

## CHAPTER 1

I felt the eyes on the back of my head, like a too-warm itch within my skull. Someone was watching me. Hunting me.

I get flashes like this sometimes, and I know to trust them. Cold dread splashed through my chest, and I walked faster. I needed to find other people. Cars whooshed along the main road, more than a block away. *Hurry*. I pulled my bag in close and started to run, cutting across the suburban lawns in the fading, late-afternoon light. I would flag someone down or even step out into traffic and cause a scene.

I didn't make it.

The rumble of the approaching engine made my stomach clench. I glanced back as a white van thumped over the curb behind me, screeching to a stop halfway on the sidewalk. The side door rolled back with a metallic scrape. Quick footsteps slapped the sidewalk and thudded into the grass, then rough hands grabbed my arm and closed over my mouth, stifling my scream.

The driver pulled out so fast the tires squealed. Someone tried several times to close the side door of the lurching vehicle before the latch finally caught. The large hand of my attacker remained clamped over my mouth, and my breath ripped through my nose. *Oh my god oh my god oh my god.* His weight crushed my chest, and my hammering heart pounded against the pressure. The smells of stale cigarettes, cheap beer, and a slightly rancid locker-room scent were overly strong in the small space, and I nearly threw up.

The driver laughed. I knew that laugh; I had heard it in the lunchroom at school, and in the halls. Delbarton Evans was a junior like me, although we were not in any classes together. His friends called him Del, and I was not one of them. The other two in the van also looked familiar. I thought one of them was named Mike, and the other was Carl. Mike was the one holding me down, and he joined Del in his laughter. Carl stared at me; he paled to an even more sickly green when he realized I was staring back at him.

The van pulled into a garage; the door motor hummed overhead as the last of the daylight slid away. *Oh no no no No No NO NO!* The closing door was my last chance; I shifted and bit down hard on Mike's hand. He yelped in pain, then growled, actually growled, and punched me in the jaw.

Pain speared through my head, and I tasted blood. Del jumped from the driver's seat and grabbed the arm that Mike couldn't hold. The alcohol smell hit me again as his face came close to mine, and he looked me straight in the eye. Then, with his free hand, he grabbed the front of my shirt and ripped it straight down to my waist. *Oh god no.*

"Shut up and lie still," he said, as his eyes slid down my body. Mike laughed and grabbed at the button of my jeans. I tried to kick him away, but he crushed my legs with his knees. Carl, still looking sick, hung back and silently watched.

How could this be happening? The frozen panic threatened to overwhelm me again. *NO!* I felt a surge of energy start low in my gut, growing taller and stronger, burning like an icy flame up into my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut.

*"NO!"* I shouted. It sounded like I was in chorus with many other versions of myself as an unseen fire launched itself from me. The hands gripping me momentarily tightened, then fell slack. I opened my eyes.

All three of my attackers had fallen to the floor. Del lay face-down only inches from me. His eyes were open and empty-black, without the colored ring of an iris. What the hell? I shoved myself up from under Mike. My heart throbbed like it was going to explode, and it felt like an electrically-charged spike had driven itself through my forehead.

I was shaking so violently I could barely get to my knees. Mike also was shaking, but it looked like he was having a seizure. As I watched, he went still. He wasn't breathing. I glanced at Carl. He slumped against the side of the van, and his face hung slack from the bones of his skull as though he had started to melt. The only sound in the van was my own ragged breath.

Dead. They were all dead.

And I knew that, somehow, I had killed them.

I had to get out of here. I stumbled from the van, tripping over Mike's sprawled leg. I couldn't make my mind work, couldn't figure out how to open the garage door. I pulled on it, hearing my own desperate sobs echo in the cold space. The single, bare bulb suddenly clicked out, plunging me into darkness, and my scream came out as a whimper. *Oh god help me I'm trapped I'm trapped in the dark and they're dead dead dead oh god.*

My hands slid along the side of the van. I couldn't work the handle. *Trapped in the dark.* Clack: the dome light flashed on when I finally opened the driver's door. I found the button on

the driver's visor; my fingers fumbled with it as I tried not to look in the back. *All dead.*

Slanting light worked its way across the garage as the outside world reappeared under the rolling door. I couldn't stop myself; I looked once more at my three dead attackers. *Oh god what happened what did I do WHAT AM I?*

I pulled the torn sides of my shirt together in front of me and stagger-ran home.

## CHAPTER 2

I showered until the hot water ran out, then dressed in sweats. Cold seeped through my body, despite the fact that the day was a warm one for early October. The last of the afternoon light melted away as I sat on my bed in my darkening room and tried to calm myself through sheer force of will. I'd stopped shaking, but my mind twisted and churned around the facts again and again. I had been abducted and assaulted. *Punched in the face.* They had been planning to do terrible things to me. *After they ripped my clothes off they would have— oh god.* There was nothing I could do to stop them, but still— I had stopped them. *What did I do?*

Could I really have killed three people with my thoughts? How was that possible? *Unnatural.* Was it because I had gotten angry? I had been angry at people before, and they all still had pulses. *Killer.* Was it because I had been in danger? Had something changed when Mike had punched me? The ugly bruise on my jaw hurt when I touched it, or when I opened my mouth too wide. I experimentally opened and closed it, just to see when and how much it hurt. There was not much of a lump, which was good. I looked in the mirror as I applied concealer

over the reddish-purple mark. *Freak*. The pale girl looking back seemed like a stranger, so I tried not to meet her eyes.

How did I do it? Would it happen again? Could I stop it? If something like today triggered it again, would I want to stop myself from killing them? *Monster*.

My mom came home in time for dinner. She noticed I was upset, but I avoided answering the unspoken questions in her green eyes. She looks young for her forty-seven years, although she needs to lose at least thirty pounds. My mom put on the weight after my father died when I was four, and, like her wedding ring, she never took it off. She still wears her grief as an extra layer of flesh.

"Do you want me to make cookies?" she asked me. To my mom, chocolate was nature's Prozac. I shook my head. She seemed hurt by my refusal, as though I had dodged a hug. In a way, I had.

I zombied through the remaining hours of the evening. I did my homework, then threw a load of laundry in the machine. The ripped shirt I had been wearing was balled up in a plastic bag and shoved deep in the bathroom trash. Evidence. A strange combination of numbness and hyper-awareness played tug-of-war with my senses. I heard noises in the neighborhood that I'd never noticed in the years we had lived here; suddenly I was attuned to the auditory wallpaper of my life. A few late-arriving commuters pulled their cars into their driveways; the sound of a garage door started me trembling again.

It was after midnight when I finally fell asleep, and nearly two when the first of the nightmares of the van drenched me in the shaky-sweats and shocked me awake. Across the hall, I heard my mother stirring, as though she'd also had a bad dream. I waited in the dark as she came to my door, pretending to be asleep as she silently checked on me. She stood there for a

long time, watching me. Worried. Finally, she closed my door. I could hear her settling back in her own room, but I could not get back to sleep. Flipping on the light, I finished a book without registering the words on the pages, then started another.

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Three students had been found dead, and no one knew what had killed them. The school seemed electrically charged with rumor. Some people cried, but many discussed wild ideas with hushed voices and dancing eyes. A few scenarios involving horror movie monsters and alien abductions bounced around the halls.

One girl stood alone just outside the main door. She had her books held protectively against her chest and a look of grim satisfaction on her face. I didn't know her name, but I thought she was a year younger than me. I watched her for a few seconds and she glanced my way. As our eyes met, I had another of those flashes, and I knew that I was not the first person to be pulled into that van. I dropped my gaze and went inside.

I didn't have a large circle of friends here; my mom and I moved to Chatham just over two years ago. Apparently, this is one of the best public high schools in the state of New Jersey. That bar was apparently pretty low. Our little three-bedroom house was in the tiny strip of Chatham that was not full of extravagant McMansions. I did not like it here; most of the other kids were too wrapped up in fashions, fancy cars, and the Short Hills Mall. More than half of the parents worked in the City, and their kids reaped the social-camouflage benefit from expensive clothing and cars.

I didn't blend in with the herd. My action plan had been to stay under-the-radar socially, get good grades, and get into a really good college. High school is full of games, and I intended to win the one that mattered. Today, even that didn't seem to matter.

During third period, I heard the tinny sound of a police radio in the hallway outside my A.P. history class. Two uniformed figures threw silhouettes against the frosted glass of the classroom door. Mr. Storrs opened the door to their knock and spoke with them in the threshold. His eyes widened as he glanced in my direction. I felt empty of emotion as I gathered up my books.

The back of the police car smelled like cleaning chemicals. I was not in handcuffs, but I suspected my police escort from the building was going to hit the school rumor-machine at a dead run as soon as history class ended. So much for staying under-the-radar. I was surprised at how numb and detached I felt. *Monster*. I had killed three people less than twenty-four hours ago, and now I was in police custody.

I'd never been inside a police station before. We came in through the back entrance, passing several other police cars, as well as an expensive, chauffeured, silver town car that looked out-of-place among the black-and-white vehicles. The officers escorted me to a small room with a frosted glass door, leaving me sitting alone at a table with an empty chair across from me. I saw myself reflected in the one-way glass; I looked like my own ghost. My green eyes seemed glassy; my light skin seemed waxen. Straight, brown hair fell lifelessly to my shoulders.

The sound of the door made me jump; a uniformed officer stood aside for a tall, African-American man who filled the room with his presence. "Madeline Dunn." he said. I nodded, although it hadn't seemed like he was asking a question. The man looked about fifty, and an air



of calm, competent power radiated off him. He was immaculately groomed and wearing an expensive-looking suit. Behind him trailed a bored-looking blonde girl in a trendy-looking black top. She sighed dramatically, then looked up at the cop and said, "You questioned Ms. Dunn for several minutes." Her voice had a strange, resonant quality to it. "You found that she had no connection to the case; she is no longer a Person-of-Interest. You released her into Dr. Williamson's custody."

The officer nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him. I stood there with a furrowed brow and a few loose strings dangling from my thoughts. What had just happened? The girl then looked at me. "You will forget what I just said to the officers." Her voice still had the resonance. Fog seeped through my mind, and a gently-pushing thought, *forget*, floated across it. I could feel the memory slipping for a moment, then I sharply inhaled and pushed back.

"No." I said. The memory came back like it was being poured into my head, leaving a pressing ache behind my eyes.

The blonde girl gasped, as though I was being rude. The tall man, whom I assumed was the Dr. Williamson that she'd mentioned, chuckled.

"Thank you, Cecelia." Dr. Williamson said to her, "That will not be necessary."

Cecelia gave me a narrow-eyed look of catty dislike. I had not made a new friend.

"We won't be long." he continued. "Would you prefer to wait in the car?"

Cecelia left the room with a long-suffering sigh.

The man turned to me with a pleasant smile and an extended hand. "Madeline, I'm Jon Williamson. It is a pleasure to meet you." I felt annoyed at being addressed by my full first name. *Maddie*, I thought, but didn't correct him. Instead, I clasped his hand hesitantly, meeting

his eyes. My head spun with ideas. Had Cecelia just hypnotized the police officers? There had been a weird resonance in her voice when she had spoken to them. She'd tried to do the same thing to me, but it hadn't worked. Something strange had been in my voice yesterday, when the three of them— *oh god*.

Dr. Williamson's smile disappeared. His eyes widened with concern. *What happened yesterday?* The thought floated across my mind, and suddenly I vividly recalled the scrape of the van door as it slid open, the smells, the fear, and then the rising anger and the intensity of the "NO!" that had made them stop, made them die.

Dr. Williamson's hand tightened, and I realized that mine was still in his grasp. I broke eye contact with him and pulled my hand away. I felt trapped in the too-small room. My heart pounded wildly, but it was from remembered fear. My instincts told me I could trust Dr. Williamson.

"Maddie," he said. I could tell that he had not taken offense at my sudden pulling away. "I run a training program for young people with special abilities. I think you should join us."

"My mom—" I said, then stopped. I had no idea how I had intended to finish that sentence. My mom needs me here? My mom won't want me to go away? My mom will freak out if I tell her I need to go somewhere she's never heard of with someone she's never met? I suddenly realized that I'd simply assumed I would go with him. In fact, I was eager to go with him, as though I had been waiting for the invitation. I had no idea what this program was or where it might be, but I knew two things: I needed to get the heck out of Chatham, and I needed to figure out what had happened to me in the garage. This 'training program' sounded like it could do both. Count me in.

Dr. Williamson waited until it was clear that I wasn't going to finish my sentence. Then he smiled. "Don't worry about it. I'll talk to your mother."

I don't know what he and the still-bored blonde girl said to her when we stopped at her office; they asked me to wait in the car. However, within two hours, I had hugged my mom goodbye, packed my bags, and was sitting in the back of the town car. *Escaping*. On my left, Dr. Williamson worked on his laptop. Cecelia, who still seemed vaguely hostile, listened to her iPod on my right. My two suitcases filled the trunk, and we sped north on Route 287. I focused on the road and let my mind go blank. It worked better than I'd hoped at keeping the overwhelming thoughts at bay.