

## 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.*

Cold dread splashed through my chest and my pace quickened. I'd gotten flashes like this before—I knew to trust them. I needed to find other people. More than a block away, cars whooshed along the main road.

*Hurry.*

I pulled my bag in close and started to run, cutting across the suburban lawns in the fading late-afternoon light. Perhaps I could flag someone down or even step out into traffic and cause a scene.

I didn't make it.

I glanced back at the rumble of the approaching engine and a white van thunked 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 behind me. 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 overwhelmed the small space. I nearly threw up.

The driver laughed. I knew that laugh—I'd heard it in the lunchroom and halls at school. Delbarton Evans was a junior—like me—although we weren't in any classes together. His friends called him Del, and I wasn't one of them. The other two in the van also looked familiar.

*Mike. Carl.*

Mike was the one holding me down; he joined Del in his laughter. Carl stared at me, paling to an even more sickly green when he realized I was staring back at him.

The van pulled into a garage and the door motor hummed overhead as the last of the daylight slid away.

*Oh no no no No No NO NO!*

That 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; 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? 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 as if I was in chorus with many other versions of myself as an unseen fire exploded from my forehead. The hands gripping me momentarily tightened, and 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 without the colored ring of an iris.

*What the hell?*

I shoved myself out from under Mike. I felt as if an electrically-charged spike had driven itself through my forehead. I was shaking so violently I could barely get to my knees. Mike was also 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'd slumped against the side of the van and his face hung slack from his skull as though he'd started to melt. The only sound in the van was my own ragged breathing.

Dead—they were all dead.

And I knew—somehow—I had killed them.

*I've got 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. 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 until I felt the handle.

*Trapped in the dark.*

I finally opened the driver's door and the dome light flashed on. My fingers groped for the button on the driver's visor. I tried not to look in the back.

*All dead.*

Light worked its way across the garage as the outside world reappeared under the rolling door. I couldn't stop myself; I looked at my three dead attackers. *Oh God what happened what did I do?*

*WHAT AM I?*

## CHAPTER 2

By the time the world stopped tumbling around me, I found myself at home. I showered until I ran out of hot water, and then dressed in sweats. Cold seeped through my body despite the fact that the day was warm for early October. The last of the afternoon light melted away as I sat on my bed in my darkening room. I'd stopped shaking, but my mind twisted and churned around the facts.

I'd been abducted and assaulted—punched in the face. They'd been planning to do terrible things to me. *After they ripped my clothes they would have—oh, God.* There was nothing I could've done to stop them but still—I'd stopped them.

*What did I do?*

Did I really kill three people with my thoughts? How was that possible?

*Unnatural.*

Was it because I'd gotten angry? I'd been angry at people before and they 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 wasn't 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. 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. I shook my head. She seemed hurt by my refusal, as though I'd dodged a hug.

I zombied through the remaining hours of the evening. I did my homework and then threw a load of laundry in the machine. I'd shoved the ripped shirt I'd been wearing deep in the bathroom trash, hiding the 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'd lived here; suddenly I was attuned to the auditory wallpaper of my life. A few late-arriving commuters pulled their cars into their driveways, and the sound of one of their garage doors started me trembling again.

It was after midnight when I finally fell asleep, and nearly two when the first nightmare 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 heard her settle back in her own room, but I couldn't get back to sleep. Flipping on the light, I finished reading 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. Scenarios involving horror movie monsters and alien abductions bounced around the halls.

One girl stood alone just outside the main door with a look of grim satisfaction on her face. She held her books protectively against her chest. 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 wasn't the first person to be pulled into that van. I dropped my gaze and went inside.

I didn't have any close friends here, just a group of five other honors-track kids I hung out with sometimes. We ate lunch together and tried to separate ourselves from the other group of "smart kids," the ones who dressed up as wizards or hobbits or something on the weekends. My mom and I moved to Chatham just over two years ago. This was supposedly 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 town that wasn't full of extravagant McMansions. More than half of the parents worked in the City, and their kids reaped the social-camouflage benefits 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. But today, even getting into the Ivy League didn't seem important.

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 and cold as I gathered up my books. The eyes of the entire class followed my steps to the door, and the urgent whispers started before it had a chance to close behind me.

The back of the police car smelled like cleaning chemicals. I wasn't 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. Maybe I was in shock or something, but I just felt numb. I'd killed three people less than twenty-four hours ago, and now I was in police custody.

*Monster.*

I'd never been inside a police station before. We came in though the back entrance, passing an expensive, chauffeured, silver town car that looked out-of-place among the black-and-white police vehicles. The officers escorted me to a small room with a frosted glass door, leaving me sitting alone at a table, staring at the 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 skin was wax, and my 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. An air of calm, competent power radiated off him.

I nodded, although it hadn't seemed like he was asking a question. The man looked about fifty. He seemed polished in his expensive-looking suit. Formidable.

A bored-looking blonde girl in a trendy, black top trailed behind him. 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 just happened?*

The girl then looked at me. "You. 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 chuckled.

"Thank you, Cecelia." he said to her, "That won't be necessary."

Cecelia gave me a narrow-eyed look of catty dislike. I hadn't 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's 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'd 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, and 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, their hands on me, 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. He hadn't 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'd 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. I wanted to go with him, as though I'd 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. We'll talk to your mother."

I don't know what he and the blonde girl with the strange voice said to my mom when we stopped at her office. Dr. Williamson asked me to wait in the car. However, within two hours, I'd 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.