirt was untucked, and he was gripping his stomach.

“Because things are gonna get weird,” said Zoe.

Everyone followed her gaze across the field.

The figure was nearly on them. Ronny lowered his rifle, dumbfounded.

“You are *so* screwed,” Zoe told him.

The figure slowed as it approached the road.

Zoe felt her heart shrink and nearly vanish when she saw that it wasn’t X.

# TWO

RIPPER GAVE ZOE A slight nod, then advanced on Ronny. She looked furious. Her ragged ball gown rustled as she walked.

Ronny shrank backward.

“Who are you?” he said.

Ripper didn’t answer. She just kept coming.

Ronny lifted the rifle, fumbled with the bolt, and finally managed to pull it back. He pointed the gun at Ripper’s face.

Ripper didn’t even break stride.

“I dislike weapons,” she said. “Things were about to go badly for you—and now they will go very much worse.”

She made a *come here* gesture with her fingers. The rifle flew from Ronny’s hands and into her own.

Zoe could hear Dallas and Val whispering variations on *WTF*. She turned to see their expressions. Val had stopped filming. She and Dallas were frozen in surprise, like figures in a museum diorama: *Americans, early 21st century, freaking out.*

“Hey, that’s my gun!” said Ronny. “I’m a hunter!”

Ripper regarded him coldly.

“A hunter? Are you indeed?” she said. “So am I.”

She reared back and kicked him across the mouth. Ronny collapsed to the ground, blood spilling down his chin.

Ripper pushed the rifle into the pavement muzzle-first. The asphalt tightened around it, seized it like it was the Sword in the Stone.

Ripper went to stand over Ronny.

“Listen to me, you idiotic mushroom,” she said. “I was two thousand miles from here and weeping over my son Alfie’s grave when a trilling in my brain informed me that Zoe was in peril. In all your world, she is the only one I care for—and I care for her deeply.”

“Zoe, you *know* this person?” said Dallas.

Ripper made a lifting motion with her hand. Ronny’s body rose off the ground. Then Ripper pushed her palm forward through the air, and he sailed headlong into the ditch.

Zoe went to Ripper and hugged her.

“I thought you were X,” she said. “When I saw the light—I thought it was X.”

“I’m sorry, dear girl,” said Ripper. “But I hate to waste an entrance.”

“We could have handled this guy,” said Zoe.

“No doubt,” said Ripper. “I had a second purpose in coming here—I am in need of your counsel. But first, introduce me to your friends?”

What followed was a surreal, slow-motion moment—two worlds bleeding into each other.

“This is Ripper,” said Zoe. “And this is Val and Dallas. They’re my people.”

“Hello, Zoe’s people,” said Ripper.

She looked Dallas over approvingly, and shook his hand longer than necessary.

“How old are you, if I may inquire?” she asked him.

Dallas coughed nervously.

“Seventeen?” he said.

“Pity,” said Ripper. She touched the Band-Aid on his chin with her forefinger. “I myself am nearly two hundred.”

Dallas nodded.

“You look good,” he said.

Ripper laughed, and proceeded to Val.

“This hair of yours,” she said. “I suspect you don’t care to hear anyone’s opinion—but may I tell you *my* opinion?”

“Um, sure?” said Val.

“It is sublime,” said Ripper. “You must not alter it until you’ve infuriated as many imbeciles as you can.”

“Yeah, that’s my plan,” said Val.

Zoe felt a flood of fondness for both of them. Val was devoted to her girlfriend, Gloria, but not above being flattered by someone as gorgeous as Ripper.

“Okay, now can I ask *you* a question?” said Val. “Actually, two questions?”

“You may,” said Ripper.

“What the hell is going on?” said Val. “Who even *are* you?”

“I am an associate of X’s,” she said. “Zoe will tell you the tale later. I promise it will not bore you.”

She turned to Zoe.

“What shall we do with Mr. Mushroom?” she said.

“I don’t know,” said Zoe. “I hit the brake to avoid a deer, and he crashed into me—and then he just went nuts.”

“Yes, well, lunatics are full of surprises,” said Ripper. “I don’t mean to disparage lunatics, by the way. I am a lunatic myself.”

She shoved Zoe’s and Ronny’s vehicles apart, without any show of effort. Then she walked to the ditch.

“Mr. Mushroom,” she said.

Ronny looked petrified.

“Yes, ma’am?” he said.

His shirt was twisted halfway up his torso. His gut hung over his belt.

“Are you quite finished making difficulties?” said Ripper.

“Uh-huh,” said Ronny, nodding frantically. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Then get on your feet,” said Ripper.

Ronny climbed awkwardly out of the ditch. His right eyeball was now thoroughly soaked with blood.

“If ever you mention me—or any of the inexplicable things you witnessed here—to a single person,” Ripper told him, “I will find you, relieve you of your internal organs one by one, and wave them in front of your face as you die. I believe I could draw the process out for hours. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ronny.

“Very good,” said Ripper. She pointed at the Booty Hunter cap. “Give me your hat.”

Ronny handed it to her reluctantly, and she put it on.

“Now go away,” she said. “And have that eye of yours inspected by a surgeon. It is repulsive.”

Ronny fled to his truck, and drove off with the ruined hood bouncing.

They all stood silently until he was out of sight.

Zoe looked at her phone—she had to be at the memorial service in five minutes. But she wasn't ready to say good-bye to Ripper.

"Come with me," Ripper said suddenly.

"To where?" said Zoe. "What do you mean?"

She heard a siren in the distance. The police.

"You recall the reason I ran from the Lowlands?" said Ripper.

"You want to see where your children are buried," said Zoe.

"Just so," said Ripper. "I have found Alfie's grave, and at last said a proper farewell, yet I cannot find Belinda. And you see the state of my dress and boots—I can hardly make inquiries. But *you* could."

"I could," Zoe said tentatively. "I'm good at inquiries."

"Zoe," said Val, "whatever this is—*no*."

"I'm with Val," said Dallas. He glanced at Ripper. "Please don't levitate me."

Ripper held Zoe's eyes, waiting.

"I have to give Bert and Betty's eulogy," said Zoe. "In five minutes."

"Afterward?" said Ripper. "I will come to you wherever you are." She paused. "I know I must seem very fierce to you, Zoe. Yet if you had seen me at the stone marker bearing Alfie's name—truly, the grass will grow taller where I sat weeping. And Belinda died in such a piteous way. Abandoned. Unloved. I myself was already in the Lowlands. Even if I could discover where they laid her body down, I could not face the place alone. So I ask you for one night." She was all but begging. "Will you come?"

Zoe gazed at Ripper. It'd be dangerous to be with her when she

was on the run from the lords, and Zoe had had enough danger. She had to say no. Even though Ripper had once risked herself for Zoe's family—even though Ripper loved X as if she were his own mother—she *had* to say no.

The siren was louder. Zoe saw a squad car shoot out of the woods.

“Ripper, I—” she began.

“Before you answer,” said Ripper, “let me add an inducement. Every night, the lords send bounty hunters after me. It goes without saying that I defeat them all. Last night, thinking of you, I told one of them: ‘You may inform the lords that if they want me, there is only one hunter I will ever surrender to.’”

Ripper waited to see if Zoe understood, before continuing.

“I beg you to come—not just to help me find my Belinda, but so that you might be there when the lords finally send X for my head.”

# THREE

ZOE AND HER FRIENDS crept into First Presbyterian looking disheveled and dazed. The congregation was already singing “Abide with Me.” Val and Dallas ducked into a pew near the back, but Zoe had to walk to the front. The hymn ended when she was halfway there, and suddenly the only sound in the church was her black flats going *squinch-squinch* on the floor. Everyone turned. Zoe gave an embarrassed wave. No one seemed to think it was funny.

Her mother had saved her a seat by the aisle, where she was sitting with Jonah and her hippy-dippy, chain saw–artist friend, Rufus. Zoe expected her mother to whisper *Where were you?* or at least give her a disappointed look. Instead, she gripped Zoe’s hand warmly. She must have known she was scared to death. Zoe’s heart, which had only just stopped racing from the confrontation with Ronny, now raced at the thought of giving Bert and Betty’s eulogy in front of 200 people.

After Stan Manggold had killed the Wallaces, he'd dumped them in the lake by their house. Divers had recovered their bodies a few days ago. Zoe had wanted to be there when Bert and Betty were found. *Someone* who loved them should have been there. She'd actually snuck out to her car the morning of the dive, knowing her mother wouldn't approve. Unfortunately, Jonah figured out what she was up to, and hid in the backseat so he could go, too. A mile from the house, he scared the crap out of Zoe by springing up in the rearview mirror and shouting, "It's me!"

She couldn't let the little bug watch bodies get pulled out of a lake—he'd be so freaked out that he would be sleeping in her bed for a month. When he wouldn't stop saying "I loved Bert and Betty also! I loved them also!" Zoe made an illegal U-turn, and drove to Krispy Kreme, where they ate donuts and cried without talking.

Zoe's mother nudged her. The minister was leading a prayer now, and they were supposed to be standing. Zoe looked up at the altar. Her mom had chosen the flowers, which were perfect: lilies, roses, gladiolus. And Rufus had made a wooden box to hold the Wallaces' ashes. It was walnut and carved with a pair of doves in flight, like souls. Zoe liked to tease Rufus (for saying "epic" and "rad" all the time, for having the world's least secret crush on her mom), but he was an extremely good guy and more talented than Zoe had thought: the box was lovely, and there was no way he'd made it with a chain saw. Still, it was hard for Zoe to look at. She couldn't believe that everything that was left of Bert and Betty could fit inside it. Two whole lives, one little box.

The prayer ended. Zoe checked the bulletin to see when the eulogy was supposed to be. It was *right now*.

The minister was nodding at her.

Zoe realized something.

She'd left her index cards in the car.

She felt her face get hot, her throat close. The minister raised his eyebrows.

Her mother signaled for him to wait, then leaned toward Zoe and whispered the kindest thing anybody had ever said: "Do you want me to do it instead?"

Every part of Zoe wanted to say yes.

"No," she said. "I have to try. But it's gonna be messy."

"Messy is okay," her mom said. "They knew how much you loved them."

The minister looked annoyed. His eyebrows crept higher.

Zoe leaned past her mother to Jonah. He was wearing khaki pants, a red tie that he had insisted on tying himself—there was no describing the knot he'd finally come up with—and a blue blazer, the arms of which were so long that you could just barely see the tips of his fingers.

"Do you want to come up with me, bug?" she whispered.

"Yes, actually!" he said. "I think people will like my tie."

"Go, go, go," said their mom, and they climbed the steps to the altar holding hands.

The minister, seeing Jonah, said, "It seems we have a surprise guest"—which Jonah loved.

Zoe stood at the bare lectern, her pulse rushing, her mind blank as a swept room. She didn't know how to start. A dozen feelings were colliding inside her. She missed Bert and Betty almost too much to talk about them, which reminded her how much she missed X—and she just couldn't open *that* door. There was an ocean behind it.

Jonah let go of her hand, took a Sharpie out of his coat pocket,

and started drawing on his palm. Maybe it was a bad idea to bring him up here. Had he taken his ADHD med this morning? Zoe looked at the congregation. They were restless. How long had she just been standing there?

Jonah tugged at her sleeve. She glanced down, annoyed.

He'd drawn a little red heart on his hand. He'd even colored it in. It was squiggly and wobbly—but it was for her.

It helped.

She leaned toward the microphone.

"I forgot the notes for my speech," she said. "I think that's god's way of telling me that my speech wasn't very good."

There was a soft ripple of laughter, even from the minister, which calmed Zoe more. She looked out at her mom and Rufus. They immediately raised their palms—they had hearts on them, too. They must have planned this out.

"I could never say everything I want to about Bert and Betty anyway," Zoe said. "They were so sweet and so funny." Bits of the eulogy she'd written started floating back to her. "You know how you'll be sitting there thinking of calling someone to see if they want to go hiking—and all of a sudden they call *you* to see if *you* want to go hiking? That was Bert and Betty. We were connected somehow." She paused. "They taught Jonah and me so much about the woods and the mountains. They also secretly gave us ice cream for years, because our mom's a vegan and won't let it in the house. Sorry, Mom—Jonah and I have actually had a ton of ice cream."

Jonah stood on his tippy-toes so he could reach the microphone, and said, "Salty caramel, please!"

Their mother made a pretend-angry face.

Zoe couldn't remember the middle of the eulogy, so she skipped to the end. She'd worked so hard on it that she'd memorized it.

"The Wallaces loved us so much that it made me feel safe—like wherever I went, they were walking in front of me with shields," she said. "The way they got killed . . . I really wish that I had been walking in front of *them*." She stopped a moment. "When something horrible and unexpected happens, like Bert and Betty dying, I try to remember all the *amazing* and unexpected things that have also happened. Getting to know the Wallaces was one of them. It's hard to breathe now that they're gone. But some people change you so much that they make any amount of pain worth it."

Zoe didn't know if she was supposed to say "thank you" or just walk back to her seat. She stood awkwardly for a second, then said, "Okay, that's all. Sorry I freaked out at the beginning."

Jonah clapped for her, then leaned up to the microphone and said, "I tied my own tie."

When they stepped down from the altar, Zoe saw that her mom and Rufus had their palm-hearts in the air.

Zoe was so relieved to be done with the speech that she felt like she was floating. The day was nowhere near over—Ripper was out there somewhere, waiting; Val and Dallas were in the back of the church, ready to barrage her with questions. But Zoe kept a box in the back of her brain for things she didn't want to think about. It was labeled Do Not Open. She pushed all her worries into it now. For the rest of the service, she laid her head on her mom's shoulder, replayed memories of the Wallaces, and stared at a spot to the left of the altar where the sun, streaming through

the stained-glass windows, threw patches of blue, yellow, and green against the floor.

There was something Zoe hadn't been able to say in her eulogy because it was too weird, but it comforted her now: she knew that Stan Manggold was being punished for killing the Wallaces, because X had eventually tracked him down and taken him to the Lowlands. The fact that he was suffering was not the thing that comforted her, though. What comforted her was this: if there was a hell for Stan, there had to be a heaven for Bert and Betty.

THE PLAN WAS TO spread the Wallaces' ashes after the service. While the crowd drifted out and the organist played a few last chords, Zoe told her mom she needed a minute to say good-bye to Dallas and Val.

Zoe could almost always expect a *woot!* or a *boom!* from Dallas, but this time he said only, "You did good." Val, looking agitated and angry, gestured for Zoe to follow her, and walked out of the church without a word.

The minister stood outside amid the parishioners. Val waited on the sidewalk where they wouldn't be overheard.

"*Ripper?*" she said. "You know somebody named *Ripper?*"

"Yes," said Zoe quietly.

"You are not going *anywhere* with her," said Val.

"I am," said Zoe.

"She's psychotic," said Val.

"Only a little," said Zoe.

"This isn't funny," said Val. "Have you been lying to us this whole time—about X? About everything?"

Zoe was ashamed. She spoke even more softly.

“Not about everything,” she said. “Okay, yeah, about everything.”

Val turned away, too pissed off to speak.

“Why didn’t you tell us the truth, dude?” said Dallas.

“I should have,” said Zoe. “But the story is so crazy. And I guess—I’m just realizing this now—I guess I was afraid that once you knew who X really was, you’d tell me to stay away from him, and I knew that I couldn’t.”

Val turned back suddenly.

“I want to know everything about him,” she said. “Right now. You know I love you, but I swear to god, one more lie and I’m done.”

“X is . . .,” said Zoe. “Okay, here we go. X is a prisoner in a place called the Lowlands. They let him leave to collect souls who’ve been damned, but then they make him come back. Jonah and I met him during the blizzard when he came to get Stan Manggold. How was I going to explain that to you? You’d have looked at me like you’re looking at me right now.”

“The Lowlands? What is that?” said Val. “Are you talking about hell?”

“Yes, but—” said Zoe.

“Yes, *but*’?” said Val. “He’s from hell? How is that not a deal breaker?”

“I’m with Val, dawg,” said Dallas. “You dumped *me* because I like sports.”

“X was born there, okay?” said Zoe. “He doesn’t know who his parents are—they’re somewhere else in the Lowlands, which are gigantic, I guess. He grew up in a prison cell. I’m the first person his

own age he's ever talked to, probably. I *know* I'm the first person who ever held him or kissed him . . ."

"You can skip some of this," said Dallas, reddening.

"Sorry," said Zoe. "X has been told he's a piece of shit his whole life, but somehow he's the kindest person. The most loyal person." She paused. "And he loves me so much he can barely look at me."

Val and Dallas were silent.

"I need him back," said Zoe. "I miss his hands. I miss his coat. How weird is that? I miss his coat!"

"That's the only thing you've said that actually isn't weird," said Val. "I've had sex with *all* of Gloria's coats."

Dallas was in misery. He pretended to choke himself with his tie.

Val glared at him.

"What is *wrong* with you, Hetero Norm?"

"First of all," said Dallas, "why does no one want to have sex with *my* coat—it's full of luxurious down. Also, I'm sorry but I don't want to hear about this hot-ass dude. Could you guys try to be sensitive since I'm the ex-boyfriend?"

"'Ex-boyfriend'?" said Val. "Zoe hooked up with you in the handicapped bathroom at Walmart—and now you're her 'ex-boyfriend'?"

"It was Target," said Dallas. "And that shit was hot. Back me up, Zo."

"It was," she said, mostly just to be nice. "You're sure it wasn't Walmart?"

Val yanked the conversation back on track.

"I'm sorry Bert and Betty died," she told Zoe. "I'm sorry your dad died. Obviously. Watching *you* suffer made *me* suffer. You know

that. But I don't . . . I mean, I don't know what the hell is going on with you anymore."

Zoe glanced at the church. Her mother, Jonah, and Rufus had just come out. They were thanking the minister. Jonah was holding their mother's hand and swinging her arm around like it was a jump rope.

She knew that Val and Dallas were overwhelmed by everything she'd told them. She knew she shouldn't say another word. But Val had reminded Zoe of one last secret she'd been keeping.

"My father is still alive," she said. "My mom knows. Jonah doesn't. When I get back, I'll explain all that, too."

THE WALLACES HAD ASKED that their ashes be scattered on a stretch of river they loved off Tally Lake Road. Bert and Betty used to take folding chairs and read there—even in winter sometimes. It pained Zoe to remember how cute Bert and Betty looked all bundled up in their coats and scarves, how they passed a plaid thermos of coffee back and forth, how they had to keep taking off their gloves to turn the pages.

Zoe knew that Ripper, wherever she was, was waiting impatiently to find her daughter's last resting place. As she drove, she kept thinking she saw Ripper's gold dress between the trees. But Zoe didn't want to rush this. For the time being, she kept Ripper in the Do Not Open box in her brain. She smiled, imagining Ripper cursing indignantly and trying to climb out.

They had taken two cars. Zoe and Jonah were in one, their mom and Rufus in the other. Jonah had insisted that Rufus come with them, even though he hadn't known the Wallaces well. Rufus seemed to feel self-conscious about intruding on a family moment,

but the Bissells had been staying with him ever since their house was destroyed, and what Jonah said, in his own strange way, was true: “You’re part of our *us* now.”

Jonah also insisted they bring Spock and Uhura with them to the river, because the Labs had belonged to Bert and Betty. Uhura had gotten pneumonia. Zoe was sure it was from when Stan Manggold tried to drown her in the lake during the blizzard. The dog had lost a startling amount of weight. Just picking her up was heart-breaking: it felt like holding a skeleton. The vet couldn’t promise that Uhura would recover, but no one told Jonah that. He watched the dog obsessively, like he was her secret service agent.

Zoe’s mother parked near the river. Zoe pulled up on the other side of a copse of trees, so her mom wouldn’t see what Ronny the Unhinged Hunter had done to her car. A light rain polka-dotted the windshield.

“Do we have to get out right away?” said Jonah. “Or can we sit?”

Uhura was curled on his lap in the backseat.

“We can sit if you want to,” said Zoe.

“I want to,” said Jonah. “Uhura’s sleeping. She still sounds rationally. Do you think she’ll always sound rationally?”

“I don’t know, bug,” said Zoe. “But I know she loves you—and I know you love her.”

“Duh,” said Jonah. “I totally love her.”

Zoe watched through the windshield as her mom spread a blanket by the river, and Rufus carried out flowers from the altar and the urn he’d carved with doves.

“Are you feeling sad about Bert and Betty?” said Zoe.

When Jonah didn’t answer, she looked at him in the rearview mirror. He was making his scrunched-up “thinking” face.

“I’m sad-mad,” he said. “I’ve never been here without them before. Remember their thermos? Are *you* sad-mad?”

“I am, yeah,” said Zoe. “I didn’t know it was called that.”

“It *is* called that, I didn’t make it up,” said Jonah. “You know what sucks?”

“What sucks, bug?” said Zoe.

“When you go to a place and all you see is the people who aren’t there,” he said. “Don’t tell Mom, but I’m a little glad we don’t live on the mountain anymore.”

“Why?” said Zoe.

“Because now it’s just the place where Dad isn’t,” said Jonah. “Also, it’s the place where Bert and Betty don’t come over anymore—and the place where X doesn’t play in the snow with me. You know?”

“I do,” said Zoe.

She reached back and mussed his hair. Jonah grinned. He snapped his teeth at her hand, like an alligator.

“I liked your speech thing at church,” he said. “You guys think I don’t pay attention to stuff, but mostly I do.”

“I know you do,” said Zoe.

“I liked the part about X,” said Jonah.

“What part about X?” said Zoe. “There wasn’t a part about X.”

“Yeah, there was,” said Jonah. “You said, ‘Some people change you so much that they make any amount of pain worth it.’ See? I was listening.”

“That was about Bert and Betty,” said Zoe.

“No, it wasn’t, duh,” said Jonah. “I’m not *seven*.”

“Okay, maybe it was about all of them,” said Zoe. “I liked when you said, ‘I tied my own tie.’”

“How else were they gonna know?” said Jonah.

Uhura finally stirred, and they left the car and walked down the slope to the river. Zoe was touched by how carefully Jonah carried Uhura, how he took only the tiniest, most cautious steps. Spock walked alongside him. He kept his worried eyes trained on Uhura, and made a wincing sound, like he was asking, *Is she okay? Is she okay?*

They all sat on the blanket, and Zoe’s mom opened the wooden urn. Bert and Betty’s remains were in his-and-her plastic bags. Zoe had known there would be bits of bone mixed in with the ashes, but seeing them was harder than she’d expected. She felt one of those elevator-drops in her stomach. Jonah seemed not to realize that it was bone, and Zoe was grateful for that.

Her mother asked if anyone wanted to say a few words before they scattered the ashes.

Jonah raised his hand, like he was in school.

“I want to say the words ‘sad’ and ‘mad,’” he said.

“Me, too,” said Zoe.

“Good,” said their mother. “It’s important to acknowledge both those things. They’re both a hundred percent okay.”

She looked to Rufus, who scratched his overgrown red beard thoughtfully.

“Do you want to say anything?” she said. “You can.”

“No, I’m good,” he said. “I like what the river is saying. I like what the *wind* is saying.” When Zoe smirked—she couldn’t help it—Rufus smiled unabashedly, and said, “You think I’m a goofball.”

“I think you’re awesome,” said Zoe. “And a *gigantic* goofball.”

Zoe was glad Rufus was there. Her mother refused to admit that he had a debilitating crush on her, and wouldn’t tell Zoe whether

she had feelings for him, too. Still, Rufus was an addition to her family, which felt good and healing—they'd gotten too used to subtraction.

The rain picked up. Zoe could feel it land softly in her hair. Her mom read a Buddhist poem about how the end isn't really the end ("I don't get it," said Jonah), and put the first handful of the Wallaces' remains into the water. She had Jonah drop rose and gladiolus petals along with it, so they'd know where the ashes were as the current carried them away. The petals were a nice touch, Zoe thought. Her mom had a way with nice touches. Watching the flowers made Zoe feel peaceful for the first time since she'd woken up. They were like a fleet of red and blue ships.

Afterward, Jonah carried Uhura to the car, whispering to her as he walked. Rufus tried to distract Spock, to get him to play, but Spock wouldn't leave Uhura's side.

Zoe and her mom washed the ash off their hands in the river, which was so cold that it stung.

"I told Val and Dallas everything," said Zoe.

"Wow," said her mother. "That was maybe a decision you and I could have talked about beforehand. It has repercussions for all of us."

"I know, I'm sorry, but it kind of had to happen right then," said Zoe. "Because of . . . stuff."

"Okay, I trust you, Zo," said her mom. "How'd they take it?"

"They were shocked," said Zoe. "Obviously. Val was pissed. They're still trying to understand it. I mean, *I'm* still trying to understand it. Are you ever going to tell Rufus?"

"I'm not sure," said her mother. "It's a lot to put on the poor guy."

“Yeah, but if you don’t say something, the wind or the river might tell him,” said Zoe.

Her mom smiled.

“Be nice,” she said. “My number one concern is that Jonah never finds out that your dad just took off on us. I hate that *you* know it.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. You deserved someone better than him.”

Zoe saw how tired her mother was. How depleted.

“We *got* someone better than him, Mom,” Zoe said. “We got you.”

Her mother surprised her by tearing up. Zoe thought of Ripper, and how badly Ripper wanted to say good-bye to Belinda, how ashamed she was for leaving her children motherless when she murdered her servant with the teakettle and was damned.

“Sorry,” said Zoe’s mom, wiping her eyes with her fingertips. “Emotional day. All I ever wanted to do was protect you guys from— from everything. I wanted to raise you like little lambs.”

Zoe hugged her hard.

“You did good,” she said. “*Baaaaa.*”