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opening extract from

If You're Reading This, It's Too Late

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Pseudonymous Bosch

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The Xxxxxxxxx School. City of Xxxxx Xxxxxx. Lunchtime.

I'm sorry – I still cannot tell you the name of Cass's school. Or where the school was located. Or what it looked like. Or almost anything else about it.

Of course, I trust *you*. But there's always the possibility that, through no fault of your own, you will toss this book out the window and it will fall into the wrong hands.*

I can tell you this: it was a school that lived by strict rules.

There were, first of all, the principal Mrs. Johnson's rules, which were strict enough, but usually understandable. Like no skateboarding in the hallways, for example. Or no wearing your underpants outside your clothing.

But there were also many other, unspoken rules that were made by nobody in particular, and that made no sense at all.

One of these pointless rules was that you ate lunch

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*While I'm on the subject, you do remember that all the names in this book are made up, don't you? Cassandra. Max-Ernest. All of them. Yes, I'm reckless and irresponsible, but there's a limit – even for me. I would never tell you my characters' real names. If somebody reading this book – *somebody,* I said, not you – were able to track one of them down, well, I don't even want to think about the consequences.

at the same table and with the same people every day; if you changed tables it could only mean that you were in a fight or something truly drastic had happened.

The lunch tables were clustered outside in a part of the school yard known as the Grove (even though there weren't any trees nearby). At the centre table sat Amber and her friends. Amber, you may remember, was the nicest girl in school, and the third prettiest. At least, that's what everybody said.

Other tables spread out from there – like planets orbiting a sun.

Cass and Max-Ernest, I am sorry to report, did little to rebel against this system. In fact, their table, located on the very outermost fringes of the Grove, was so well known it had a name: the Nuts Table.

"The name doesn't make any sense," Max-Ernest complained almost daily. "It should be the No Nuts Table, since it's for kids with nut allergies."

"I think people think the Nuts Table sounds funnier," Cass told him.

But she stopped short of a full explanation: if Max-Ernest didn't understand that the other students thought that the kids at the Nuts Table were, well, nuts, then good for him.

Cass had no allergies herself; nonetheless, her diet was very restricted. Because she saw lunch as part

of her survivalist training, everything she ate had to be capable of lasting for months without spoiling, whether in an underground bunker or an outer-space escape pod. Thus fresh fruit was prohibited, but fruit gums were permissible. Sandwiches were out, but cup-o-noodles was okay.

Trail mix was the most ideal food of all; it was a whole meal in one.*

Today, however, Cass hesitated before digging into her trail mix. A handwritten note was sitting on top.

Cass grimaced in annoyance. She hated it when her mother put notes in her lunch – it was *so* embarrassing. Not to mention, the notes usually consisted of lists of not-very-fun things Cass was supposed to do or remember.

She pushed the note back into her reusable waterproof lunch bag. She would read it later. Maybe.

Unlike Cass, Max-Ernest did have several nut allergies (to which nuts he was never sure) as well as a host of other food-related ailments. But what was more remarkable, he always brought two lunches to school: one made by his mother, and one by his father;

*Don't worry, as Cass often pointed out to her nervous lunch table companions, there were no nuts in her trail mix – just peanut-butter chips, and they were artificially flavoured. For Cass's patented "Super-Chip" Trail Mix recipe, see Book I, Appendix.

he was always careful to eat the same amount from each. Max-Ernest's parents were divorced, and everything in his life was doubled or divided. (When Cass first visited his house, she couldn't believe it: the house was split down the middle, each side designed and decorated differently, with neither parent ever stepping onto the other parent's side.)

Today, he didn't seem to be in a hurry to eat *either* of his lunches.

"So, I learned a new trick. Wanna see?" he asked, already laying out his playing cards. "It's called the Four Brothers."

Max-Ernest had been reading up on magic for several months now, not just how-to books but also histories and biographies of famous magicians. Every time Cass saw him he had a new story about an Indian sword-swallower or a nineteenth-century flea circus or an essay on the first time a magician made an elephant disappear.

For today's trick, Max-Ernest removed the four jacks from his deck and fanned them out in front of Cass. "See these four jacks? They're brothers and they don't like being separated."

He gathered up the jacks and placed them in different places in the deck, separating them – or seeming to. Then he cut the deck.

"Now, watch how the jacks all come back together…"

He riffled through the deck and showed her how they'd moved next to each other – or seemed to. "How 'bout that?"

He was getting better, thought Cass. But not that much better.

It didn't help that Max-Ernest had a big pimple on the tip of his nose. Between the pimple and his spiky hair – each strand, as always, cut exactly the same length – he looked more like a hedgehog than a magician.

"Pretty good," said Cass diplomatically. "But I think I've seen the trick before – only with kings. And they weren't brothers, they were friends."

"That doesn't make sense. Four kings would never be friends – they would be rivals, fighting over their kingdoms. And even if they weren't fighting – I doubt they would have that many friends. It's not very realistic—"

Cass was about to point out that sometimes *brothers* could be rivals. Like Pietro and Dr. L. They were twins – but also mortal enemies. At the same time, plenty of people had four friends or even more. Amber, for instance. Amber considered herself to be friends with their entire school.

But Cass decided not to say anything. You had to choose your battles with Max-Ernest. Otherwise, you would be arguing all day.

Besides, neither of them had very many friends; in that respect, he was correct. In fact, she was Max-Ernest's only friend. And, as much as she hated to admit it, he was *her* only friend as well. (Unless you counted their old classmate, Benjamin Blake. But his parents had put him in a special school this year. And he'd never said that much anyway – at least that you could understand.)

"Well, I still wish you would concentrate on training for the Terces Society instead of magic tricks," she said.

"We don't even know what we're training for!" said Max-Ernest, a little exasperated. "Besides, Pietro was a magician, wasn't he?"

"You mean, he *is* – he's still alive, remember?"

"We don't know for sure. Somebody else might have written the letter who had the same initials. Or who was pretending to be him. Or maybe he died *after* writing it. I mean, it's been four months. Why hasn't the Terces Society contacted us again, if they even—"

Cass gave him a look. She hated it when he suggested that Pietro might be dead. Or that the Terces

Society might not exist. She'd spent too much time preparing to contemplate such a thing.

"The letter said that Owen would come get us, and he will!" she said with more confidence than she felt.

Owen was the man who'd helped rescue them from the clutches of the Midnight Sun. He had a habit of switching identities, so for months Cass and Max-Ernest had scrutinized every face they encountered. But they'd never detected a single false moustache or fake accent. Or even any suspicious car accidents. (Owen was a terrible driver.)

"Well, maybe he already came," Max-Ernest offered conciliatorily, "but it was like an abduction. We actually took our oaths under hypnosis, and now we're operating under secret instructions—"

Cass laughed. If nothing else, Max-Ernest was always willing to consider all the possibilities.

"Was that funny?" he asked in surprise.

Cass nodded. He grinned. "How 'bout that?"

(To Cass's chagrin, Max-Ernest's magical aspirations had done nothing to diminish his previous, even more unlikely desire: to be a stand-up comedian.)

"Is that from your mom?" Max-Ernest asked, changing the subject. He was looking at the note still sticking halfway out of her lunch bag.

Irritated, Cass pulled it out. This is what it said:

Cass, here's the grocery list for tomorrow –
MEAT – no need for A quality
DUCK (3) – tell butcher you owe –
he'll understand
12 Potatoes, Mashed
Peanut Butter
Mother

Now that she was looking at the note, it seemed strange to Cass for several reasons:

First, her mother had gone to the grocery store yesterday.

Second, they'd never had a duck in her house – let alone three.

Third, her mother always bought potatoes whole, then mashed them at home. Cass wasn't even sure you could buy pre-mashed potatoes if you wanted to.

Fourth, her mother never signed her notes "Mother". Usually, she just signed "M". If she was feeling especially loving or playful she might write "Mommy". Sometimes, when she wanted to show Cass she was treating her like a grown-up, she signed "Mel".

But *Mother*? Not that Cass could remember.

A little feeling of excitement started tingling in her

toes, bubbled through her stomach, then burst out of her mouth:

"Hey, look at this..." she whispered to Max-Ernest. "It's from them. I know it. It's in code. Can you believe they got it into my lunch?! It was only in my locker for an hour! Do you think Owen is here right now?"

She looked around. The only person she didn't recognize was an Asian boy sitting at the next table, plugging his guitar into a little portable amplifier.

A frown appeared on Max-Ernest's face as he studied the note.

"What – you don't think it's in code? It has to be. It's definitely not from my mom."

"No, I agree – it looks like it's in code. It's just kind of weird…"

Surreptitiously, Max-Ernest pulled out what looked like a game player of some kind from his pocket. Sent to him by Pietro, the hand-held device was actually the ULTRA-Decoder II. Specially designed for decrypting codes, it contained over a thousand languages and even more secret codes in its memory.

Holding the grocery list under the table, Max-Ernest pointed the Decoder at it and scanned.

"I dunno, the Decoder doesn't pick up anything," he whispered. "If it's in code, there's, like, no system to it…"

Cass sighed. Could the note be from her mother after all?

"The Skelton Sisters gave it to me as a prize when I joined the Skelton One Hundred," said a familiar, sugary voice.

It was Amber, walking by with her friend Veronica (the second prettiest girl in school, and not even the fourth or fifth nicest). As far as Cass knew, neither girl had yet turned thirteen. But somehow, over the summer, they'd aged by several years. It was the glittery make-up, Cass decided. (She couldn't believe Mrs. Johnson let them wear it – never mind their mothers.) And the tight clothes.

Amber held up a sparkling pink cellphone decorated with a big red heart. "The ringtone automatically changes to a new Skelton Sisters song each time!" she bragged loudly enough so the entire school yard could hear. "So I'll know all the songs by the time I go to the concert. If I get in – it's almost sold out."

(Romi and Montana Skelton were teenage twins who'd risen to fame on television and video but who now commanded a vast commercial empire – twin❤hearts™ inc. – that produced everything from

fuzzy pink backpacks to stinky sticks of lipgloss. Cass had a particular hatred for them – partly because Amber had a particular love for them.)

"Here, listen..."

Amber started pressing buttons on her phone, but before she could make it ring, the school yard was filled with the sound of feedback – and the twisting, sliding whine of an electric guitar. It was the new boy at the next table – channelling Jimi Hendrix.*

Cass laughed aloud. The timing was perfect – interrupting Amber just as she was about to subject them all to some awful Skelton Sisters song.

She looked over at the young guitarist. He was strumming and staring out into space, as if he were alone in a garage and not in school with hundreds of other people. He was tall for his age and he had a thick mop of long black hair that fell over his eyes. He wore bright green tennis shoes and a T-shirt bearing the words:

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*If you ask your parents, they will probably tell you that Jimi Hendrix was the greatest rock guitar player who ever lived. What they might not tell you is that he also liked to wear wigs. Feedback, by the way, is that high-pitched squealing you get when a microphone picks up sound from a loudspeaker (a sound which, if you think about it, came from the microphone in the first place!). Before Hendrix, most people thought of feedback as trash noise. But he turned it into music.

ALIEN EARACHE

We rock so hard they hear it on Mars!

"I bet that's that new kid – from Japan," Cass said to Max-Ernest. "Remember Mrs. Johnson made that announcement?"

Cass's laugh, meanwhile, had not gone unnoticed by Amber.

"Hey, Cass…are you okay?" asked Amber, stopping at Cass's table – but not without taking a good look at the guitar player first.

"Uh, yeah, I think so…"

"Oh, good!" said Amber sweetly. "I was worried maybe that guitar hurt your ears—"

"No…" Cass didn't like where Amber was heading.

"I just thought they would be really sensitive 'cause they're so – you know."

"No, we don't know!" said Max-Ernest hotly. "Her ears are totally normal, Amber. She hears the same stuff you do."

Cass's ears, as everyone knew, were a sore subject for Cass. Not only were they big and pointy, like an elf's, they also tended to turn bright red when she was angry or embarrassed or in any way upset.

Or when people talked about them.

At the moment, they were turning a violent shade of scarlet.

"Oh, hi, Max-Ernest!" said Amber, as if she'd only just seen him. "I totally didn't mean it as an insult. But that's so sweet the way you defend her! Are you guys, like, a *couple* now?"

Max-Ernest choked on the two identical carrot sticks he was eating. And then he turned very pale.

Amber glanced covertly at the guitar player to see if he was taking this all in. He didn't seem to be.

"We are *not* a couple," Cass said as calmly as she could – considering so much blood was rushing to her ears it felt like a firestorm. (The difference was, she had an asbestos blanket to ward off a *real* firestorm.)

"Oh, that's too bad. You guys make such a cute couple," said Veronica. "C'mon, Am—"

Stifling laughs, they sauntered away.

"Sorry. Forgot to check the volume, yo!" said the guitar player, sounding decidedly un-Japanese. He reached down to disconnect his instrument from his amplifier and turned his head towards the Nuts Table. "I heard that girl Amber was the nicest girl in school. Didn't really seem like it."

"Yeah, that's kind of f-f-funny, huh," stammered Cass, trying to cover her ears with her hair (which was

very difficult because her hair was braided). "Anyway, don't worry about it. I thought your playing was –" she searched for the word – "cool."

"Thanks," he said with a big smile. "I'm Yoji. You know, the new guy."

"Yeah, we kind of guessed," said Cass, desperately hoping her ears were turning back to normal.

"You can call me Yo-Yoji. If you want. That's what my friends call me…"

"Okay. Hey, um, Yo-Yoji, I hate to break it to you, but you may have a little more apologizing to do—"

She nodded towards the principal, who was striding across the yard in Yoji's direction, her big yellow hat flapping with each step.

Yoji made a face of exaggerated fear. "Uh-oh… Well, it was nice knowing you. Or meeting you – or whatever."

"Yeah, nice to meet you, too... Oh, I forgot – I'm Cass. And this is Max-Ernest... Say hi, Max-Ernest."

She tugged on her friend's sleeve.

"Hi, Max-Ernest," said Max-Ernest, who'd been stewing in tormented silence ever since Amber had asked if he and Cass were a couple.

Before Yo-Yoji could reply, Mrs. Johnson arrived at his table.

"Up!" she said. "Now march—" She pointed in the

direction of her office. Yo-Yoji shrugged and headed off, guitar on his back.

Cass watched him go, wondering how this new, unexpected element might change the carefully controlled social environment of their school: did she need to take any precautions?

Suddenly, Max-Ernest sat up very straight. "That's it!"

"What?" asked Cass, distracted.

"*Meet*. Look at the note. See how it says 'Meat – no need for A quality'? What if that means no need for letter *A*? Because *meat* means *meet*. With an *E*."

"So we have to meet somewhere? I knew it!" said Cass, forgetting all about Amber and Yo-Yoji and even her red ears. "What about the next line – 'Duck (3)'?"

"'Tell butcher you owe'," Max-Ernest finished for her. "Well, that could be about the letters, too, I guess. If *you* was the letter *U*. And *owe* was *O*."

"So then it's *MEET DOCK 3*?"

Max-Ernest nodded. "And the rest is easy: '12 Potatoes, Mashed' has to be 12 *p.m.* And Peanut Butter – that must be *P.B.*"

"Pietro Bergamo!"

"How 'bout that," Max-Ernest said. "But I still think it's weird he didn't use a more normal code. There's not even really a key."

"So what – you figured it out, anyway! Just like I knew you would."

Max-Ernest nodded, smiling, and wrote the decoded message next to the grocery list.

Meet Dock 3, 12 p.m., Pietro Bergamo