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Opening extract from
The Scattering

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Published by
**HarperCollins Children's Books an
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Publishers**

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First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* in
2017 HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of
HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd, 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1
9GF

The HarperCollins website address is:

www.harpercollins.co.uk 1

Text © Kimberly McCreight 2017

ISBN 978-00-0-811508-1

Kimberly McCreight asserts the moral right to
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Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives

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PROLOGUE

I STAND IN THE DARK, BAREFOOT AND COLD ON THE EDGE OF THE SHARP ROCKS, staring out over the long stretch of black water in front of me. And I wonder if I really can make it all the way to that small light on the dock in the distance. It seems so impossibly far away, the water so frighteningly still like it's just waiting for someone fool enough to try.

I am not a very strong swimmer, or not nearly strong enough. I've never made it that kind of distance. Not fully clothed, not in the darkness. Across unfamiliar water, with all the tricks a pin-prick of light on the horizon can play, who knows what could go wrong? But we have no choice. They are coming for us. For me, actually. They are already here. Voices in the distance, creeping closer. It's only a matter of time.

But the real crazy thing? These bad facts notwithstanding, deep down I do believe I can swim the mile or more to that dock. I know it, actually. Maybe that's all that matters. Because if I have learned anything in these past weeks, it's that strength is just another word for faith. And true courage lies in holding out hope.

And right now, it's just me and my doubt at the water's edge anyway. I know not to let that get the better of me. Instead, I need to trust my instincts.

So I take one last deep breath before I step forward and set my gaze on that faraway horizon. And then I start to swim.

I AM IN OUR FOYER STARING AT THE TEXT FROM JASPER. AT THAT ONE WORD
Run.

For a minute. For an hour. Forever.

My heart drums against my rib cage as my eyes stay down. The six agents say things. Their names—Agent Klute and Agent Johansen and Agent something else and something else. *Run. Don't run. Run. Don't run.* They say other things: Department of Homeland Security. Ruling out a domestic security threat. The rest is just buzzing.

*Run. Don't run. Run. Don't
run. Run.*

I spin toward the steps, phone gripped like a hand grenade.

Run first. Questions later. Quentin taught me that.

“Wylie?” my dad shouts after me. Stunned. Confused. Wor- ried. “Wylie, what are you—”

Voices, jostling behind me as I pound toward the steps. Don't look back. Don't slow down. On and up the stairs. On and up. That's what I need to do.

But why up? Shouldn't I run out the back door and not deeper into the house? The upstairs bathroom and the slanted, notched part of the roof. That must be it. A way out. I grab the banister when my feet slip.

"Ms. Lang!" one of them calls. So close I can almost feel his breath.

"Stop! Leave her alone!" My dad sounds so angry I barely recognize his voice. Many more voices shout back at him. Gasp- ing, thudding, a struggle. "You can't just barge into our house!"

"Dr. Lang, calm down!"

"Hey! Stop!" The voice behind me again. Even closer now. I lunge forward as I hit the upstairs hall.

The bathroom. That's where I need to go. *Focus. Focus. Faster. Faster.* Before he grabs me. The door isn't far. And I'll only need a second to open the window and crawl out. After a quick slide to the ground, I'll do then what I have done before. Run. Like. Hell.

Down the hallway I pound, loud feet still just a stride behind me. "Wylie!" the man calls out, but stiff like he doesn't want to admit that I even have a name.

"This is our house!" my dad shouts again. He sounds closer to the steps.

"Dr. Lang, you need to stay here!"

My eyes are locked on the bathroom door at the end of the hall. It seems so far away. The hallway endless. But I need to get

to that door. Window up. Slide out. One step at a time. As fast as I possibly can.

“Ms. Lang!” The voice again, much closer. Too close. And nervous. He is near enough to grab me but is too afraid of hurting me. “Come on! Stop! What are you doing?”

Past the first door on the right. Two more left to go.

But then my foot catches on the carpet. I manage to get my hands up at the very last second so that it's my wrist that cracks hard against the wall, and then my shoulder instead of my face. Still, the shooting pain makes me feel dizzy as I hit the ground. I think I might vomit as I roll into myself, cradling my arm against my stomach. I'm afraid to look down. Terrified the bone might be poking through.

“Jesus, are you okay?” The agent has stopped in front of me. I can now see he's the short one with the overly muscular arms that stick out stiffly from his sides. And he is definitely as nervous as he sounded. But also annoyed. He looks up and down the hall like he's checking for witnesses. “Damn it. I told you not to run.”

A FEW MINUTES later, I am sitting on the slouched couch in our small living room as my dad wraps an ice pack around my throbbing wrist. The pain is making my brain vibrate. The men have silently positioned themselves so that they now block the door and the stairs and the hallway toward the back. Each and every one of the possible exits. They look even bigger inside the compact frame of our old Victorian home than they did outside. There is definitely no way out now.

"I don't think it's broken," Agent Klute announces, peering at my arm. But not nearly close enough to make that kind of assessment.

My dad, on his feet in front of me, turns around and gets right in Agent Klute's face. He looks so tiny by comparison, like a little boy.

"Get the hell out of my house," he snaps, pointing toward the door. "Now, I mean it. All of you out."

Like he will try to remove Klute by force if he has to. My dad's fury has made him blind to their difference in size. He would die trying to protect me, I can see that so clearly now. I wish I had known it before. I'm not sure what it would have changed about what happened at the camp. Everything maybe.

"I'm afraid we can't leave, Dr. Lang." Klute lowers his head. "Not until Wylie answers our questions."

He is trying to appear unthreatening. Apologetic. It doesn't work. Especially because he doesn't *feel* sorry. I can tell. I can read his feelings well enough to have no doubt. Actually, Agent Klute feels so very little. It's chilling. My dad steps closer, his anger rising.

"You can't just barge into my home and *chase* after my daughter. She is the *victim* here," my dad says. "Even if she was a criminal, you need a warrant to be in someone's home. It's not legal. God help you if her wrist is broken."

"To be clear, Dr. Lang, your daughter ran from federal agents.

Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?"

My dad almost laughs. Then he presses his fingertips to his mouth, as if in prayer. I have never seen him this angry before. Rage has changed the shape of his face. But I can

so hard to stay calm. To do what needs to be done.

“Get out. Get out. Get out,” my dad says—slow and quiet and steady. Like a drumbeat. “Right now. Or so help me God—”

“As I said, we can’t do that.” Agent Klute is still so freakishly calm. “Wylie is a material witness to a multiple homicide that could be linked to domestic terrorism. We need her to come with us now and answer some questions. That’s all.”

“Ha!” my dad huffs. “I’m calling a lawyer.”

What lawyer? I think as my dad grabs for his phone and dials. And yet he seems so confident as he puts the phone to his ear. Time stretches out as we stand there, waiting for someone to answer his call, for my dad to speak. I can feel Agent Klute staring at me. I try not to look back at him, but I cannot help myself.

Sure enough, his cold, black eyes are locked on me, his mouth hanging open a little so that I can see his huge white teeth. I imagine them biting into me. But I don’t sense any of the hostile feelings I would expect to be coming from him—no annoyance or suspicion or aggravation. There is only one thing: pity. And, it turns out, that is so much more terrifying.

I cross my arms tight as my stomach balls up. Maybe I should just answer their questions. Maybe that would make this all go away faster. Except I also have the most awful sense that—no matter what I say—this is the beginning of something and not the end.

Breathe, I remind myself. *Breathe*. Because the room is narrowing, the floor beginning to shift underfoot. And this is definitely not the time to black out. I’ve been an

“Hi, Rachel, it’s Ben,” my dad finally says into the phone. “I need you to call me back as soon as you can. It’s an emergency.” Rachel. Right. Of course my dad would call her. Rachel was my mom’s friend. Or ex–best friend. After years of her and my mom being out of touch, Rachel appeared out of nowhere at my mom’s funeral. Ever since, she’s been like some kind of rash we can’t get rid of. She wants to help. Or so she claims. My dad says it’s probably her way of coping with her grief. If you ask me, what—or who—she actually wants is my dad. Regardless, the whole thing is weird. *She* is weird, and I don’t trust her.

But like her or not, Rachel is a criminal defense attorney. She would know what to do in a situation like this. And Rachel might be a totally shitty person—the details of their falling-out were never something my mom would share, but even she always said that Rachel was the person she’d call if she ever found herself in real trouble, because “Rachel could keep a bragging serial killer out of prison.” And my mom didn’t mean it as a compliment.

“Dr. Lang, if Wylie has nothing to hide, it shouldn’t be a problem for her to talk to us,” Agent Klute says when my dad hangs up.

“Maybe it would be less of a problem if you hadn’t tackled me,” I say, because it seems like my dad could use some help.

“Hey, you fell!” the short agent pipes up. “I didn’t touch you.”

That’s true, of course, but it hardly feels like the important point.

Agent Klute frowns at me. None of this is going the way it was supposed to. And now he is aggravated, but only a little. Like he’s just gotten a small drop of soup on

shirt. “I can assure you, Dr. Lang, we have *extremely* broad authority to question witnesses in cases of suspected terrorism. And we don’t need a warrant. Wylie is not under arrest. At least not yet.”

“After that”—my dad points to me, my arm specifically—“the only way we’re answering your questions is if our lawyer tells us we have to.”

Agent Klute takes a breath. “Fine. When will she be here?” “I don’t know,” my dad says, trying to sound like this gives him the upper hand. Though he knows that it does not. And he’s worried about where this situation is headed. I can feel that loud and clear.

Agent Klute stares blankly at my dad. “We’ll just wait for your lawyer then. For as long as it takes.”

FOR A WHILE after, a half hour maybe, my dad and I sit in silence, side by side on the couch. The agents stand as still as statues in each corner. Agent Klute is the only one who moves, pacing as he sends texts. He’s getting more agitated with each one, our floor creaking eerily under his heavy feet.

I want to text Jasper, but who knows what he will say? And if the agents do bring me in for questioning, they could easily take my phone. It’s safer to wait to talk to Jasper until after they are gone.

My dad calls Rachel two more times, but both calls go to voice mail. And so we wait some more. Thirty more minutes go by. Then an hour. I cannot believe how uncomfortable our living room couch is. I don’t think anyone has ever sat on it that long, definitely not me. Eventually, I need to use the bathroom, but I

can't bear the thought of someone going with me. And I am sure they will.

I'm just beginning to think I'll have no choice but to bear bathroom babysitters when Agent Klute's phone vibrates loudly in his hand. "Excuse me, I need to take this call," he says, nodding at the other agents, letting them know they are temporarily in charge before stepping outside the house.

As the front door closes behind Agent Klute, my dad's phone finally rings. "Rachel," he answers, desperate and relieved. He's quiet, listening for a minute. "Well, not great to be honest. Could you come over? It's kind of an emergency. No, no, nothing like that." He pauses and takes a deep breath as he stands. But he doesn't actually go anywhere. He just hovers there in front of the couch. On his feet, he seems so unsteady, like part of him is disintegrating. "There are some federal agents here, and they want to interview Wylie and I'm just—she's been through a lot, and I want to schedule it for another time." Silence again as Rachel responds. "I did. They refused. They said because this has to do with domestic terrorism and Wylie's not a suspect . . ." More silence. "Yeah, okay. Okay. Thank you, Rachel."

He seems better, more hopeful when he turns back to me. "What did she say?" I ask.

"That we're doing the right thing," he says. "We should just wait here. She's on her way."

MY DAD STILL has the phone in his hand when Agent Klute steps back inside the house. "We'll be in touch soon, Dr. Lang," Klute says matter-of-factly. As if this is an extension of a conversation

we were already having. As if this was already agreed upon. "We'll schedule another time for that interview."

But why? Because I am not buying that Agent Klute is taking off because he's afraid of some lawyer he's never met. He doesn't even know Rachel finally called back. Klute nods in the direction of his men. No, they are leaving for their own reasons. Bad ones. "Where are you going?" I ask though I would probably be much better off not saying a word. It's not as if I want them to stay.

When Agent Klute looks at me, I feel it again: pity. And it's worse this time. So definitive and deep. He nods again. "We'll be in touch."

I watch as Klute and his men gather together and disappear out the door. And I imagine it like that eerily quiet moment when the tide gets pulled out to sea, right before a tsunami crashes back to shore. Silent and astonishing and totally terrifying.