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ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

SOON TO
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MOTION
PICTURE

THE
DARKEST
MINDS

EXCLUSIVE LIAM STORY INSIDE

THE DARKEST MINDS



ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

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*For Stephanie and Daniel, who were in every
minivan with me*

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Preview of *Never Fade*

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PROLOGUE

WHEN THE WHITE NOISE WENT OFF, WE WERE IN THE GARDEN, PULLING WEEDS.

I always reacted badly to it. It didn't matter if I was outside, eating in the Mess Hall, or locked in my cabin. When it came, the shrieking tones blew up like a pipe bomb between my ears. Other girls at Thurmond could pick themselves up after a few minutes, shaking off the nausea and disorientation like the loose grass clinging to their camp uniforms. But me? Hours would pass before I was able to piece myself back together.

This time should have been no different.

But it was.

I didn't see what had happened to provoke the punishment. We were working so close to the camp's electric fence that I could smell the singed air and feel the voltage it shed vibrating in my teeth. Maybe someone got brave and decided to step out of the Garden's bounds. Or maybe, dreaming big, someone fulfilled all our fantasies and threw a rock at the head of the nearest Psi Special Forces soldier. That would have been worth it.

The only thing I knew for certain was that the overhead speakers spurted out two warning blares: one short, one long. The skin on my neck crawled as I leaned forward into the damp dirt, hands pressed tightly against my ears, shoulders tensed to take the hit.

The sound that came over the speakers wasn't really white noise. It wasn't that weird buzz that the air sometimes takes on when you're sitting alone in silence, or the faint hum of a computer monitor. To the United

States government and its Department of Psi Youth, it was the lovechild of a car alarm and a dental drill, turned up high enough to make your ears bleed.

Literally.

The sound ripped out of the speakers and shredded every nerve in my body. It forced its way past my hands, roaring over the screams of a hundred teenage freaks, and settled at the center of my brain, where I couldn't reach in and rip it out.

My eyes flooded with tears. I tried to ram my face into the ground—all I could taste in my mouth was blood and dirt. A girl fell forward next to me, her mouth open in a cry I couldn't hear. Everything else faded out of focus.

My body shook in time with the bursts of static, curling in on itself like an old, yellowing piece of paper. Someone's hands were shaking my shoulders; I heard someone say my name—*Ruby*—but I was too far gone to respond. Gone, gone, gone, sinking until there was nothing, like the earth had swallowed me up in a single, deep breath. Then darkness.

And silence.

ONE

GRACE SOMERFIELD WAS THE FIRST TO DIE.

The first in my fourth grade class, at least. I'm sure that by then, thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands, of kids had already up and gone the same way she had. People were slow to piece it all together—or, at least, they had figured out the right way to keep us in the dark long after kids started dying.

When the deaths finally came to light, my elementary school put a strict ban on teachers and staff talking to us about what was then called Everhart's Disease, after Michael Everhart, the first kid known to have died of it. Soon, someone somewhere decided to give it a proper name: Idiopathic Adolescent Acute Neurodegeneration—IAAN for short. And then it wasn't just Michael's disease. It was all of ours.

All the adults I knew buried the knowledge beneath lying smiles and hugs. I was still stuck in my own world of sunshine, ponies, and my race car collection. Looking back, I couldn't believe how naive I was, just how many clues I missed. Even big things like when my dad, a cop, started working longer hours and could barely stand to look at me when he finally did come home. My mom started me on a strict vitamin regimen and refused to let me be alone, even for a few minutes.

On the other hand, my parents were both only children. I didn't have any dead cousins to send up red flags, and my mom's refusal to let my dad install a "soul-sucking vortex of trash and mindless entertainment"—that thing commonly known as a television—meant that no scary news broadcasts rocked my world. This, combined with the CIA-grade parental controls set

up on our Internet access, pretty much ensured I'd be far more concerned with how my stuffed animals were arranged on my bed than the possibility of dying before my tenth birthday.

I was also completely unprepared for what happened on the fifteenth of September.

It had rained the night before, so my parents sent me to school wearing red galoshes. In class, we talked about dinosaurs and practiced cursive before Mrs. Port dismissed us for lunch with her usual look of relief.

I remember every detail of lunch that day clearly, not because I was sitting across from Grace at the table, but because she was the first, and because it wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't old like Grandpops had been. She didn't have cancer like Mom's friend Sara. No allergies, no cough, no head injury—nothing. When she died, it came completely out of the blue, and none of us understood what it meant until it was too late.

Grace was locked in deep debate about whether a fly was trapped inside her Jell-O cup. The red mass shivered as she waved it around, inching out over the edge of the container when she squeezed it a bit too tight. Naturally, everyone wanted to give their opinion on whether it was a fly or a piece of candy Grace had pushed in there. Including me.

"I'm not a liar," Grace said. "I just—"

She stopped. The plastic cup slipped from her fingers, hitting the table. Her mouth was open, eyes fixed on something just beyond my head. Grace's brow was furrowed, almost as if she was listening to someone explain something very difficult.

"Grace?" I remember saying. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes rolled back, flashing white in the second it took for her eyelids to droop down. Grace let out a small sigh, not even strong enough to blow away the strands of brown hair stuck to her lips.

All of us sitting nearby froze, though we must have had the same exact thought: she's fainted. A week or two before, Josh Preston had passed out on the playground because, as Mrs. Port explained, he didn't have enough sugar in his system—something stupid like that.

A noon aide rushed over to the table. She was one of four old ladies with white visors and whistles who rotated lunch and playground duty during the week. I have no idea if she had any medical certifications beyond a vague notion of CPR, but she pulled Grace's sagging body to the ground all the same.

She had a rapt audience as she pressed her ear to Grace's hot pink T-shirt, listening for a heartbeat that wasn't there. I don't know what the old lady thought, but she started yelling, and suddenly white visors and curious faces circled in on us. It wasn't until Ben Cho nudged Grace's limp hand with his sneaker that any of us realized she was dead.

The other kids started screaming. One girl, Tess, was crying so hard she couldn't breathe. Small feet stampeded toward the cafeteria door.

I just sat, surrounded by abandoned lunches, staring at the cup of Jell-O and letting terror crawl through me until my arms and legs felt like they would be frozen to the table forever. If the school's security officer hadn't come and carried me outside, I don't know how long I would've stayed there.

Grace is dead, I was thinking. *Grace is dead? Grace is dead.*

And it got worse.

A month later, after the first big waves of deaths, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a five-step list of symptoms to help parents identify whether their kid was at risk for IAAN. By then half my class was dead.

My mom hid the list so well that I only found it by accident, when I climbed on top of the kitchen counter to look for the chocolate she kept hidden behind her baking supplies.

HOW TO IDENTIFY IF YOUR CHILD IS AT RISK, the flyer read. I recognized the flaming orange shade of the paper: it was the sheet Mrs. Port had sent home with her few remaining students days before. She had folded it twice and fastened it with three staples to prevent our reading it. TO THE PARENTS OF RUBY ONLY was written on the outside and underlined three times. Three times was serious. My parents would have grounded me for opening it.

Luckily for me, it was already open.

1. Your child suddenly becomes sullen and withdrawn, and/or loses interest in activities they previously enjoyed.
2. S/he begins to have abnormal difficulty in concentrating or suddenly becomes hyper-focused on tasks, resulting in s/he losing track of time and/or neglecting him/herself or others.
3. S/he experiences hallucinations, vomiting, chronic migraines, memory loss, and/or fainting spells.
4. S/he becomes prone to violent outbursts, unusually reckless behavior, or self-injury (burns, bruising, and cuts that cannot be explained).
5. S/he develops behaviors or abilities that are inexplicable, dangerous, or cause you or others physical harm.

IF YOUR CHILD DEMONSTRATES ANY OF THE ABOVE SYMPTOMS, REGISTER HIM/HER AT IAAN.GOV AND WAIT TO BE CONTACTED ABOUT THE LOCAL HOSPITAL TO WHICH S/HE SHOULD BE TAKEN.

When I finished reading the flyer, I folded it back up neatly, put it exactly where I found it, and threw up in the sink.

Grams phoned later that week, and in her usual to-the-point-Grams way explained everything to me. Kids were dying left and right, all about my age. But the doctors were working on it, and I wasn't supposed to be afraid, because I was *her* granddaughter, and I would be fine. I should be good and tell my parents if I felt anything weird, understand?

Things turned from bad to terrifying very fast. A week after three of the four kids in my neighborhood were buried, the president made a formal address to the nation. Mom and Dad watched the live stream on the computer, and I listened from outside the office door.

"My fellow Americans," President Gray began. "Today we face a devastating crisis, one that threatens not only our children's lives, but the very future of our great nation. May it comfort you to know that in our time

of need, we in Washington are developing programs, both to support the families affected by this horrid affliction and the children blessed enough to survive it.”

I wish I could have seen his face as he spoke, because I think he knew—he must have—that this threat, the crimp in our supposedly glorious future, had nothing to do with the kids who had died. Buried underground or burned into ash, they couldn’t do anything but haunt the memories of the people who had loved them. They were gone. Forever.

And that symptoms list, the one that was sent home folded and stapled by teachers, which was aired a hundred times over on the news as the faces of the dead scrolled along the bottom of the screen? The government was never scared of the kids who might die, or the empty spaces they would leave behind.

They were afraid of us—the ones who lived.

TWO

IT RAINED THE DAY THEY BROUGHT US TO THURMOND, AND IT WENT ON TO RAIN STRAIGHT THROUGH THE WEEK, AND THE WEEK AFTER THAT. Freezing rain, the kind that would have been snow if it had been ve degrees colder. I remember watching the drops trace frantic paths down the length of the school bus window. If I had been back at home, inside one of my parents' cars, I would have followed the drops' swerving routes across the cold glass with my ngertips. Now, my hands were tied together behind my back, and the men in the black uniforms had packed four of us to a seat. There was barely room to breathe.

The heat from a hundred-odd bodies fogged the bus windows, and it acted like a screen to the outside world. Later, the windows of the bright yellow buses they used to bring kids in would be smeared with black paint. They just hadn't thought of it yet.

I was closest to the window on the five-hour drive, so I could make out slivers of the passing landscape whenever the rain let up for a bit. It all looked exactly the same to me—green farms, thick expanses of trees. We could have still been in Virginia, for all I knew. The girl sitting next to me, the one that would later be classified Blue, seemed to recognize a sign at one point because she leaned over me to get a better look. She looked a little familiar to me, like I had seen her face from around my town, or she was from the next one over. I think all of the kids with me were from Virginia, but there was no way to be sure, because there was only one big rule: and that was *Silence*.

After they had picked me up from my house the day before, they'd kept me, along with the rest of the kids, in some kind of warehouse overnight. The room was washed in unnatural brightness; they sat us in a cluster on the dirty cement floor, and pointed three floodlights toward us. We weren't allowed to sleep. My eyes were watering so badly from the dust that I couldn't see the clammy, pale faces around me, let alone the faces of the soldiers who stood just beyond the ring of lights, watching. In some weird way, they ceased to be whole men and women. In the gray haze of half sleep, I processed them in small, terrifying pieces: the gasoline reek of shoe polish, the creak of stiff leather, the twist of disgust on their lips. The tip of a boot as it dug into my side, forcing me back awake.

The next morning, the drive was completely silent except for the soldiers' radios and the kids that were crying toward the back of the bus. The kid sitting at the other end of our seat wet his pants, but he wasn't about to tell that to the red-haired PSF standing beside him. She had slapped him when he complained he hadn't eaten anything all day.

I flexed my bare feet against the ground, trying to keep my legs still. Hunger was making my head feel funny, too, bubbling up every once in a while to overwhelm even the spikes of terror shooting through me. It was hard to focus, and harder to sit still; I felt like I was shrinking, trying to fade back into the seat and disappear completely. My hands were starting to lose feeling after being bound in the same position for so long. Trying to stretch the plastic band they'd tightened around them did nothing but force it to cut deeper into the soft skin there.

Psi Special Forces—that's what the driver of the bus had called himself and the others when they collected us from the warehouse. *You are to come with us on authority of the Psi Special Forces commander, Joseph Traylor.* He held up a paper to prove it, so I guess it was true. I had been taught not to argue with adults, anyway.

The bus took a deep dip as it pulled off the narrow road and onto a smaller dirt one. The new vibrations woke whoever had been lucky or exhausted enough to fall asleep. They also sent the black uniforms into

action. The men and women stood straighter, and their attention snapped toward the windshield.

I saw the towering fence first. The darkening gray sky cast everything in a moody, deep blue, but not the fence. It was glowing silver as the wind whistled through its open pockets. Just below my window were dozens of men and women in full uniform, escorting the bus in at a brisk jog. The PSFs in the control booth at the gate stood and saluted the driver as he navigated past them.

The bus lurched to a stop, and we were all forced to stay deathly still as the camp gate slid shut behind us. The locks cracked through the silence like thunder as they came together again. We were not the first bus through—that had come a year before. We were not the last bus, either. That would come in three more years, when the camp’s occupancy maxed out.

There was a single breath of stillness before a soldier in a black rain poncho rapped on the bus door. The driver reached over and pulled the lever—and ended anyone’s hope that this was a short pit stop.

The PSF was an enormous man, the kind you’d expect to play an evil giant in a movie, or a villain in a cartoon. He kept his hood up, masking his face, hair, and anything that would have let me recognize him later. I guess it didn’t matter. He wasn’t speaking for himself. He was speaking for the camp.

“You will stand and exit the bus in an orderly fashion,” he yelled. The driver tried to hand him the microphone, but the soldier knocked it away with his hand. “You will be divided into groups of ten, and you will be brought in for testing. Do not try to run. Do not speak. Do not do *anything* other than what is asked of you. Failure to follow these instructions will be met with punishment.”

At ten, I was one of the younger kids on the bus, though there were certainly a few kids younger. Most seemed to be twelve, even thirteen. The hate and mistrust burning in the soldiers’ eyes might have shrunk my spine, but it only sparked rebellion in the older kids.

“Go screw yourself!” someone yelled from the back of the bus.

We all turned at once, just in time to see the PSF with the flaming red hair launch the butt of her rifle into the teenage boy's mouth. He let out a shriek of pain and surprise as the soldier did it again, and I saw a faint spray of blood burst from his mouth when he took his next, angry breath. With his hands behind his back, there was no way he could block the attack. He just had to take it.

They began moving kids off the bus, one seat of four at a time. But I was still watching that kid, the way he seemed to cloud the air around him with silent, toxic fury. I don't know if he felt me staring, or what, but the boy turned around and met my gaze. He nodded at me, like an encouragement. And when he smiled, it was around a mouthful of bloody teeth.

I felt myself being hauled up and out of my seat, and almost before I realized what was happening, I was slipping down the wet bus steps and tumbling into the pouring rain. A different PSF lifted me off my knees and guided me in the direction of two other girls about my age. Their clothes clung to them like old skin, translucent and drooping.

There were nearly twenty PSFs on the ground, swarming the neat small lines of kids. My feet had been completely swallowed by the mud, and I was shivering in my pajamas, but no one took notice, and no one came up to cut the plastic binding our hands. We waited, silently, tongues clamped between our teeth. I looked up to the clouds, turning my face to the pounding rain. It looked like the sky was falling, piece by piece.

The last groups of four were being lifted off the bus and dropped onto the ground, including the boy with the broken face. He was the last one off, just behind a tall blond girl with a blank stare. I could barely make them out through the sheet of rain and the foggy bus windows, but I was sure I saw the boy lean forward and whisper something into the girl's ear, just as she took the first step off the bus.

She nodded, a quick jerk of her chin. The second her shoes touched the mud, she bolted to the right, ducking around the nearest PSF's hands. One of the PSFs barked out a terrifying "*Stop!*" but she kept running, straight for the gates. With everyone's attention turned toward her, no one thought to look

back at the boy still on the bus—no one but me. He came slinking down the steps, the front of his white hooded sweatshirt stained with his own blood. The same PSF who had hit him before was now helping him down to the ground, as she had done for the rest of us. I watched her fingers close around his elbow and felt the echo of her grip on my own newly bruised skin; I watched him turn and say something to her, his face a mask of perfect calm.

I watched the PSF let go of his arm, take her gun out of its holster, and, without a word—without even blinking—stick the barrel inside of her mouth and pull the trigger.

I don't know if I screamed aloud, or if the strangled sound had come from the woman waking up to what she was doing, two seconds too late to stop it. The image of her face—her slack jaw, her eyes bulging out of her skull, the ripple of suddenly loose skin—stayed burned into the air like a photonegative far longer than the explosion of pink, misty blood and clumps of hair against the bus.

The kid standing next to me dropped into a dead faint, and then there wasn't a single one of us that wasn't screaming.

The PSF hit the ground the exact same moment the girl was tackled into the mud. The rain washed the soldier's blood down off the bus windows and yellow panels, stretching the bloated dark lines, drawing them out as they disappeared completely. It was that fast.

The boy was looking only at us. "*Run!*" he yelled through his broken teeth. "What are you doing? *Run—run!*"

And the first thing that went through my mind wasn't *What are you?* or even *Why?*

It was *But I have nowhere else to go.*

He might as well have blown the entire bus up for the panic it caused. Some kids listened and tried to bolt for the fence, only to have their path blocked by the line of soldiers in black that seemed to pour out of the air. Most just stood there and screamed, and screamed, and screamed, the rain falling all around, the mud sucking their feet down firmly in place. A girl knocked me down to the ground with her shoulder as the other PSFs rushed

for the boy, still standing in the bus doorway. The soldiers were yelling at us to sit on the ground, to stay frozen there. I did exactly as I was told.

“Orange!” I heard one of them yell into his walkie-talkie. “We have a situation at the main gate. I need restraints for an Orange—”

It wasn’t until after they had rounded us back up and had the boy with the broken face on the ground that I dared to look up. And that I began to wonder, dread tickling up my spine, if he was the only one who could do something like that. Or if everyone around me was there because they could cause someone to hurt themselves that way, too.

Not me—the words blazed through my head—*not me, they made a mistake, a mistake*—

I watched with a feeling of hollowness at the center of my chest as one of the soldiers took a can of spray paint in hand and painted an enormous orange *X* over the boy’s back. The boy had only stopped yelling because two PSFs had pulled a strange black mask down over the lower part of his face—like they were muzzling a dog.

Tension beaded on my skin like sweat. They marched our lines through the camp toward the Infirmary for sorting. As we walked, we saw kids heading in the opposite direction, from a row of pathetic wood cabins. All of them were wearing white uniforms, with a different colored *X* marked on each of their backs and a number written in black above it. I saw five different colors in all—green, blue, yellow, orange, and red.

The kids with the green and blue *X*’s were allowed to walk freely, their hands swinging at their sides. Those with a faint yellow *X*, or an orange or red one, were forced to fight through the mud with their hands and feet in metal cuffs, a long chain connecting them in a line. The ones marked with orange smears had the muzzlelike masks over their faces.

We were hurried into the bright lights and dry air of what a torn paper sign had labeled INFIRMARY. The doctors and nurses lined the long hallway, watching us with frowns and shaking heads. The checkered tile floor became

slick with rain and mud, and it took all of my concentration not to slip. My nose was filled with the smell of rubbing alcohol and fake lemon.

We filed one by one up a dark cement staircase at the back of the first floor, which was filled with empty beds and limp white curtains. *Not an Orange. Not a Red.*

I could feel my guts churning deep in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't stop seeing that woman's face, right when she pulled the trigger, or the mass of her bloody hair that had landed near my feet. I couldn't stop seeing my mom's face, when she had locked me out in the garage. I couldn't stop seeing Grams's face.

She'll come, I thought. She'll come. She'll fix Mom and Dad and she will come to get me. She'll come, she'll come, she'll come . . .

Upstairs, they finally cut the plastic binding that tied our hands, and divided us again, sending half down to the right end of the freezing hallway and half to the left. Both sides looked exactly the same—no more than a few closed doors, and a small window at the very end. For a moment, I did nothing but watch the rain pelt that tiny, foggy pane of glass. Then, the door on the left swung open with a low whine, and the face of a plump, middle-aged man appeared. He cast one look in our direction before whispering something to the PSF at the head of the group. One by one, more doors opened, and more adults appeared. The only thing they had in common aside from their white coats was a shared look of suspicion.

Without a single word of explanation, the PSFs began pulling and pushing kids toward each white coat and its associated office. The outburst of confused, distressed noises that erupted from the lines was shushed with a piercing buzzer. I fell back onto my heels, watching the doors shut one by one, wondering if I would ever see those kids again.

What's wrong with us? My head felt like it was full of wet sand as I looked over my shoulder. The boy with the broken face was nowhere, but his memory had chased me all the way through the camp. Did they bring us here because they thought we had Everhart's Disease? Did they think we were going to die?