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# BLACK OUT

ROBISON WELLS

AUTHOR OF *VARIANT*

ROBISON WELLS

# BLACK OUT

HARPER TEEN

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

REPAID

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# DEDICATION

To Mom, for everything

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**User: SusieMusie**

**Mood: Pissed Off**

My stupid friends are nothing but power struggles and politics. Sara invited Erica to see a movie Friday night, but she invited Tyler to go to a party the same precise time. She thinks it's funny, but I know she's just going to stand one of them up. I don't even care anymore. Let them fight.

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# ONE

**“READY?” ALEC ASKED, LOOKING IN** the rearview mirror at Dan, whose eyes were closed in a kind of nervous meditation.

“I’m good,” Laura answered.

Alec ignored her. He wasn’t concerned about Laura. She had the easy job.

“Dan? Ready?” he asked again. “It’s time.”

Dan didn’t meet Alec’s eyes, but opened the car door and stepped into the visitor parking lot of the Glen Canyon Dam. Their beat-up Chevy Bronco was one of only three vehicles there—the other two were desert-camouflaged Humvees.

Alec smiled. Soon there would be at least fifty thousand dead. Probably more. Lake Powell, the enormous reservoir just upriver from the Grand Canyon, got three million visitors per year, and even though it was September now—not peak season—there had to still be at least fifty thousand people on the lake.

Add to that anyone in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. All of the water from Lake Powell would scour the Grand Canyon and then pour into Lake Mead, overtopping the Hoover Dam and taking it out too, in a violent flood. Alec wished he had better numbers to estimate the deaths. He wished he’d be there to watch it all happen.

Oh well. It would be in the news soon enough. And it would take hours for the water to get to Lake Mead, so there would be reporters waiting. He could watch the Hoover Dam topple from safety, five hundred miles away.

Besides, deaths weren’t the numbers he was supposed to be most concerned about. Glen Canyon Dam produced 4.5 billion kilowatt hours of electricity per year, and Hoover generated another four. In one day he’d knock out enough power to light up Las Vegas for half a year.

He stepped to the back of the Bronco and clapped Dan on the shoulder. “For your mother and mine.”

Dan nodded without making eye contact.

“Yeah.”

They walked toward the visitor center in silence, Alec feeling a serene calm. This would be the biggest attack yet. Not just the biggest of theirs, but the biggest all across America. And rightly so—he was supposed to be setting the example.

A speedboat shot across the lake in the distance, leaving a trail of white foam in its wake.

“Their country is falling apart and they go on vacation,” Laura said, sounding amused.

“They have to relieve stress,” Alec answered sarcastically. “They probably think being in the wilderness is safe.”

If anything, the lake had more people on it than usual for this time of year, a fact he’d discovered yesterday when he’d tried to rent a small craft to scope out the dam. All he’d been able to get was a



old houseboat, and he'd had to navigate through a bustling marina to where he could get a good view. From there, Alec made all his notes—security patrols, escape routes—and developed a quick plan. Laura had lain out in a bikini and taken in as much sun as she could before the cool September breeze forced her to pull her T-shirt back on. And Dan had just sat for hours, eyes transfixed on the mass of concrete.

They reached the visitor center. The glass doors were locked, but that had been expected.

Laura knocked, hard enough that Alec worried the doors might shatter. She was showing off. *Idiot*.

He took a breath and tried to clear his mind. It was time for his part of the plan. He'd rehearsed the conversation a hundred times in his head—trying to think of every possible variation, every surprise. He was ready.

A moment later a soldier appeared, dressed in the full combat fatigues of the National Guard, rifle slung across his chest. Without opening the door, he gestured for them to go away.

Alec shook his head and held up a clipboard. "We have an appointment."

The soldier watched them for a few seconds, and then waved them off again.

"We have an appointment," Alec shouted again, through the glass. "We're from the University of Utah."

The guard sized them up. If he was worried, he didn't show it; he just seemed annoyed. All three were shorter than him. Alec was the oldest at nineteen, and skinny. Laura looked more like a ditz cheerleader than a terrorist. Only Dan had any muscle, but he was short—maybe five foot six.

Alec was already working on the man's mind. Implanting memories was an imprecise science, but Alec was confident: the glass was thick, but not dense or leaded or bulletproof; the man was only about four feet away; Alec was fully prepared.

It would take a few moments.

The soldier opened the door about three inches. The handles inside were actually chained, and that was all Alec could do not to laugh. The whole front of the visitor center was glass, and they expected the chain to stop a break-in?

The guard spoke through the gap. "Can't you read the sign? Dam's closed until further notice."

Laura spoke. "We have an appointment."

"An appointment? For a bunch of kids?"

"Grad students," Alec said. "U of U. We're here to get the weekly samples." He held up a length of cotton rope and a handful of plastic tubes.

"There's no one here to have an appointment with," the soldier said, flustered. Alec could see the false memories beginning to take hold. "We're . . . the dam . . . it's on lockdown."

Alec held up the clipboard again. "I showed you our security clearance. We were here last week, remember?"

The soldier's brow furrowed. "Well . . ."

"We know it's a hassle," Alec said, "but if I don't get this data my thesis is gonna be shot."

The guard readjusted his rifle on his shoulder, uncomfortable and confused.

Alec tapped the clipboard a final time. "It's signed by your commanding officer," he said, prodding the memory that was slowly infecting the soldier's mind.

The soldier, looking completely flustered, nodded, and undid the padlock on the chain. "Just . . . just be quick, okay?" He turned his back to the group and led them into the visitor center, illuminated only by the large windows. The place had probably been closed to tourists since the United States went on high alert, three weeks before, and the building had a feeling of abandonment to it, as if the workers had left in the middle of what they were doing. A half-eaten sandwich sat on the information

desk, the lettuce now brown and limp, the bread shriveled and stale. A scattering of papers lay on the floor in front of the cash register.

The guard led them to an elevator. He was walking more quickly now, with gained confidence and the memories solidified and began to fit more naturally into his mind.

He opened the door for them, smiling cheerfully at Laura and nodding to Alec and Dan. In that moment they were several stories down and walking out onto the top of the dam. A breeze blew across Laura's hair across her face as she turned and said, "Five minutes. Promise."

Alec stayed beside the soldier, gently feeding a second set of memories into the man.

"Aren't you going with them?"

Alec shook his head. "I don't like heights."

Fifty yards away, Laura leaned over the edge of the dam and looked down at the lake thirty feet below. On tiptoe, she began to unwind the rope and lower it. There wasn't any point to this, other than to make it look like they were doing something somewhat scientific. She was the distraction and the getaway plan. Dan would do the real work.

The soldier's radio crackled to life. The voice on the other end sounded alarmed.

"Gulf Charlie Five, this is Gulf Charlie Four. Private Diamond, what are those kids doing on the dam? Over."

He pulled the radio from his belt. "They're from the U. They have papers signed by Lieutenant Kilpack. Over."

While Laura stretched out over the railing—she was wearing short shorts and a tank top for the explicit purpose of drawing the attention of whatever soldiers were watching—Dan had gotten down on one knee, his right hand flat on the cement.

The staticky voice spoke again. "No one's supposed to be out there, Diamond. Over."

Diamond glanced at Alec and spoke into the radio. "I don't know what to tell you. I have the written orders right here. Over."

Alec looked around for the other soldier, but there was no one in sight. There were the two empty military vehicles parked in the lot—there were military vehicles *everywhere* nowadays—but most of the manpower was focused on the bridge over the canyon. That was the more likely target. As far as the army knew, it was next to impossible to damage a dam this size from up on top. All three of them could have been strapped with C-4 and not made a significant dent in it. The military still hadn't figured out anything important; Dan was more powerful than any explosive.

"I'm going to make a call," the voice on the radio said. "Stand by. Over."

"It's fine," Diamond replied, a little nervousness in his voice. "I've got an officer with the sheriff's office right here next to me. Over."

Alec released a little tension in his jaw. That had been tougher. It was easy to convince the man that the three of them were students, but much harder to immediately create a new, less-plausible story. Alec looked nothing like a police officer.

But, that's why he was in charge.

"Sorry, officer," Diamond said. "We'll get it sorted out."

A sudden shudder rolled through the concrete like a wave. Diamond and Alec both automatically reached for the wall for support.

The radio snapped to life. "Gulf Charlie Five, this is Gulf Charlie Four. Private Diamond, get those kids the hell off the dam."

Diamond began walking toward them. "Hey!"

Alec followed, right by his side.

There was another rumble, louder this time.

*Come on, Dan, Alec thought. Get it done.*

---

Twenty yards from the teens, the guardsman raised his rifle. "Hey, get over here."

*Hurry up.* Alec could fill the soldier's head with false memories, but he couldn't quickly overri-

the soldier's deeply ingrained training to follow orders.

Laura dropped the rope and held up her hands, but Dan didn't move.

An alarm was sounding now, and Private Diamond stopped, training his rifle on the two teens.

"Turn around," he barked.

Dan ignored him.

There was a sharp crack, and for an instant Alec thought Diamond had pulled the trigger. But the sound was much louder than a gunshot, reverberating off the canyon walls and shaking the ground under their feet. The face of the cement was splintered with a thousand tiny cracks and a thin cloud of dust burst skyward.

"You have three seconds," Diamond shouted.

The radio was screaming at him to fire.

That was all Alec needed. If no one else was firing at Dan, then there weren't snipers. The voice on the other end of the radio was probably inside the dam itself, watching the four of them on security cameras. They'd be feeling the real impact of what Dan was doing.

Alec pulled the private's sidearm from the holster. There wasn't even time for Diamond to respond before Alec fired three shots into the soldier's neck and head.

The dam rumbled, deep and grinding, knocking Alec to his knees.

Ahead of him he saw Dan try to stand, wobbling on weak legs.

It was finally Laura's turn. She grabbed Dan and slung him over her shoulder as easily as if he had been a stuffed toy. She ran toward Alec and the visitor center.

Alec took the soldier's rifle and radio, and then handed the pistol to Laura as she met them. He held the door open for her, and then chased after her up the emergency stairwell—she took them three at a time.

There was a ding of an elevator in the visitor center, and Alec spun and fired a short burst from the rifle in the direction of the sound.

"Door's locked," Laura shouted, and then Alec heard her smashing through the glass.

He fired another burst toward the elevators and then turned and ran, jumping through the broken glass door and sprinting to the Bronco.

"You do it?" Alec asked, barely containing his laughter. "You have time?"

Dan nodded weakly. "I did it. Damn thing's full of rebar, but I did it."

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## TWO

**IT WASN'T HARD TO DISAPPEAR** anymore. Six months ago Aubrey had hardly been able to control it, either to make it happen or stop it from happening. But now it was as natural as walking.

Nicole called it “twinkling,” as in, “disappearing in the twinkling of an eye,” but Aubrey hated that.

She hated a lot of things that Nicole did but put up with them anyway. Nicole had become her best friend. Her only real friend—the only one who knew Aubrey’s secret. And so Aubrey left the dance floor of the Gunderson Barn, the location of the North Sanpete High homecoming dance, and headed outside. Her floor-length blue satin dress fluttered around her feet, and as she pushed through the crowds of dancing high school students, she vanished. No one noticed.

It wasn’t fair, she thought, stepping into the cool September air. This was the first high school dance she’d ever attended. The first expensive evening gown she’d ever worn. The first time when a boy she didn’t even know had asked her to dance—and Nate Butler, her date, had actually gotten angry about it. Boys were fighting over her. This wasn’t the old life of Aubrey Parsons; it was much better.

But now she had to cut her night short, so that she could spy for Nicole.

Aubrey walked down the front steps, carefully moving around the couples who had gone outside seeking fresh air and privacy. Kelly—one of Nicole’s entourage and therefore one of Aubrey’s new friends—was in the shadows behind a tree, giggling with some guy. Aubrey ignored her.

The barn was just on the edge of Mount Pleasant, sprawled out on a wide field by the San Pete River. Aubrey walked the uneven stone path toward the lawn in the back. Heels were new to her, too, and she was relieved that no one could see her take the shoes off and carry them.

It wasn’t hard to find the boys. Aubrey had done a lot of spying for Nicole, and most of it had been much trickier than listening in on four stupid football players getting drunk in the dark. They sat in a row on a short brick wall, passing a bottle back and forth.

Nate was with them. He was the star linebacker, and he’d been following Aubrey around ever since she’d been under Nicole’s wing. She hadn’t noticed him leave the dance floor to come outside—Aubrey had been spending more time with Nicole and the girls than with the boys.

Not that she minded that he’d left. She liked the idea of a boy doting on her—and he was supposedly a great catch—but she could barely carry on a conversation with him unless the topic was football, hunting, or video games.

The other three guys weren’t as popular—not in Nicole’s inner circle. Lewis was funny but had never done much around school other than crack jokes. Scott was rich—well, rich for their small farming town in central Utah. His family owned the slaughterhouse. And Thomas had recently moved to Mount Pleasant, and had done very little to distinguish himself other than walking on the football team and catching Nicole’s eye. That’s why Aubrey was spying—to see if Nicole should care about Thomas.

It wasn’t fair. The entire reason that Aubrey spied for Nicole was so that Aubrey could be at things

like the homecoming dance. That was their deal. Now she was missing that because of one of Nicole's whims.

And disappearing made Aubrey tired—she could only do it for so long—and she didn't want to spend the rest of the night dizzy and nauseated.

"This sucks," Scott said, wiping his mouth and handing the bottle to Thomas. "I knew it would be like this. Dances are always lame."

"You got here half an hour ago and only spent ten minutes inside," Lewis said.

"Is it going to get any better?" Scott asked.

"No." Lewis laughed and hopped up on the wall.

Thomas took a drink. "What's the deal with Kelly? She's hot."

"That's pretty much the deal with Kelly," Lewis answered.

"That's all I need." Thomas took another drink. "Who's she with?"

Lewis spread his arms out, walking unsteadily along the wall. "Everyone, at some point. She'll eventually get around to you."

The others laughed. Lewis stumbled and then jumped down to the ground.

Aubrey hated this. She wondered how long she'd have to stay and listen to get what Nicole wanted. Her spying didn't necessarily reveal everyone to be a jerk, but it wasn't uncommon. Everyone talked about other people behind their backs. Everyone gossiped. Everyone sucked.

Nate motioned for the bottle. "I probably need to get back in there."

"What's the deal with your girl?" Thomas said. Aubrey perked up. She had never been as interested in Nate as he was in her, but she couldn't help wondering what he would say.

"What about her?" Nate said.

"She's hot."

Aubrey felt herself blush.

Nate nodded.

"Here's what I want to know," Lewis said. "We've all been in school together since kindergarten. He was looking at Thomas but gesturing to the other two boys. "And so has little Aubrey Parsons. And until this year no one would give her a second glance."

Aubrey's chest tightened. Nothing they said would be good. But she couldn't get herself to leave—she needed to hear what Nate would say.

But he didn't say a word. He just shrugged.

"Why not?" Thomas was asking Lewis, but it was Scott who answered.

"Because she's trailer trash. Until she started hanging out with Nicole, I think she had like three old shirts that she wore over and over."

"And her dad's a drunk," Lewis added. "Like, slobbering, fall-down, filthy drunk."

"Just like you," Aubrey yelled, knowing they couldn't hear her. She felt tears welling up in her eyes but fought them off.

"So what?" Thomas said. "Like I said, she's hot. Didn't you see her tonight?"

Scott shook his head. "Nicole must have bought the dress. I think she buys all of Aubrey's clothes now."

That wasn't true, but Aubrey hated the real answer even more. She didn't want to think about it.

Nate smiled wryly. "Aubrey may be poor, but she makes up for it in other ways."

The group burst into laughter, and Aubrey ran forward, right in front of Nate. "I do not!" she screamed. "That's a lie, you pig!"

Maybe it was stupid and risky, but at that moment she didn't care: she jumped at Nate, both hands

slamming into his chest. Partly from being unprepared and partly because of the alcohol, he tumbled off the low wall and into a patch of flowers. The open bottle lay on his shirt, spilling its contents on his chest.

The other boys howled in delight as he struggled to get up, and Aubrey took a pleased step back.

Aubrey's invisibility wasn't like the movies. She still didn't understand how any of it worked—how she'd ended up being able to do it—but from practicing over and over with Nicole, she knew it wasn't as plain as just disappearing. Instead, people simply didn't notice her. She could yell, or slap, or punch, and no one would detect it. They'd feel the punch—like Nate had—but they wouldn't recognize it for what it was. They'd think they'd slipped, or that they'd gotten a sudden muscle spasm, or that a wind (or drunkenness) had knocked them over. But they'd never see her, or hear her. It was like their minds just blocked her out completely.

Nate was looking stupid, awkwardly trying to climb back up off the lawn.

Aubrey checked her dress to make sure she hadn't been splashed with any of the alcohol. The boys had stopped talking about girls and had switched to football. The North Sanpete Hawks had pummeled the Manti Templars in the homecoming game.

She was tired of spying. Who cared what these boys were saying? She was going back into the dance to tell Nicole that Nate could go to hell.

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## THREE

**JACK COOPER SAT A QUARTER** mile from the Gunderson Barn, up a hill in his dad's pickup. His mom had packed him a bologna sandwich for a midnight snack, but he was eating it now, mostly out of boredom.

Below him he could see the kids at the dance and could hear the blare of the music. It was too far to make out any faces, but Jack was fine with that. If he couldn't see them, then they couldn't see him. As if it wasn't bad enough that he was a janitor at his own high school, the school had asked him to clean up after the homecoming dance, too. It was time-and-a-half pay, and he couldn't say no to that, but he didn't want to even go down the hill until everyone was gone. He needed the money, but he didn't need to be seen.

He could easily spot the cops surrounding the barn. The town only had four officers, but in light of recent events they'd asked for volunteers to come and guard the dance. Jack sighed. In light of recent events, no one should be leaving their house.

He'd only been a little kid when 9/11 happened—too young to even know about it, really—but there was a 9/11 every day now. Three straight weeks of terrorist attacks. No rhyme or reason. No arrests had been made, no suspects were being interrogated. Subways, government buildings, national landmarks, power plants, restaurants. Jack wondered how people had the courage to go outside anymore.

They didn't, he reminded himself. Except for little towns like Mount Pleasant that no terrorist would care about.

He clicked on the radio.

*“. . . take twenty to twenty-four hours for the water to travel the three hundred miles to Lake Mead. An unnamed representative of the Bureau of Reclamation said that if Hoover Dam overflows for a sustained period then that dam will likely fail. Hoover Dam officials have fully opened the spillways in an effort to dump as much water as possible before the bulk of Lake Powell arrives.”*

Jack sat up a little straighter. Had Lake Powell been attacked? The reporter started talking about evacuations on Lake Mead, and Jack changed to another station.

*“—we're told that the Glen Canyon Bridge is in danger of collapse due to rising water levels below what used to be the dam.”*

What used to be the dam?

This was the closest terrorist attack to Mount Pleasant yet—maybe only five hours away. He'd gone to Powell with a scout troop a couple of years ago and had caught the biggest fish of his life—twelve-pound striped bass.

Could the lake really be gone? A wave of nausea washed over Jack, and he stepped outside the truck, leaning on the open door and sucking in a breath of fresh air. He could see through the massive barn doors below him, could see the kids dancing carefree while the world was falling apart. Shadow

ran playfully on the lawn and in and out of the trees. His friends were down there.

His former friends.

---

It used to be the three of them—Jack Cooper, Aubrey Parsons, and Matt Ganza. Jack was always with one of them, for as long as he could remember. Aubrey was the smart one, tutoring Jack in almost every subject—except history, the one class he loved. Matt had never seemed to have a care in the world, except for sports, but he'd always been terrible at them. Now, suddenly he was the star of everything. Went from benchwarmer to starting quarterback. The basketball coach had already promised him a starting spot on the varsity team. He—regular old Ganza—was at the dance tonight with Nicole Samuelson, the homecoming queen.

And Aubrey. She was too good for anyone now. Last year, Jack had actually gotten the courage to ask her to junior prom, but she'd said no. She'd cried, told him she would if she could just afford the dress. And then she'd been too embarrassed to ever talk about it again—or to let him bring it up.

So now there was only Jack. Jack the friggin' janitor, waiting to clean up once everyone else had their fun.

He wondered if any of the kids he could see were Ganza or Aubrey. One of the guys sitting on the wall, one of the couples holding hands, the girl in the electric-blue dress.

None of them knew about Lake Powell. He wondered if he should go down and tell them.

In the distance, a long line of headlights approached the barn.

*Wait a minute . . .*

He pushed the door closed quickly, dousing the light in the cab. He climbed up into the bed of the truck and peered through the darkness ahead, trying to get a better look.



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## FOUR

**AUBREY HAD ONLY MADE IT** a few yards when something stopped her. There were two people in the shadows, watching the boys. Had they heard what Nate had said—what he had insinuated about her?

It was too dark to make out more than their vague shapes, but they were big. Obviously boys. Would Nate's comments spread even faster? Nicole could stop the gossip. Aubrey had to talk to her.

But if Nicole was going to stop the rumors, she'd have to know who had heard them. Aubrey walked toward the side of the barn, where giant timbers jutted out from the wall, creating a wide dark alcove. She felt light-headed and unsteady. She'd been invisible for too long. As she went on there were more—dark shapes hidden in the shadows all around her, all around the barn.

Aubrey took a step back, and barely caught herself from falling.

It wasn't just boys in the shadows. They were three soldiers—two crouched and one standing, all of them fully dressed in combat gear. They wore helmets and large goggles, and a black cloth covered their noses and mouths like a ski mask. The two men crouching held rifles at the ready, while the one standing had his slung over one shoulder.

Was this some kind of prank? The uniforms looked too real, and no high school student would be stupid enough to use guns as a joke—not with what was going on all over the country. Aubrey backed away, and then turned and ran toward where she'd seen the first dark shapes.

They were soldiers, too.

Her head was spinning. She needed to get back inside.

What if they weren't soldiers? What if they were terrorists in disguise?

She lifted her dress up almost to her knees and jogged toward the front doors. A caravan of school buses was pulling into the parking lot, led by a pair of army jeeps.

The place was being surrounded, and she didn't know why. She needed to tell someone. Nicole would know what to do.

Cautiously, she stepped through the open doors of the barn, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The music was still playing and everyone was dancing and laughing.

She pushed through the crowd, bumping into more people than she normally would have, but she couldn't slow to be more careful. Besides, no one would notice her anyway. She hadn't reappeared. They might feel a movement, but to them it would seem like nothing more than a muscle twitch.

Near the speakers at the far side of the room, she spotted Nicole surrounded by a circle of girls. Aubrey reached the group she started fading back in, and wormed her way into the center, becoming fully visible as she did.

"Aubrey," Nicole said, shouting over the blaring speakers. "You look terrible."

"I know. Can we go talk?"

"Later."

“No,” Aubrey said, taking Nicole’s arm. “Now.”

~~Suddenly, the music stopped, and the dimmed lights were brought up to full strength. There were groans from the students and a few shouted at the DJ to turn things back on.~~

Wishing she were taller, Aubrey jumped up to look over the others’ heads toward the door. She couldn’t see any of the soldiers yet.

“What’s going on?” Nicole asked.

Aubrey turned to her. “I don’t know. I think we might be evacuated. The army’s outside.”

“The army?”

“I hope it’s the army,” Aubrey said under her breath.

A man appeared from the back of the barn—a soldier in camouflage, but not wearing all the gear or a helmet. He walked to the DJ table and took the microphone.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” the man said. “But we have to cut the evening short.” He was smiling, but his eyes were grim and cold.

“They’re all over outside,” Aubrey whispered to Nicole. Aubrey’s arms and legs felt weak, and her head was still fuzzy.

“First, I want to assure you that there is no reason for alarm,” the man said. “When I give the order, we’ll simply have you exit the building in a quiet and orderly fashion. The school district has several buses which will take you back into town.”

There was an outcry from the crowd, and the soldier motioned for everyone to be quiet. “In the interest of public safety, I’m going to need you to follow my instructions.”

Aubrey craned her neck to look back toward the wide barn door, and saw at least a dozen soldiers. A few more had appeared from a side hallway. They were spreading out in the room, surrounding the students.

“Please,” the soldier said, though his voice made the word sound like an order rather than a request. “walk in a single file line and keep your hands at your sides.”

From over by the main door, Aubrey could hear a soldier bark a command at the students. The room was humming with whispers.

Nicole touched Aubrey’s hand, her eyes frightened. “You don’t think they’re here for . . . you, right?”

Aubrey paused. She hadn’t even thought about that. “What? Of course not. It’s about the terrorists.”

Nicole looked nervous—a look Aubrey had never seen on Nicole before. “Isn’t that how it happens to people like you in movies, though?” she asked. “Testing?”

“This isn’t a movie,” Aubrey said, suddenly panicked. “It has to be something else. How would anyone have found out?”

Nicole shook her head.

“I’m going to go,” Aubrey whispered.

Nicole grabbed her hand, but Aubrey was already vanishing. Aubrey, now invisible, brushed Nicole’s hand away, and watched the puzzled look on her face as she reached and grasped for Aubrey’s unseen body.

Aubrey didn’t care right then how it worked. Panic was gripping her as Nicole’s words sunk in.

Were they here for her?

Aubrey gave Nicole a final look, wondering when they’d talk again, and then forced her way out the crowd into the night air.

The parking lot was brightly lit with floodlights mounted on the tops of four army jeeps. At the far

end were the newly arrived school buses. A line of kids waited in the center of the lot, surrounded by more armed soldiers. She realized they were the people she'd seen outside, including the boys—the soldiers must have rounded them up before entering the barn.

She headed toward them—exhausted from being invisible for so long—hoping that something would let her know if the army was looking for her.

Two soldiers stood at the front of the line, one carrying a clipboard and the other holding a handful of what looked like plastic hospital bracelets.

Aubrey was out in the middle of the lights now. Her thin dress was doing nothing to stop the cold, and in her weakened condition she started shivering.

Kelly was almost at the front of the line, and the look on her face seemed more inconvenienced than worried. As the boy in front of her was directed to the buses, she stepped up to the soldiers.

“Name?” the man with the clipboard said.

“Kelly Wagner.”

He looked through the papers on the clipboard until he found a black-and-white photocopy of a yearbook picture, and compared it to Kelly's face.

“How long is this going to take?” she said.

He ignored her, and peeled a sticker off his paperwork.

“Hold out your left wrist,” the second man said, taking the sticker and pressing it onto one of the thick plastic bracelets.

Kelly obeyed, and the soldier strapped the bracelet on her arm. He tugged on it until Kelly squealed. He then motioned for her to hurry along, and a third soldier escorted her to a bus.

Aubrey moved to get a better view of the clipboard, but by now she could hardly stand. She waited through two more people, hoping to catch a glimpse of her own name on the list—to see if it was marked in some way.

Something rumbled, like the low growl of an animal.

The soldiers noticed it too, and they retreated away from the line of teens. The man with the bracelets dropped them and lifted his rifle, leveling it at the crowd. The other soldier twisted his headset microphone to his mouth.

“Possible Lambda,” he said. “At the loading area. Over.”

The soldiers' fear was contagious and Aubrey stumbled slowly back from the teens—from kids she'd known for as long as she could remember.

A loudspeaker squawked. “Attention, students. Please get down on the ground, and keep your hands in front of you.”

The crowd was hesitant to move, and a few of the girls called out, saying that the asphalt would ruin their dresses.

Aubrey heard the rumble again. It wasn't an animal—it sounded like rock grinding against rock.

“Everyone get down,” the voice commanded sharply. All the soldiers' guns were raised now, and the students slowly began to comply.

Aubrey reached the edge of the lit area. She couldn't stand any longer and rested on the bumper of a truck. She searched the faces for Nicole, but didn't see her—the line still wound all the way back into the barn.

Someone near the front of the line moved. It was Nate, only . . . it wasn't Nate. He was wearing the same boutonniere she'd pinned on his jacket earlier that night, the same garish tie, but his face was wrong. Aubrey rubbed her eyes to see if fatigue was blurring her vision, but he still looked off. His face and hands were black and rough, almost like the asphalt he was standing on. He stood fully erect

against the soldiers' orders.

The soldiers barked at him to get back down, then ordered him to come forward, but he didn't do either. His eyes—small and black—scanned across the crowd of students as though he was waiting for something.

The soldiers were screaming at Nate now, commanding him to listen and obey. He spoke words that Aubrey couldn't hear, and she almost thought she saw his grotesque face smile.

Then he lunged forward, running toward the nearest soldier. His footsteps were heavy and Aubrey thought she felt the ground shake. Rifles flashed all around the parking lot as the army opened fire on him, but Nate didn't stop. He collided with the soldier, tackling him to the ground with a horrible crunch. As the bullets hailed into Nate, he stood again, leaving the soldier crumpled in a motionless heap.

Aubrey dashed across the lawn, her bare feet stumbling. The soldiers weren't looking for her—they were looking for Nate, and he was some kind of monster. Or were they looking for both of them? At the edge of the lawn she plunged into the bushes, fighting her way through the tangled branches and sticks. Bullets continued to roar behind her, echoed by the screams of the terrified students.

Finally, she took a step and there was nothing beneath her. She flailed for something to grab, but she fell.

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## FIVE

**JACK WATCHED AS THE SOLDIERS** fired at the—what was it? A gorilla?—but their guns seemed to have no effect.

The gorilla—no, it was human; it was wearing clothes—attacked another soldier, charging into the direct path of the bullets and leaping forward. The soldier was smashed to the pavement and didn't get up.

Several of the students began to creep away, crawling for safety or to escape. Jack saw two girls sprint from the school bus toward the denser brush.

And then the thing tried to run, thundering out of the parking lot and onto the empty road. Jack saw a soldier fire something else from his rifle—slower than a bullet and arcing like a thrown baseball. It hit the ground behind the creature and exploded in yellow fire and smoke. All the way up on the hill, Jack felt the shock wave thud into his chest and pass through his body.

How could this be happening? And what was that thing? Was it a terrorist? That seemed like the only explanation, though it didn't make any sense. Everyone assumed the terrorists were Islamic fundamentalists, or political extremists, or environmental activists. No one thought they were . . . monsters?

As the smoke cleared, the thing was struggling to stand.

Another grenade was launched—that's what it had to be—and this one was a direct hit.

Jack realized his hands were clutched on the sides of the truck's cab, his knuckles white and the sharp edges of rusty metal digging into his skin.

As the cloud of smoke and debris drifted away, the creature wasn't moving.

He didn't look menacing anymore. Just a man—just a kid, like Jack—lying motionless on the road next to two craters in the asphalt.

Four soldiers moved out to check on him, and suddenly the rest of the army was back at work—corralling the kids who were trying to crawl away, and herding them all into some semblance of a line.

Jack realized suddenly that he was hearing screams. They'd been there all the time, he was sure, but he'd just noticed them now that the guns had stopped. They weren't frightened screams, or calls for help—they were wails, like uncontrollable sadness.

Few of the students would stand. Jack wondered how many had peed themselves, and then realized how stupid that was—someone had just died. Some teenager had just turned into some kind of monster and had then been gunned down, blown up, by the United States Army.

Jack watched as, one by one, the students were pulled from the ground, checked against paperwork, put in some kind of handcuffs, and led onto buses. There were medics there now, removing the bodies of three dead or, hopefully, unconscious soldiers. A truck beyond the floodlights took the motionless monster—now a regular boy—away.

The soldiers made a final sweep of the area—in and out of the barn, up into the brush, down

through the river—and returned with a few more terrified kids.

And then they left, the buses in a tight convoy surrounded by Humvees.

And Jack was all by himself.

He stumbled to his knees and puked over the edge of the truck's bed, his whole body shaking.

What had he just seen? That was the homecoming dance—that was everybody he knew, all gone.

When did teenagers at a dance become criminals?

No, not criminals. Police handle criminals. The army fights enemies.

A bunch of boys in hand-me-down suits and girls in skimpy dresses were enemies of America?

What was that thing, that monster? That must have been why the army was there. But then why did

they take all the others away? Was the army protecting them or arresting them?

Jack didn't dare drive his truck to the barn—he didn't want any lights to make him a target—but he made the decision to hike down the grassy hill.

He moved slowly, instinctively using the slow, toe-to-heel footsteps he'd been taught over a lifetime of hunting deer and elk. The dark felt claustrophobic and heavy, like the night air was wrapping around him, crushing his chest. His breathing was rapid, even though he was hardly moving a mile per hour, and his heart raced.

When he got to the end of the brush, he stopped. The barn was wide open, the lights still on and crepe paper and balloons still adorning the doors.

A paper sign with the painted words "Hawks Forever" hung just inside the barn.

There were bullet holes in the sign.

Now that he was looking for them, he could see the holes everywhere, tiny dots of light punched through the wooden walls of the barn.

No one was here. The teachers were gone, and the DJ, and the local cops. Everyone had been taken.

It was a good thing he didn't have a date, Jack thought, and then began laughing until his laughter turned to sobs and he fell to his knees. What had happened here? What was happening to the world?

What would happen tomorrow?

He wiped his face, ashamed of himself even though there was no one to see him cry, and stood quietly. Quietly, he crossed the lawn and entered the parking lot.

The asphalt was littered with shell casings. Dozens. Hundreds.

He kept moving out to the street, to the two craters blown into the roadbed. They looked like large potholes, only more violent, with grapefruit-sized hunks of asphalt scattered in all directions.

There was blood. In the darkness he might have mistaken it for spilled motor oil, but he'd seen where the gorilla kid had lain—where he'd died.

Jack turned away, feeling the nausea welling up inside of him again.

And then he saw her. A flash of blue and brown—a dress—entering the building.

He paused, frozen for a moment, frozen because everything felt dangerous. But it was just a girl. Someone the army had missed.

Jack hurried to the barn, his eyes darting back and forth between the door and the ground—he didn't want to step on any shells and scare her. He wanted answers, and maybe this girl would have some.

He stopped at the entrance, his stomach in his throat.

He peeked inside.

The girl sat at one of the round tables near the door, facing away from him. Her dress, blue and long, was covered in a layer of dark brown mud, and scratches up the back had torn and frayed the material. Her hair and neck were just as filthy. A long red scrape ran up her shoulder and under her

dripping brunette hair.

She wasn't wearing any shoes.

She looked exhausted, her forearms resting on the table and her head hanging down. Jack guessed she must be in shock—one of the few who'd seen what happened but managed to stay hidden.

He wondered if he should say something, but was afraid she'd panic. Instead, he stepped inside the barn and began walking in a wide circle around her, staying far enough away to be non-threatening until he was in her view.

Her eyes were closed.

Aubrey.

He wondered how he hadn't recognized her before, but he wasn't used to seeing her in anything approaching a dress like this. The only times she ever wore a dress were to church, and for years those had just been the same floral prints she'd bought at his parents' thrift shop.

"Hey," Jack said, trying to sound as calm as possible.

Her head popped up, eyes open and terrified. They settled on Jack. She stared for just a few seconds and then bent over again.

Even now, after all that had happened, she didn't want to see him. What had he ever done to her?

"You okay?" he asked, a slight harshness to his voice.

Aubrey lifted her head, but didn't really make eye contact. Instead she gestured around the room at the destroyed decorations and spilled food. She pulled out the chair beside her, and Jack thought she was offering it to him until he saw the two bullet holes punched through the back.

"Do I look okay?" she said. "Is any of this okay?"

Jack came over anyway, staring at the sharp, torn metal edges of the folding chair.

"How did you get away?"

She pointed to her dress and then shook her head, plainly upset with herself. "I ran and fell in the river, like an idiot."

"Better than being out here," he said, sticking a finger through one of the jagged bullet holes.

He tried to imagine what she would have looked like if she hadn't been filthy with mud, if her makeup and hair weren't soaked.

She probably would have looked like one of Nicole's Barbie-doll clones, he thought. This wasn't the same Aubrey Parsons he used to know and—well, it wasn't the same Aubrey Parsons he used to know.

Jack sat down across from her. "Do you know what happened?"

She shook her head. "I know what I saw, but I have no idea what it was."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Nate Butler turn into some kind of monster—like he was made out of rock, like in a movie."

"That was Nate?"

"You saw it?" She looked surprised.

"Yeah," Jack said. He held up keys to the barn—keys he didn't need, since it was left wide open. "I was waiting for the dance to be over so I could clean the place up."

"Then you know what happened."

"I guess."

She looked so different. Even filthy, she was a different person than the one he'd known. Aubrey Parsons should have been wearing a T-shirt and jeans, not a strapless dress.

He stood, then walked to a small alcove by the front entrance. Rows of hangers held jackets and shawls—no one had been able to gather their belongings before being forced outside. He pulled out

one of the boys' coats—thick, sheepskin, exactly like one Jack had always wanted. He then roamed around in the bags left on the floor below, digging through leftover decorations and extra boxes of cookies before he found a pair of girls' sneakers. Finally, he grabbed one of the shawls.

Jack took the clothes to Aubrey. "Here."

She picked up the shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"No," he said. "Use that as a towel. Wear the coat."

Aubrey paused, then did as he'd instructed, whispering, "Thank you."



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