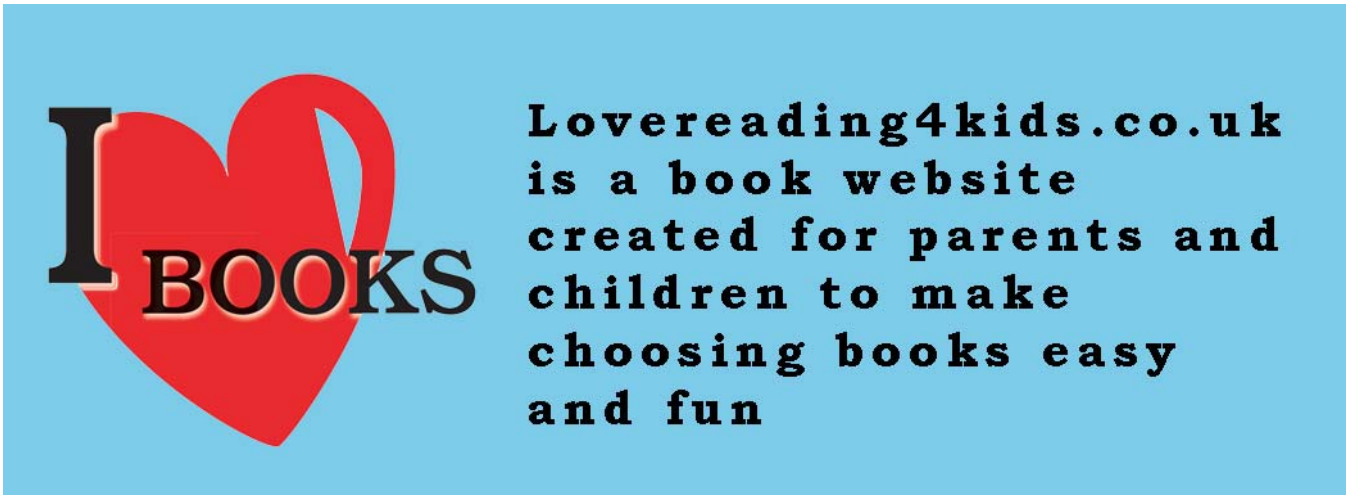


Opening extract from

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Written by

Ryan Graudin

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By
Wolf

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TO DAVID FOR BEING AT MY SIDE AND
SHARING THE MOST IMPORTANT JOURNEYS

THE ROTTEN BONES ARE TREMBLING,
OF THE WORLD BEFORE THE GREAT WAR.

—FROM THE OFFICAL SONG OF THE HITLER YOUTH

Once upon a different time, there was a girl who lived in a kingdom of death. Wolves howled up her arm. A whole pack of them—made of tattoo ink and pain, memory and loss. It was the only thing about her that ever stayed the same.

Her story begins on a train.

CHAPTER 1

THEN

THE NUMBERS
AUTUMN 1944

There were five thousand souls stuffed into the train cars—thick and deep like cattle. The train groaned and bent under their weight, weary from all of its many trips. (Five thousand times five thousand. Again and again. So many, so many.)

No room to sit, no air to breathe, no food to eat. Yael leaned on her mother and strangers alike until her knees ached (and long, long after). She choked in the smell of waste and took gulps from the needle-cold buckets of water that were shoved through the door by screaming guards. Far below the tracks, a slow, shuddering groan whispered her name, over and over: *yah-ell, yah-ell, yah-ell.*

"You won't have to stand much longer. We're almost there," Yael's mother kept saying as she smoothed her daughter's hair.

But *almost there* kept stretching on and on. One day rolled

into two, into three. Endless hours of swaying kilometers and slats of sunlight that cut like knives through the car's shoddy planks and across the passengers' gray faces. Yael huddled against her mother's taffeta-silk skirt and tried not to listen to the crying. Sobs so loud her name almost drowned in them. But no matter how loud the sadness got, she could still hear the whisper. *Yah-ell, yah-ell, yah-ell*. Constant, steady, always. A secret under everything.

Three days of this.

Yah-ell, yah-ell, yah—squeal!

Stop.

Nothing.

And then the doors opened.

"Get out! Hurry!" a man—bald, thin, dressed in clothes like pajamas—yelled, and kept yelling. Even after they started spilling out of the train car. He yelled and yelled in a way that made Yael shrink close against her mother. "Hurry! Hurry!"

All around was darkness and glare. Night and spotlights. The cold air was sharpened by the screams of guards, snarling dogs, and snapping whips.

"Men on one side! Women on the other!"

Push, push, jostle, push, screams. There was a sea of wool and shuffling. Everyone seemed lost. Moving and pushing and crying and not knowing. Yael's fingers clenched the edge of her mother's coat, so tight they could have been seams of their own.

—HURRY HURRY MOVE—an iron voice inside Yael fought and pushed and cried***—DON'T GET WASHED AWAY—***

They were all flowing in one direction. Away from whiplash and dog fangs. Toward a man who stood on an overturned apple crate, looking out across the platform's dark, milling crowd. A floodlight bathed him. The pure white fabric of his lab coat glowed and his arms were stretched wide, like wings.

He looked like an angel.

Every face that passed he measured and judged. Male and female. Old and young. The man in the glowing lab coat plucked and sifted and pointed them into lines.

"Too small! Too ill! Too weak! Too short! Too old!" He barked out characteristics like ingredients for some twisted recipe, sweeping away their offenders with a wave of his hand. Those he approved of received a passing nod.

When he saw Yael, he neither barked nor nodded. He squinted at first—eyes serpent sharp behind his glasses.

Yael squinted back. There was a sharpness in her eyes, too, whetted by three days of fear and too-bright lights. Her knees ached and wobbled, but she tried her best to stand straight. She did not want to be too small, too weak, too short.

The man stepped down from the crate and walked toward Yael's mother, who shifted just-so against her daughter as if to shield her. But there was no defense from this man's gaze. He saw all, staring at Yael and her mother as if they were suits that needed tailoring. Taking measurements with his eyes, imagining what a few stitches and tucks might do.

Yael stared back, taking measurements of her own. The man looked different up close. Out of the light, with the shadows pressed in. (They seemed extra dark on him, as if making

up for that first glowing impression.) He smelled different, too. Clean, but not. Harsh, peeling scents Yael later learned to associate with bleach and blood and uncareful scalpels.

This man did not trade in heralds or blessings or miracles.

He was an angel of a different kind.

Yael's knees ached, ached, ached. Her eyes stung and watered. She kept standing. Kept staring. Clenching her mother's skirt with stubborn fingers.

The man in the white coat glanced at the guard next to him, who was busy inscribing notes onto a clipboard. "Reserve this girl for Experiment Eighty-Five. It's long-term, so she should be housed in the inmate barracks. And make certain her hair is only cut. Not shorn. I'll need strands for samples."

"Yes, Dr. Geyer." The guard grabbed Yael's hand, snapped his pen across her skin in two quick strikes. *X* marks the survivor. "What about the mother?"

The man shrugged. "She seems strong enough," was all he said before he walked back to the crate, back to the light that made him dazzle and glow.

Yael never did find out why Dr. Geyer chose her. Why she—out of all the young children who stumbled out of the train cars and clung to their mothers' coats that night—was placed in the line of the living.

But it did not take her long to discover what she'd been marked for.

This was Experiment 85: Every other morning, at the end of the four-hour roll call, a guard shouted out Yael's number. Every other morning, she had to follow him through two sets of barbed-wire gates and over the train tracks, all the way to the doctor's office.

The nurse always strapped Yael down to the gurney before the injections. She never really looked at Yael, even when she turned the girl's arm over to check the numbers stamped there. Those water-weak eyes always focused on the inanimate. Things like the not-quite-dry bloodstains on the floor tiles or flecked across the pristine white of her apron. The shiny black leather of her shoes. The clipboard she scrawled Yael's information on.

INMATE: 121358ΔX
AGE: 6 YEARS
EXPERIMENT: #85 MELANIN MANIPULATION
SESSION: 38

Dr. Geyer was different. From the moment he stepped across the threshold, his eyes never left Yael. He sat on his rolling stool, arms folded over his chest. Leaned slightly back. Examining the little girl in front of him. There were no wrinkles on his face—no weary frown or weight of the world sagging his skin.

He even smiled when he asked his questions. Yael could see all of his white, white teeth, cut apart by the tiny black gap where his two front incisors didn't quite meet. It was this part of his face she always focused on when he spoke. The gap. The

not-quite-fullness of his soft words. The single break in his paternal mirage.

"How are you feeling?" he'd ask her, leaning forward on his toadstool seat.

Yael never really knew the answer to this question. What exactly it was that Dr. Geyer expected her to say when the bunk she shared with her mother and Miriam and three other women was infested with lice; when the night temperatures dropped so low that the straw in their mattress stabbed her skin like knitting needles; when she was hungry, always hungry, even though the Babushka in the bunk across from her snuck her extra bread rations every night.

—DON'T LOOK AT THE KNIVES TELL HIM WHAT HE WANTS TO HEAR—

She wanted to be strong, brave, so she offered the one word a strong, brave girl might say: "Fine."

The doctor's smile always grew wider when she said this. Yael wanted to keep him happy. She didn't want the bloodstains on the floor to be hers.

Every session he examined her skin. Shone a dazzling penlight into her eyes. Tugged out a few of her stubby hairs for color analysis. When the string of questions and answers ended, Dr. Geyer took the clipboard from the nurse stationed in the corner. Always he flipped through the pages, his brown hair tumbling to his eyes as he deciphered the nurse's crude writing.

" 'Melanin production seems to be on a steady decline.... Note paler patches on skin as well as slight change in subject's

iris pigmentation. Eumelanin is also decreasing—as can be seen by subject's hair coloration.' "

They never called Yael by her name. She was always *subject*. Or if they needed to be more specific: Inmate 121358ΔX.

"We're making progress." Dr. Geyer's smile stretched, as if his lips were being held open by tenterhooks. He handed the clipboard back to the nurse, rolled his seat to the sterling tray table, where the needles sat in a neat row. Straight silver fangs, waiting to sink poison into Yael's skin. Fill her with another two days of fire and agony. Change her from within. Take all the colors and feelings and human inside. Drain, drain, drain until nothing was left.

Just a ghost of a girl. A nothing shell.

Progress.