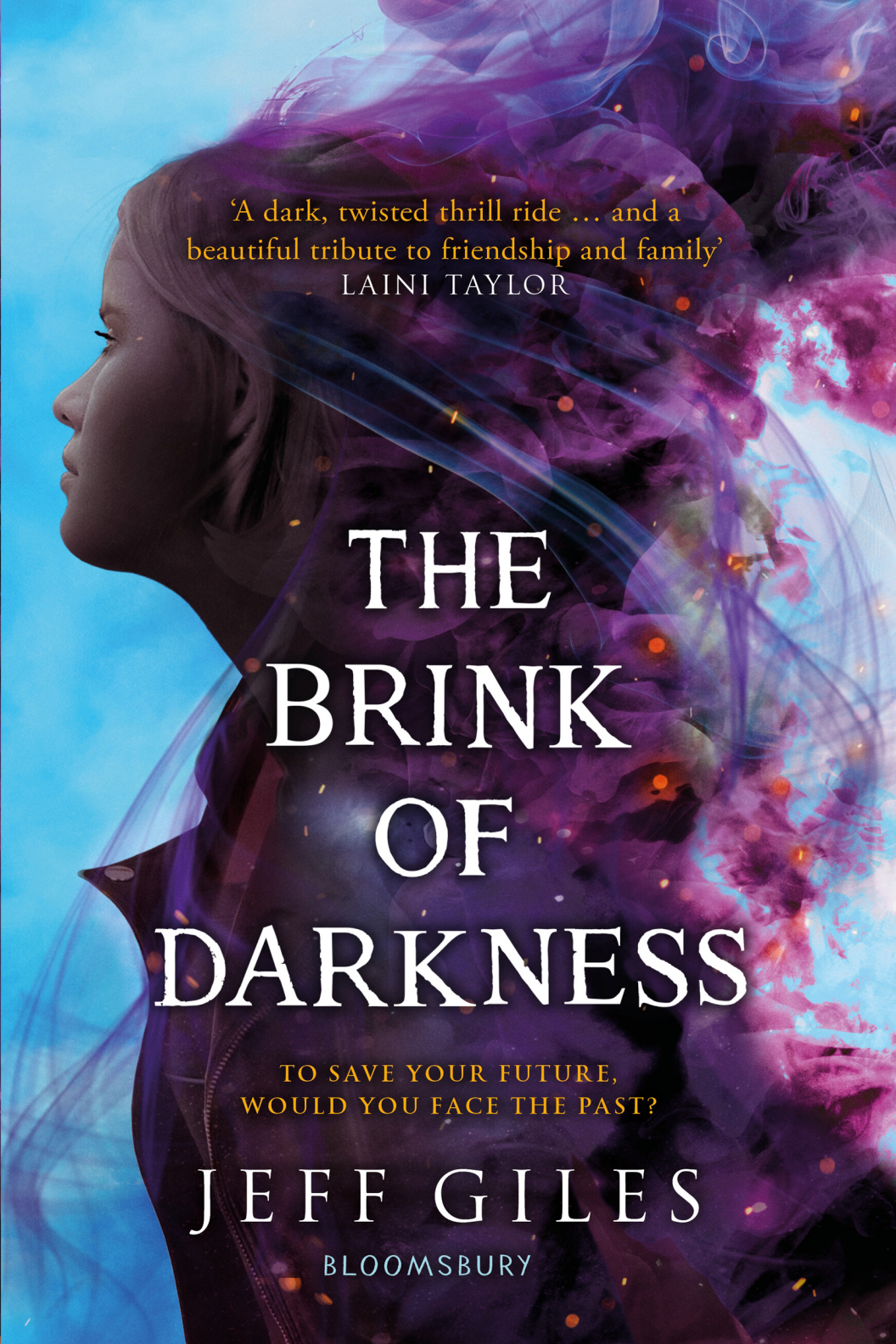

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'Zoe and X sparkle with life … By the end you'll be gagging for more. Good thing that it's the first in a series, then! ✶✶✶✶'
SFX

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Prologue

He saw her at last—she was up on the grassy dune above the harbor, a pale shape cut out of the darkness.

How long had it been since X had seen her? He had no way of knowing. He'd been in his cell in the Lowlands, deep in the earth, where there was no clock, no sun, no future, only the dead and damned.

She hadn't noticed him yet. She was searching for him, her eyes everywhere. He stood on the dock below her. It creaked and floated up and down, like the water beneath it was breathing.

"Here!" he called.

She turned toward him. She beamed.

"I know that face," she said.

X spread his fingers, and a soft corridor of light appeared—a trail for her to follow to the water. She started down the hill too quickly. She stumbled, fell on her knees, pushed herself up without bothering to brush off the sand.

"Hi, I'm Zoe and I'm a runway model," she said.

He smiled. He hadn't in a long time.

"I love your voice," he said, "even if your meaning eludes me on occasion."

"My meaning eludes everybody on occasion," she said.

He tried not to rush at her when she reached the dock. He was afraid he'd alarm her. She ran at *him* anyway. She kissed his cheeks, his chin, his forehead. He did the same to her, and they laughed at how frantic they were: they couldn't find each other's lips.

"How much time have we got?" she said.

"A few hours, at most," he said. "Then I must return to the Lowlands with the soul they sent me to capture."

Zoe slid her hands under his shirt. Something like silver spread through his chest.

"We need a boat," she said. "I'm having a sudden urge to lie in a boat with you."

"I would lie in a boat with you until the sun dried up all the sea," he said. "When I was young—"

She breathed into his neck.

"Less talking and more boat-getting," she said.

X scanned the harbor. There was a cluster of fishing boats. Otherwise the water lay empty. He peered at the end of the dock, where it seemed to narrow to a point in the dark, and saw an orange rowboat tied to an iron cleat.

Zoe stepped into it first, spreading her arms for balance as it rolled beneath her. A seat—a wide wooden plank—bisected the boat.

"We can't lie down in here," she said. "There's not enough room."

X shattered the plank with his fist, then tossed the scraps onto the dock.

"That'll work," said Zoe.

X laid his coat on the floorboards, and went to untie the boat. The knot was complicated, so he just yanked the cleat off the dock. Again, the sound of splintering wood ricocheted through the harbor.

"Man, they are *never* gonna give you a job here," said Zoe. She frowned. "I've got to stop with the jokes. I just can't believe you're here—and by the time I *do* believe it, you'll be gone."

Whoever owned the boat had taken the oars. X crouched next to Zoe, and pushed the craft away from the dock with a superhuman shove. They flew backward so fast that the boat nearly left the water. Waves rose on either side, and spilled in around their feet.

X had a plan he longed to tell Zoe about, but he was impatient to feel her hands again.

"I beseech you," he said, "do not darken the moments we can be together by dwelling on the moments we cannot."

Zoe pulled him down by the front of his shirt.

"I like it when you beseech me," she said. "Beseech me some more."

PART ONE

Life Without

ONE

Sometimes Zoe felt as if she were being hollowed out bit by bit. She had lost so many people in the last six months, and every one of them had carried part of her away. Eventually, she'd be like one of those chocolate Easter bunnies that the stores were suddenly selling again—you could poke her with your finger and her heart would cave in.

It was a Saturday morning in Montana. Early March. Zoe was driving her decrepit old Taurus to a memorial service for Bert and Betty Wallace. The farmlands were drab, gray brown, just starting to recover from winter. Zoe was thinking about the Wallaces, but also about her father and X. She'd had to say good-bye to them all in one way or another. She prayed that her father would never come back—and that somehow X would. She hadn't seen either of them since a terrible day in the snowy woods.

Her friends Val and Dallas were in the car, too. Val looked beautiful, though she hated church clothes: half her head was shaved,

the other half a futuristic silvery blue. Dallas was dressed like a jock at an awards dinner (navy blazer with gold buttons, khaki pants, tie decorated with baseballs), and there was a round Band-Aid on the cleft of his chin, where he'd cut himself shaving. Zoe used to go out with Dallas. Kind of, sort of, a little. She thought he looked adorable. Val, she knew, had no patience for him. Val was convinced that Dallas still had a thing for Zoe—he insisted he was going to ask out a girl named Mingyu, but kept putting it off—plus, Zoe had told Val that Dallas used to flex his pecs when they made out.

Zoe had agreed to give Bert and Betty's eulogy even though she dreaded public speaking. The Wallaces had been like grandparents to Zoe and her little brother, Jonah. She'd written out every word of her speech on orange index cards, which sat in a stack on the dashboard. She needed the cards because once she stepped up to the lectern, she expected to go into a terrified fugue state where anything, including ancient Egyptian, might come out of her mouth.

She turned onto Twin Bridges Road. The stack of index cards collapsed, and slid across the dashboard in a smooth orange stripe. Val gathered them up.

"You okay?" she said.

"No," said Zoe. "I'm kind of underwater."

"Do you want me to make fun of Dallas?" said Val. "Would that help? I'm willing to do that for you."

"No, but thank you," said Zoe. "You're sweet."

"Wait, whoa, how is that sweet?" said Dallas.

He leaned forward between the seats. Val pushed his fuzzy, buzz-cut head away, saying, "Back in your cage."

Zoe drove across Flathead Valley. In the distance, the mountains still shone with snow.

"Do you want me to talk about nature?" said Val. It was a joke: Val liked being indoors. "Look at all the nature!"

"You're not helping, dawg," said Dallas. "I'm going to rap for you, Zoe. Val, give me a beat."

"On what planet do you think I would give you a beat?" said Val. She looked at Zoe. "Don't you dare give him a beat."

Dallas rapped anyway: "My lyrics *devastate* / Check this *flow* I create . . ."

"Really?" said Val. "This is happening?"

Zoe smiled, but just couldn't swim up to the surface—it was like her legs were tangled in seaweed. She glanced at the cards in Val's hand. She had rewritten the first sentence of the Wallaces' eulogy 11 times, crumpling so many index cards in the process that the wastebasket by her desk looked like it was full of orange flowers.

Betty had taught Zoe how to use an ax—and Jonah how to knit. Bert, even when he'd gotten senile, used to cut pictures of cute animals out of the newspaper and mail them to the Bissells. Jonah taped them all over his walls. And then, two months ago, a man named Stan Manggold had burst into the Wallaces' home looking for money, and beaten them to death with a fireplace poker.

One of the things that Zoe found hardest was that she couldn't tell Val and Dallas the whole story—the before and the after. How could she? It sounded implausible even to her. So just when she needed to talk most—to vent and grieve—her life had become about managing secrets.

Should she tell them that the nightmare had started with her father? That he had been such a failure as a businessman that he'd sunk to committing crimes with a childhood friend—and that the childhood friend was a sociopath named Stan Manggold? Should

she tell them that her father had suggested they rob the Wallaces? That he got scared and had second thoughts? That, when Stan blackmailed him, he was such a coward that he faked his own death in a cave, abandoned his family and ran?

Zoe tried not to let the memories in. But as she pulled up to a stop sign, the Taurus bounced hard in a rut and in that instant, in that tiny moment of fear, her defenses went down and everything came rushing back, like birds to a bare tree.

Stan had gone through with the robbery alone, and murdered Bert and Betty while he was at it. Weeks later, during a blizzard, he returned to their house, convinced they had money stashed somewhere. Zoe and Jonah were there, waiting out the storm. It made Zoe sick just to remember Stan's face: the pockmarked skin, the pink slash of a mouth, the creepy white eyebrow that wriggled like a caterpillar.

Zoe checked for traffic before turning left. There was a fluorescent green SUV coming. It slowed to let her pull out. Dallas was still freestyling—his rap seemed to be exclusively about how good his rap was—but he paused long enough to say, "Look out for the deer."

There were two of them up ahead in the wet field, a doe and her fawn. They were just nosing around in the dead grass. They weren't going anywhere.

"I see them," said Zoe.

Dallas started rapping again.

"My rhymes are *unstoppable* / Like a photo that's *uncroppable*."

Val, miserable, banged her forehead against the dashboard.

Zoe remembered seeing X for the first time. He had come to take Stan's soul to the Lowlands. X was just a blur, a streak of light shooting across the frozen lake near the Wallaces' house. Zoe begged X

to let Stan go. She told him that it was wrong to kill somebody—that it wasn't his job. She hadn't known then that it actually was.

Zoe checked the rearview mirror. The SUV was too close. It was a new model, its front end designed to look like a sports car. Even if it hadn't been a pukey green, it would have looked ridiculous. Its license plate was RELOADN.

Great, thought Zoe, *a hunter.*

She slowed, and waved the driver around, but the guy just flicked his high beams so she'd hurry up.

"Seriously?" she said.

She glanced at the deer. They had started toward the road, but she'd be gone by the time they made it there.

How do you tell your friends that you've fallen for a bounty hunter from the underworld? How do you tell them that you jeopardized your life for him, and that you would do it again right now, right this very second? Val and Dallas wouldn't even know what the Lowlands were. She'd have to call the place hell. How do you say a sentence like that out loud? Would it help if she told them that X was an innocent, that he was *born* in the Lowlands? That he was a prisoner himself—and for no reason? The lords sent X to collect evil souls from the world from time to time, but that just reminded him of the life he could never have. The minute he returned with a soul, the lords threw him back into his cell, like it was a mouth they were feeding.

X had forged a family in the Lowlands. One of the lords who ruled the place, Regent, protected him as much as he could. And there was a badass British woman named Ripper who'd trained X to be a bounty hunter. She had worn the same golden ball gown since 1832, when she was damned to the Lowlands for beating a clumsy servant to death with a teakettle. Zoe had met Ripper and

loved her, despite the thing with the teakettle. Ripper was on the run from the Lowlands now. She was up in the real world somewhere, searching for her children's graves, which she had never seen.

So, yes, there were people who cared about X even in that hole in the earth. But the unfairness of him spending his life in a cell when he'd never done *anything* wrong, when he'd never even lived—it hollowed Zoe out.

She couldn't tell Val and Dallas any of this. How could she? They were right there, but they were a thousand miles away.

Zoe gripped the steering wheel harder, and sank into her thoughts. She was only dimly aware of Dallas rapping, of Val riffling the orange index cards impatiently, of the SUV surging behind her, of the farmlands flowing past.

"Deer," Dallas said again.

Zoe nodded, and sped up. The driver in the SUV closed the gap between them, then flicked his high beams again.

People: the worst.

Zoe remembered X carrying her and Jonah home through the woods after she convinced him to let Stan go. She remembered how dazed and feverish he got because he hadn't done what the lords told him to do. X spent days recovering at the Bissells' house, sleeping in Jonah's bed, which was shaped like a ladybug, and bathing in the freezing river. But then Stan murdered someone else. X, battered by guilt, left Zoe to hunt him down again and bring him to the Lowlands. Zoe remembered the way X kissed her good-bye—he'd lifted her off the slushy driveway because she only had socks on.

Once X was back in the underworld, he had demanded his freedom. The lords made him a cruel offer: he could be free forever if he returned to the world and brought them one more soul.

But the soul was Zoe's father.

X had searched for him, and found him in the woods in Canada. He brought Zoe there so she could confront her father about what he'd done to her family.

In the end, X couldn't bring himself to take the man's life. The lords of the Lowlands were enraged. They lashed out at Zoe's family to remind X that he'd failed again and that he was theirs forever. An unhinged lord named Dervish led the attack, destroying the Bissells' house and nearly killing Jonah. So X dove back into the earth. He had sacrificed himself because he refused to do anything that hurt Zoe. But his leaving—what could have hurt her more?

Hundreds of times a day, Zoe would think of him and, just for an instant, it was like he stood in front of her: gorgeous, pale, afraid of nothing, wanting only her. A half second later she'd remember that he was gone. The heat and the hope would vanish and it was like she'd been punched in the gut. But this was the thing: That instant before the pain leveled her? The moment before the remembering? It was worth it.

"DEER!" said Dallas. "Zoe, what the hell?"

The doe and the fawn had jumped the ditch that ran along the side of the road. They were racing to cross in front of the car.

A spike of dread hit Zoe's blood.

She stepped on the gas, but the pathetic, piece-of-shit car had zero pickup. Val clenched for a crash.

The SUV was practically on top of them.

RELOADN—what did *he* care if Zoe hit the deer? He'd have the doe strapped to his roof within minutes. He didn't see deer, he saw venison.

You weren't supposed to swerve to avoid a deer. It was better to

run into them than to cause an accident. Zoe knew it. Everybody in Montana did. The guy who'd taught Driver's Ed—sad-faced and chubby and always wearing the same chocolate-brown sweater, which was unraveling at the wrist—started every class by saying, "I want to go to your weddings, not your funerals."

Zoe had maybe a second and a half to decide what to do.

She had seen what deer looked like when they died. She'd heard the deceptively soft *thump* they made when the bumper hit them. She'd seen how they went rigid in a split second, how they flew through the air, stiff as stuffed animals.

She knew she should hit the doe and the fawn, but—maybe it was because she'd been thinking about X—all she saw when she looked at them was innocent creatures.

The fawn struggled to keep up with its mother. Its rickety legs were a blur, its frail back speckled white, as if with snowflakes. She could see its big, wet eyes.

Dammit.

Zoe stomped on the brake.

The car stopped so suddenly it seemed to jump. They shot forward in their seats.

The deer darted safely across the road.

Val screamed involuntarily when the SUV struck them from behind.

Zoe tried to pull off the road, but the vehicles' bumpers had twisted together. The driver jabbed his horn three times—long, longer, longest—then burst out of the SUV.

He stalked up to Zoe's window, and banged on it hard.

"Roll this down!" he said. "Right this goddamn second!"

He looked about 50—doughy and pale, with blue eyes set too close together. He wore a baseball cap with a sexist silhouette of a woman and the words "Booty Hunter."

Zoe made sure Val and Dallas weren't hurt, then looked at the clock on the dash. They had ten minutes to get to the church.

She fished for her insurance card in the glove compartment. When she found it, she breathed out, and rolled down the window.

"My name is Zoe Bissell," she said. "I'm sorry about your car."

"It's not a *car*," he said. "It's a friggin' *truck*."

He was seething. His pupils were so dilated that Zoe suspected he was high on something.

"I'm sorry about your truck," she said carefully.

"I don't give a shit about your *I'm sorry*," he said.

From the passenger seat, Val spoke under her breath.

"I don't like this guy—and his hat is pissing me off," she said. "I'm getting out."

"Stay," said Dallas.

"Did you just tell me to *stay*?" said Val.

"You're gonna make it worse," said Dallas. "I'll handle this."

"No, I will handle it," said Zoe. "*Both* of you stay."

She went to open her door, but the man stood too close. He was trapping her in. He seemed to be deciding if he was going to let her out. Finally, he backed up.

Not much damage had been done to Zoe's Taurus—it was hard to make the Struggle Buggy look any worse—but the SUV's sporty front end was decimated. The headlights were smashed, the grille was sagging. The hood had popped open and been folded in half.

"You see what you damn did?" the man said. "That is a brand-new, thirty-eight-thousand-dollar vehicle right there, fresh off the motherfrickin' lot—and that color green costs extra!"

"I didn't want to kill the deer," said Zoe.

"Oh, the deer!" said the man. "The precious friggin' deer! Who gives a rat's ass if they live or die. There's about a billion of them, you dumb bitch!"

At the word "bitch," Zoe's friends got out of the car.

Dallas, whose first instinct was always to calm people down, offered the man his hand.

"What's your name?" he said.

The man looked at him like he was nuts.

"My name is *go to hell*, you little prick," he said.

"Okay, stop," said Zoe. "You're going to have to *turn down your crazy*. It's just a car."

"IT'S A FRIGGIN' *TRUCK*!"

He screamed it so loud that a bolt of pain seemed to go through his head. He doubled over, and covered his face with his hands. When he straightened up again, Zoe blanched: the guy had burst a blood vessel in his left eye. A red cloud crept across the white of the eye toward the iris.

"Come on, what's your name?" said Dallas. "I'm Dallas."

"It's Ronny, for god's sake," said the man.

"Hey, Ronny," said Dallas. "This doesn't need to be a thing."

"It's already a damn thing!" said Ronny. "It *became* a damn thing when she made me crash the thirty-eight-thousand-dollar vehicle my mother *just* gave me for my birthday!"

He was getting more angry, not less. Zoe didn't like how close he was. He had morning breath.

"Could you take a step back, please?" she said.

He ignored her.

"She asked you to step back," said Val.

Ronny looked Val up and down. He made a show, as men often did, of being appalled by her half-shaved head and the sci-fi color of her hair.

"What are you, her girlfriend?" he said.

"No," said Val, "I'm into fat, middle-aged guys."

"Val!" said Zoe.

Ronny snorted.

"You couldn't even handle what I got," he told Val.

"I'm calling the police," said Val.

"Yeah?" said Ronny. "They're gonna be too late."

He charged to the back of his SUV, and returned with a rifle.

"Whoa, Ronny," said Dallas. *"Whoa."*

Ronny hit Dallas in the stomach with the butt of the gun.

"STOP! CALLING ME! RONNY!"

Dallas fell to all fours, gasping. The tie with the baseballs dangled down toward the road. Zoe went to him.

"I'm okay," said Dallas, when he could speak again. "I'm okay."

Ronny beat Zoe's hood with the rifle.

"How do *you* like it?" he screamed. Zoe couldn't tell if he was talking to her or the car. "This feel good? Does it?"

Dallas tried to stand—he wanted to stop Ronny.

"No," Zoe said. "Let him do it. I don't care."

She looked around for help, but they were in the middle of nowhere: fields, trees, sky. No cars for miles.

Then something caught her eye across the farmland: a bluish glow in the woods.

The rifle went off. Ronny was shooting out her headlights. The *crack*s echoed across the valley.

"How's *that* feel?" he said. "How about *this*?"

Val filmed Ronny on her phone as he bashed the car: evidence.

Zoe turned back to the trees. The light was morphing. It had been diffuse, like a mist on the ground, but now it gathered itself into a ball.

She went to the side of the road. A blurry figure hurtled toward them.

It had to be X.

How had he gotten out of the Lowlands? How had he known to come? Zoe squinted into the distance. He was still out of focus, still a smudge.

"There's stuff I didn't tell you guys about X," she told Val and Dallas.

"This is a good topic for *later*," said Val.

"Yeah, why are you bringing this up now?" said Dallas.

He leaned against the SUV. His shirt was untucked, and he was gripping his stomach.

"Because things are gonna get weird," said Zoe.

Everyone followed her gaze across the field.

The figure was nearly on them. Ronny lowered his rifle, dumbfounded.

"You are *so* screwed," Zoe told him.

The figure slowed as it approached the road.

Zoe felt her heart shrink and nearly vanish when she saw that it wasn't X.