

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

NOW
A MAJOR
MOTION
PICTURE

EXCLUSIVE
CLANCY
STORY
INSIDE

IN THE
AFTERLIGHT

IN THE AFTERLIGHT



ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

Copyright © 2013 by Alexandra Bracken

Cover art © 2018 by Michael Heath

Cover design by Marci Senders

All rights reserved. Published by Hyperion, an imprint of Disney Book Group. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Hyperion, 125 West End Avenue, New York, New York 10023.

ISBN 978-1-368-02493-8

Visit www.HyperionTeens.com

*For Merrilee, Emily, and the countless others around the world
who have worked tirelessly to put this series into your hands, with
my love and gratitude.*

In our youth, our hearts were touched with fire.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

CONTENTS

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Acknowledgments

Preview of *Through the Dark*

Exclusive Bonus Short Story

About the Author

PROLOGUE

BLACK IS THE COLOR THAT IS NO COLOR AT ALL.

Black is the color of a child's still, empty bedroom. The heaviest hour of night—the one that traps you in your bunk, suffocating in another nightmare. It is a uniform stretched over the broad shoulders of an angry young man. Black is the mud, the lidless eye watching your every breath, the low vibrations of the fence that stretches up to tear at the sky.

It is a road. A forgotten night sky broken up by faded stars.

It is the barrel of a new gun, leveled at your heart.

The color of Chubs's hair, Liam's bruises, Zu's eyes.

Black is a promise of tomorrow, bled dry from lies and hate.

Betrayal.

I see it in the face of a broken compass, feel it in the numbing grip of grief.

I run, but it is my shadow. Chasing, devouring, polluting. It is the button that should never have been pushed, the door that shouldn't have opened, the dried blood that couldn't be washed away. It is the charred remains of buildings. The car hidden in the forest, waiting. It is the smoke.

It is the fire.

The spark.

Black is the color of memory.

It is our color.

The only one they'll use to tell our story.

ONE

THE SHADOWS GREW LONGER THE FARTHER I WALKED FROM THE CENTER OF THE CITY. I headed west, toward the sinking sun that set the remainder of the day on fire. I hated that about winter—night seemed to reach earlier and earlier into the afternoon. Los Angeles’s smog-stained sky was painted with dark strokes of violet and ash.

Under normal circumstances, I would have been grateful for the additional cover as I navigated the easy grid of surface streets back to our current base. But with the debris from the attack, the installation of military stations and detainment camps, and the congestion of now-useless, abandoned cars fried by the electromagnetic pulse, the face of the city had been altered so dramatically that to go even a half mile through the wreckage was enough to become completely lost. Without the city’s light pollution casting its usual foggy glow, if any of us scouted at night, we had to rely on distant lights from military convoys.

I cast a quick glance around, pressing a hand against my jacket pocket to make sure the flashlight and service pistol were still there; both were courtesy of one Private Morales, and would only be used in absolute emergency. I wasn’t letting anyone pick me up, spot me running through the dark. I had to get back to base.

An hour ago, Private Morales had had the unfortunate luck to cross into my path, coming off her patrol of the freeway alone. I’d been there since before sunrise, positioned behind an overturned car, watching the elevated roadway shimmering like an electric current under a constant flood of artificial light. Every hour, I’d counted the number of tiny uniformed figures moving along the section nearest to me, weaving in and out of the trucks and

Humvees lined up bumper to bumper like a secondary barrier. My muscles cramped, but I fought the urge to wait it out somewhere else.

It had been more than worth it. One soldier had been enough to arm me not only with the tools I needed to return to base safely, but also with the knowledge of how we could finally—*finally*—get the hell out of this damn city.

I looked back and forth twice before climbing over the fallen heap of brick that had once been the face of a bank branch, and let out a hiss of pain between my teeth as the side of my hand scraped on something jagged. I kicked the object—a metal C that had fallen from its logo—in irritation, and immediately regretted it. The clattering and grating noise bounced off the nearby buildings, almost masking the faint voices and shuffling steps.

I threw myself into what was left of the building's interior, dropping down into a crouch behind the nearest stable wall.

“Clear!”

“Clear—”

Twisting around, I watched the progress of the soldiers moving along the other side of the street. I counted helmets—twelve—as they broke off to investigate the different smashed-glass entryways of office buildings and stores. *Cover?* I looked around, quickly taking stock of the overturned, singed furniture, my body moving toward one of the dark wood desks and sliding beneath it. The scrape of loose debris against the outside sidewalk overpowered the sound of my own ragged breathing.

I stayed where I was, nose burning with the smell of smoke and ash and gasoline, tracking the voices until they faded. Anxiety kept a grip on my stomach as I edged my way out from under the desk and along the floor toward the entrance. I could still see the patrol unit weaving through the wreckage halfway down the avenue, but I couldn't wait, not even a few minutes longer.

When I'd dug through the soldier's memories, stitched together the information I needed, it felt like a block of cement had finally rolled off my chest. She'd shown me the gaps in the freeway's defenses as surely as if she'd

handed me a map and marked them in thick, black strokes. After that, it had just been a matter of washing myself out of her memory.

I knew the former Children's League agents would be pissed that this had actually worked. Nothing they tried themselves had succeeded, and in the meantime, the hauls from their food scouting had dwindled. Cole had pushed and pushed them to let me try, but the other agents only agreed on the condition that I go alone—to avoid any additional “risks” of capture. We'd already lost two agents who'd been careless while walking out in the city.

I wasn't careless, but I *was* getting desperate. It was time to make a move now, or the military would starve us out of hiding.

The U.S. Army and National Guard had created a virtual barrier around downtown Los Angeles using the elaborate freeway system. The snaking cement monsters formed a tight circle around the inner city, choking us off from the outside world. The 101 was to the north and east, the I-10 to the south, and the 110 to the west. We might have had a chance of escaping if we'd left immediately after climbing back up to the surface from the wreckage of HQ, but...there was that word that Chubs always used: *shell-shocked*. He said it was amazing any of us were capable of movement at all.

I should have. I should have forced us to go, instead of falling apart at the seams. I should have—if I hadn't been thinking about his face trapped down in the dark. I pressed the back of my hand against my eyes, steeling myself against the nausea and stabbing pain in my skull. *Think about anything else. Anything.* These headaches were unbearable; so much worse than the ones I used to have after trying to control my abilities.

I couldn't stop. I pushed through the hollow feeling in my legs to a steady jog. I felt the ache of exhaustion at the back of my throat, the heaviness of my eyelids, but adrenaline kept me moving, even as parts of me felt like they were on the verge of shutting down. I couldn't remember the last time I'd fallen into a deep enough sleep to escape the waking nightmare around us.

The roads were blistered with peeling asphalt, strewn with piles of cement the army had yet to clear. Here and there I passed bright dots of

color—a red high heel, a purse, someone’s bike, all dropped and forgotten. Some objects had blown out of nearby windows; the heat from the nearby blasts had charred them black. The wastefulness of the destruction was sickening.

As I ran across the next intersection, I stole a look up Olive Street, my eyes drawn to the glowing field of light that was Pershing Square three avenues over. The former park had been transformed into an internment camp; hastily thrown together, while the rubble of the city still smoldered. The poor people inside its fences had been working in the nearby buildings when President Gray launched his attack against the Children’s League and the Federal Coalition, the small band of former politicians united against him. He’d supposedly retaliated because one or both parties had played a role in his most recent assassination attempt. We’d kept watch on each of these camps, searching for Cate and the others, watching as the numbers inside swelled as more and more civilians were picked up and held against their will.

But no Cate. If she and the agents who left HQ before the attack hadn’t made it out of the city, they were hiding themselves so well that *we* couldn’t find them—not even with our emergency contact procedures.

Another small military convoy—the buzz of radios and growling tires tipped me off two blocks in advance. I bit back a noise of frustration as I took cover behind the shell of an SUV until the soldiers passed me by, their boots kicking up a cloud of chalky gray dust. I stood up, brushed myself off, and started running.

We—the League, or whatever was left of us—moved locations every few days, never staying in one warehouse long. When we ventured out to find food and water, or went to watch the camps, if there was even a hint of suspicion someone could have followed us back—we moved. It was smart, there was no denying that, but I was starting to lose track of where we were at any given time.

The silence, thicker now that I had crossed into the eastern half of the city, was so much more unnerving than the symphony of machine-gun fire

and weapons discharging that had filled the air close to Pershing Square. My hand clenched around my flashlight, but I still couldn't bring myself to take it out, even as my elbow scraped against the stucco wall I stumbled into. I glanced up at the sky. New moon. Of course.

A feeling of unease, the same one that had been perched on my shoulder whispering dark things in my ear for weeks, became a burning knife in my chest—sinking slowly, tearing everything in its path. I cleared my throat, trying to get the poisonous air out of my lungs. At the next intersection I forced myself to stop, and ducked into an old ATM alcove.

Take a breath, I ordered myself. *A real one*. I tried shaking out my arms and hands, but the heaviness remained. Closing my eyes, I listened to a distant helicopter slice through the air, moving at a furious pace. Instinct—insistent, baiting instinct—was nudging me to swing an early right on Bay Street, not stay on Alameda Street until I hit its intersection with Seventh Street. The latter was a more direct route to our current base on Jesse Street and Santa Fe Avenue; the quickest way to give the others the details, form a plan, and *get out*.

But if someone were watching or tracking me, I'd be able to lose them on Seventh Street. My feet took charge and pushed me east toward the Los Angeles River.

I got a block and a half before I saw the shadows moving up Mateo Street toward Seventh Street. My punishing pace came to an abrupt stop—my hands flew out to catch myself against a mailbox before I spilled out into the middle of the street.

A sharp breath blew out of me. *Too close*. This is what happened when I didn't take the time to slow down and actually make sure the street was clear. I felt the echo of my racing pulse behind my temples and reached up to rub them. Something warm and sticky smeared against my forehead, but I just couldn't bring myself to care.

I kept my head and body low as I moved, trying to see which direction the troops were headed in now. They were already way too close to our base—if I

doubled back, I might be able to outrun them to the warehouse and warn the others to bail.

But they had just...stopped.

At the corner of the intersection, they'd walked right up to the smashed-in facade of some kind of hardware store and stepped over the busted windows and into the building. I heard a laugh, voices—and my blood slowed to a crawl in my veins.

They weren't soldiers.

I moved up the street toward the store, running a hand along the side of the building until I reached the windows and dropped down into a crouch.

“—where did you find this?”

“Good shit, man!”

More laughter.

“Oh, God, I never thought I'd be so damn happy to see bagels—”

I looked over the ledge. Inside, three of our agents—Ferguson, Gates, and Sen—were hunkered down, a small spread of food in front of them. Gates, a former Navy SEAL, tore into a bag of potato chips so hard he nearly split it in half.

They have food. I couldn't get my head around it. *They're eating food here.* The disbelief was so numbing I had to work it through one thought at a time.

They aren't bringing the food back for the rest of us.

Was this what was happening each time a group went out? The agents had been so insistent on going to scout for supplies themselves; I'd assumed it was because they were afraid if any of the kids got picked up, they'd immediately rat out the group's current location. But was this the real reason? So they'd get first dibs on whatever they turned up?

A cold, icy fury turned my fingers into claws. My broken nails cut into my palms; the sting of pain only added to the churning in my stomach.

“God, that's good,” Sen said. She was a beast of a woman—tall, with muscles packed under taut, leathery skin. There was always this expression on her face like...like she knew where all the bodies were buried because

she'd put them there herself. When she deigned to speak to any of us kids, it was to bark at us to shut up.

I waited through the silence that followed, anger flaring with each second.

"We should get back," Ferguson said, starting to rise.

"They're fine. Even if Stewart beats us back, Reynolds is there to make sure he's not shooting his mouth off again."

"I'm more worried about..."

"The leech?" Gates supplied, with a belly laugh. "She'll be the last one in. If she even makes it back."

My brows went right up at that. *Leech*. Me. That was a new one. I'd been called so many worse things, the only part I found offensive was the idea that I couldn't handle a trip back and forth across the city without getting caught.

"She's far more valuable than the others," Ferguson argued, "it's just a matter of—"

"It's not a matter of anything. She doesn't obey us, and it makes her a liability."

Liability. I pressed a fist against my mouth to keep the bile down. I knew how the League handled "liabilities." I also knew how *I* would handle any agent who tried.

Sen leaned back, bracing her hands on the tile. "The plan stays the same regardless."

"Good." Gates balled up the bag of chips he'd just demolished. "How much of this are we bringing back? I could go for another bagel..."

A tub of pretzel sticks and a bag of hot dog buns. That's what they were bringing back for seventeen kids and the handful of agents that had been stuck behind babysitting while the others went out to collect food and intel.

When they started to climb back onto their feet, I flattened myself against the building, waiting for them to step through the window and glance each way down the intersection. My hands were still clenched when I stood and started trailing them, keeping a good half block between us until the warehouse finally came into view.

Before they crossed that final street, Sen held a lighter up above her head, a single flame that the agent posted on the roof could see. There was a faint whistle in response—the signal to approach.

I ran, closing the last bit of distance before the woman could start climbing up the fire escape after the others.

“Agent Sen!” My voice was a harsh whisper.

The woman’s head swung around, one hand on the ladder, the other reaching for the handgun tucked into the holster of her combat gear. It took me a moment to realize I’d had my own hand clenched around the gun in my jacket pocket the whole time I’d been stalking them down the street.

“What?” she snapped, waving to Gates and Ferguson to continue up the fire escape.

Not happy to see me, are you?

“I have to tell you something....It’s...” I hoped she’d think the trembling quality in my voice was fear, not anger on the verge of exploding. “I don’t trust Cole with this.”

That had her interested. Her teeth flashed in the dark.

“What is it?” she asked.

This time, I smiled. And when I slammed into her mind, I didn’t care if it broke apart. I ripped through memories of bunks, training, HQ, agents, tossing the images aside faster than they could solidify in my mind. I felt her jerk, tremble under the force of my attack.

I knew when I had what I was looking for. She had imagined it so vividly, plotted it all out with a malicious efficiency that even I’d underestimated. Everything about the idea had an unnatural luster to it, like warmed wax. Cars dripped into the scene, faces I recognized as belonging to the kids upstairs were half-hidden by gags. Dust-colored military fatigues. Black uniforms. A trade.

I was gasping for air by the time I surfaced, unable to get oxygen into my chest deeply enough. I had just enough thought to twist her memory, to plant a false one in the place of the last few minutes. I didn’t wait for her to recover, pushing past her to get to the ladder.

Cole—my mind was firing too fast, black fading into my vision. *I have to tell Cole.*

And I had to get away from the agent before I gave in to the terrifyingly real temptation to put a bullet in her right here and right now.

Because it wasn't enough for her to withhold food, to levy threats about leaving us behind if we weren't quieter, didn't move faster, didn't *keep up* with the rest of them. She wanted to be done with us once and for all—to hand our leashes off to the one group she thought could actually control us.

And she wanted the reward money we'd bring in to fund her next strike.

TWO

BY THE TIME I REACHED THE SECOND LEVEL OF THE WAREHOUSE, MY CHEST WAS ON FIRE AND MY HEAD WAS A TANGLE OF DARK THOUGHTS AND DREAD. The fire escape rattled as Sen started climbing after me, and I couldn't get through the window—away from her—fast enough. Brushing aside the dark Ops jacket they'd hung up to block the weak interior light from the street, I slid my legs over the ledge and dropped inside.

My eyes frantically jumped from one flickering puddle of candlelight to another, skipping over the dark spaces in between. Every single kid seemed to be huddled in the far corner of the room, as if Gates and Ferguson had backed them into it in exchange for food.

No Cole, I thought, raking a hand back through my hair. *Dammit*. I needed him. He had to know—we had to figure this out.

“A little appreciation would go a long way,” Gates sneered. It was like his words had disturbed a thick layer of dust in the silent room. Voices immediately floated up in quiet, quick thanks before the kids settled themselves back down again, eyes only on the floor or each other. I saw now what I hadn't wanted to admit to myself before. In the end, all of the months—years—we'd spent training with the agents, and fighting alongside them...it all came to nothing the second they convinced themselves we were checks waiting to be cashed in.

I found the three faces I was looking for. Vida was back from her own scouting, a nasty cut marring her deep bronze skin, which Chubs was trying to bandage. Next to him was a black backpack. I bit my lip, trying to keep the relief I felt to myself. Inside was the research I'd rescued from Clancy's attempt to incinerate it—the sheets of graphs and charts and medical gibberish his mother had put together in her search for a cure for IAAN.

“Grannie, I swear to God, if you don’t lay off the fucking *fussing*—” Vida hissed.

“Let me just disinfect it!” I heard him protest.

Liam sat with his back against the wall, knees up, arms resting on them. He was watching Gates out of the corner of his eye with the same hard expression he’d had ever since the attack. He didn’t reach for the food, but simply passed it on to Chubs when it came into his hands.

The agents would turn them in, too. What if I hadn’t seen those agents tonight—stopped and actually listened to what Sen and the others were saying? They were going to blindside us with it, set the deal up in advance over the next few days. There wouldn’t have been time for me to do anything. Why did I think I could protect all of them? I couldn’t even protect *one* kid, not when it mattered most. *Jude—*

Sen knocked against my shoulder as she swept into the room behind me. I barely felt it.

I was above ground, I knew it, but it didn’t matter—right now, I was in a tunnel, blindly squeezing my way through the collapsed walls threatening to crush us. Chased by distant screams, unseeing eyes, and the roar of cement splintering; earth pouring down, smothering everything in its path. The face floating in front of my closed eyes was freckled, his doe-brown eyes wide as he watched his own life end. I saw all of those things, and nothing stopped them. No good memory was strong enough to wipe away how I imagined it must have been. How Jude had slipped away forever in the dark.

I felt myself disconnect. Every nerve in my body lit up, every part inside of me was racing, picking up speed. The pressure inside of me built until I was sure I was going to be crushed by it, and the thought that everyone around me would witness it made everything ten times worse.

The touch at my waist was gentle enough that I didn’t register it at first, but steady enough to turn me toward the door—strong enough, even, to keep me upright when my knees buckled at that first step.

Outside of the shrinking room, the hallway was at least ten degrees cooler. Quiet and dark enough that my skin didn’t feel like it was bubbling