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Opening extract from

Beautiful Dead Series: Book 1, Jonas

Written by

Eden Maguire

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1 - No Angel

The first thing I heard was a door banging in the wind. It spooked me because I didn't even know there was a house here amongst the trees, this far out of town.

Slow down, heart, I thought, *Darina girl, get a grip!* But back then a falling leaf would have spooked me. It was two days after Phoenix had died.

So the door banged and my heart thumped, and I was looking for something on that hill, I don't know what. I walked to the top and looked over the ridge and there it was - an old log-built, falling-down house with a porch, a big old barn and one of those round water tanks on stilts, all rusty and decrepit.

So was the truck parked at the front of the deserted house with its fenders falling off and the roof stove in, and yellow grass grew knee-high around the porch.

It was the door of the barn that banged shut. Open-shut, open-shut, whenever the wind grabbed hold.

I guess most people would have walked away.

Not me. As I said before, I was lost and looking for answers to big questions about love, loss and the meaning of life. Darina on a mission, you might say. Like, how come four of my class mates at Ellerton High had died in the space of a year? Jonas, Arizona, Summer and now Phoenix. I mean, how weird and tragic was that? It scared the hell out of everyone, I can tell you.

And the last one - Phoenix - broke my teenaged heart. I was in love with the guy, mostly from a distance, then for two blissful months we were dating. My

flower tribute to him, placed on the spot where he got stabbed, was pathetic. It read ‘I’ll miss you for ever, with all my love, Darina’ and didn’t even scratch the surface of the way I felt.

So I was going to stop that barn door banging then take a look around the ghost house. I wanted to get inside, see how the people had lived - what plates they had put on their table, what chairs they had sat in.

But first the barn. The door was huge and held together by a hundred rusty nails. The inside was dark. I could see old horse halters hanging from hooks, a pair of dusty leather chaps, some cobwebby rakes and brushes.

And a whole bunch of people standing in a circle, chanting a rhyme at a guy standing in the centre. I didn’t believe my eyes when I first saw him, but that guy was Phoenix, stripped to the waist as true as I stood there.

Phoenix who had died from a knife wound between his shoulder blades. The knife went through a major artery and he bled to death.

An older guy stepped into the centre of the circle and placed his arms on my dead boyfriend’s shoulders.

‘Welcome to our world,’ he said.

Bang! The door behind me slammed shut. I thought my heart was going to shudder to a halt.

‘To the world of the Beautiful Dead!’ the group chanted. ‘You are one of us - welcome!’

Phoenix - it was definitely him - looked totally out of it. Kind of dazed, as if he couldn’t get his eyes to focus.

The grey-haired guy’s hands steadied him. ‘You’re back,’ he murmured.

‘From beyond the grave,’ the group whispered.

I shook my head to make this stuff go away*. It can’t be happening! It’s some kind of stupid trick!*

Dead is dead, and you can’t come back.

Except that the head-shake made no difference and I was a witness.

‘Hey, Phoenix, it’s cool,’ a girl said, stepping up to him. ‘Remember me?’

She had her back to me, so all I saw was long dark hair.

‘Dude, remember me?’ A guy detached himself from the group, and then another girl, this time with fair hair falling over her shoulders.

‘It’s OK, Hunter fixed it for you,’ the blonde girl explained. ‘This is Hunter.’

The older guy offered to shake Phoenix’s hand. ‘Not too much pain on the journey back?’ he asked - like a doctor checking on his patient.

‘Nothing I couldn’t handle,’ Phoenix replied.

It was *his* voice - never more than a mumble, deep, kind of lazy. He eased his broad shoulders as if they hurt a little.

‘Hunter looks out for us all.’

The blonde girl’s smile pulled me further in. Hey, I knew that amazing warm smile, though the hair was longer, wilder, the skin paler. It was Summer Madison. I was watching another dead person, walk, talk, smile.

‘He brought us *all* back.’ The dark haired girl joined in with the explanations.

‘Hunter’s the boss man.’

I was hearing but I wasn’t looking at her or Hunter. My eyes were fixed on Phoenix. Truly, my heart couldn’t keep on thumping like this without jumping clean out of my ribcage.

I wanted to run to him, touch him, kiss him, hold him in my arms. But I was totally freaked out.

‘Why?’ Phoenix wanted to know. He’d got his balance and his focus now and was suspicious. His grey-blue eyes narrowed to a frown.

‘That’s up to you,’ the “remember me” guy shrugged and I stopped staring at Phoenix long enough to catch a glimpse of his blue eyes and curvy, full mouth - Jonas Jonson.

‘You’re back here for your own reasons,’ Summer explained. ‘We all are.’

‘Where is this? What’s happening?’ Nothing made sense to Phoenix, or to me, spying from the outside.

‘Get up to speed,’ the dark girl laughed, but not unkindly. ‘Didn’t you hear? You’re one of us - the Beautiful Dead!’

‘Arizona?’ Phoenix did the head-shake thing, just like me. She was there, right in his face. ‘How come?’

‘I have things to do,’ she replied with a toss of her head. ‘Stuff to put right.’

Phoenix Rohr, Arizona Taylor, Summer Madison and Jonas Jonson. The four dead kids from Ellerton High.

So beautiful, all of them, with their pale skin and their wild look. Not damaged by death.

Love and loss battered at my heart.

Bang! The door swung open and slammed shut.

Hunter was walking towards me. ‘I’ll get it,’ he told the group. ‘We need to fix this latch. It’s driving me crazy.’

What can I say? I panicked.

I jumped out from the stall where I'd been hiding and made it to the door before Hunter. I didn't care if he saw me. I was out in the open and running past the deserted house, past the water tower, along the rough track between the aspen trees. I didn't even look over my shoulder.

'Where did you go?' Laura was in my face the minute I slammed my car door. I was walking up the driveway when she pounced.

'Nowhere. I drove some place.' I knew the answer would wind her up, but it was all I could come up with right then. It was better than, 'I saw four dead people walking and talking.'

'You can't just drive around,' she nagged as I went up the steps and through the door. 'You know the price of gas.'

Silence from me. I threw my keys on the kitchen table.

'Darina, I was worried about you.'

'No need,' I said, heading for my room.

Laura cut me off. 'I *am* worried,' she insisted. 'You don't talk. You don't eat.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Are you getting any sleep?'

Yeah, I'm sleeping right now and having a nightmare. Wake me up, someone!

'Darina, talk to me,' she said.

I've never talked much to Mom, not since Jim moved in four years ago. There's nothing wrong with Jim, but not much right either. Mr Bland Techie Guy, travelling round the state selling laptops.

'I know you're upset,' Laura sighed.

Upset? Try ‘devastated’, ‘wrecked’, ‘ripped apart’. Like someone made a hole in my heart, my head, whatever it is that makes me who I am. I stared at her and tried to stop my lip from trembling.

‘It’s his funeral on Tuesday,’ she said quietly. ‘Brandon came in to the store yesterday to buy a dark jacket.’

‘Say his name, why can’t you?’ The pain made me angry. ‘His name is Phoenix!’ *Was* Phoenix. *Is* Phoenix. Had I seen him at the barn, or not?

Usually Laura would pick me up on disrespectful stuff like this and it would end up in a fight. But today she let it go. ‘You want me to write to the principal and ask for the day out of school?’

I shrugged. I’d take it anyway. ‘I need to crash,’ I told her. My head was spinning. ‘If I don’t get some sleep I’ll go crazy.’ *Am* crazy already - what am I saying?

So Laura let me pass and I finally made it to my room.

Yeah, I’m crazy! I thought. I flopped on to the bed and stared at the ceiling. I tried hard to block what I’d seen in the barn. I didn’t really drive to Foxton and park the car, walk through the silver aspens with their golden leaves fluttering. Hear a door bang and walk over the ridge.

Rewind that part of the day. Go back to the afternoon I spent with Logan at his place, just sitting being silent and sad together.

‘Phoenix wasn’t the violent type,’ I said after an age of saying nothing. ‘He didn’t get in to fights.’

Logan and I were out on his porch. There were empty Bud bottles lined up on the rail, his dad’s dusty boots kicked off and lying under the swing. ‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘We’d arranged to meet up,’ I went on. It was Friday. I’d been waiting for Phoenix in my car out by Deer Creek, watching for his truck as the sun went down, but he never showed. ‘So how come?’ I asked Logan, letting tears slide down my cold cheeks. ‘What happened exactly?’

‘They were all carrying knives,’ he told me gently. ‘Phoenix too.’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t want to hear that.’

‘It’s true, Darina. Phoenix was no angel, believe me.’

That’s when I decided to leave, got up and accidentally knocked over a couple of empty bottles. They smashed on a rock beneath the porch.

Logan followed me down the gravel path to the road. ‘How long were you and Phoenix an item?’ he asked. ‘Six weeks, two months maybe?’

I wouldn’t answer. My tears were angry now.

‘So how well did you know him - *really* know him?’

I got in my car and slammed the door.

Logan leaned in and grabbed the steering wheel. ‘How long have you known me? All our lives. Trust me, Darina, I wouldn’t tell you anything that wasn’t God’s honest truth.’

‘So what are you saying?’ I shot back at him over the rev of the engine. ‘My boyfriend was a member of a gang who carried a knife and deserved to die?’

‘No way!’ Logan shook his head. ‘No more than Jonas deserved to crash his bike. Or Arizona to drown in the lake, or Summer …’

‘Don’t!’ I yelled at him. Four deaths in one year. ‘No need to remind me, thanks. Now let go of the wheel.’

We’d known each other since kindergarten, Logan Lavelle and I, but he was misreading this situation big-time.

‘I thought you’d understand!’ I flung at him as I stepped on the gas and shot away from his house.

Last Friday I’d waited an hour for Phoenix out at the creek. Then Logan had driven to find me. ‘There’s a fight in town,’ he’d warned. ‘A big one. Brandon’s involved. So is Phoenix.’

I didn’t believe what Logan was telling me until I’d broken all the speed limits on the road to Ellerton. I was mad with Phoenix for not texting to tell me he couldn’t make it. I was choked with worry that Phoenix’s big brother, Brandon, might do something really crazy this time. Then I got to town, and it was too late. The fight was over. There was blood on the ground.

‘I could get you some therapy,’ Laura offered as I left for school next day. ‘I’ll find the money somehow.’

‘Do I *look* as if I need therapy?’ I snapped back.

She took a sharp intake of breath and I scooted out of the house, down the steps into my car. I made a list as I drove into town.

Major reasons to be unhappy: My parents split when I was twelve. My stepdad’s a loser. My boring school sucks and there’s a jinx on it that keeps getting people killed. My boyfriend just died…

Tears streamed down my face. I was broken and I couldn’t see anyone around who could fix me.

Logan thought he could. He came up to me as I parked my car in the school parking lot. Tall, tanned, with dark brown curly hair - the hair that was golden when he was in pre-school.

‘Hey, Darina.’

I slammed the car door. ‘Didn’t we just fight?’ I reminded him.

‘Yeah, sorry about that. No, really. But you got it all wrong. I wasn’t trying to say that Phoenix got what was coming.’

We walked into school together, me slightly ahead of Logan, trying to tune him out. But his last remark got through to me. ‘That’s what everyone else in Ellerton is saying though. “Phoenix was just like Brandon. They were brothers, the same DNA, the same faulty genetic code.”’

‘No they’re not. Don’t get paranoid,’ Logan begged. He ran ahead of me and blocked my way down the corridor. ‘No, that came out wrong too. It wasn’t a criticism. I mean, your feelings are totally mixed up right now. That’s understandable. It’s tough for you, I know it is.’

I sighed and it came out like a groan. ‘Logan, I’m just trying to put one foot in front of another. Please can we *not* talk.’

He nodded then gave way. ‘Text me if you need me,’ he called.

I walked into my classroom and for a split second I saw Phoenix sitting on the window ledge, his long legs stretched out across the table, his feet crossed at the ankles. He smiled at me.

I am crazy! I told myself for the hundredth time since Foxton.

Then I was surrounded. I lost sight of my ghost in the corner and there was a heap of touching and hugging. My boyfriend had just got stabbed to death. I was flavour of the month.

That was before the special gathering in the school’s state-of-the-art media centre. The principal called all students together in the theatre.

‘We’re meeting to share our sorrow at the sudden death this weekend of one of our senior students, Phoenix Rohr,’ Dr Valenti began.

There wasn’t a single person in Ellerton who hadn’t already heard the news. I was sitting between Jordan and Hannah, staring straight ahead. They glanced sideways at me as if I was made of glass and someone might drop me.

‘There’s still a lot of confusion surrounding the circumstances of Phoenix’s passing,’ Dr Valenti went on, standing on the stage in his grey suit, using grey words. ‘But what we do know for sure is that he will be sadly missed by everyone here.’

I heard a few people sobbing. I blinked and saw Phoenix standing right behind Dr Valenti, smiling at me again.

The principal did his bland stuff. He told us we were going to have a minute’s silence. ‘We’ll bow our heads in respect,’ he said. ‘And while we think of Phoenix, we’ll bring to mind the others we have lost this year. We’ll remember Jordan, Arizona and Summer, and I for one will keep them in my thoughts as I carry out the tasks ahead during this coming day.’

One lousy day. How about a lifetime, Dr Valenti?

I blinked again and Phoenix was gone.

We all kept our heads down for exactly sixty seconds then it was over.

‘Stand up, Darina!’ Jordan whispered in my ear.

Clunk went a thousand hinged seats as everyone stood up and filed out.

If you asked me about the rest of that day, I wouldn’t remember a single thing. Friends spoke to me and I didn’t hear. My math teacher suspected I was going to black out. She sent me to the school clinic. I lay on a bed and stared

at the ceiling, hoping to see Phoenix's face in the shadows cast by the redwood tree outside the window. Hannah came to see me. I didn't speak. Nothing broke through.

All I knew was, if Phoenix wasn't going to show up again, I'd have to go and find him. I would drive back out to that old house and barn.

School finished and there was an obstacle in my way in the shape of Brandon Rohr. He was leaning against the side of my car, arms folded across his chest, waiting for me.

I tell you now, Brandon was Phoenix's brother but they were total opposites. They didn't even look alike, except they were both well over six feet tall. Brandon was the bulky football type, Phoenix was more the graceful basketball player. Brandon's hair was cropped close to his head while Phoenix wore his longer, almost to his collar. Brandon never smiled. Especially not now, three days after his brother died.

'Get in the car,' he told me.

I fumbled with the lock and the ignition. Brandon sat down in the passenger seat. 'Where are we going?' I asked.

'Just drive.'

I took a deep breath then did as I was told. Soon we were heading west, out of town. I stopped my hands from shaking by holding tight to the steering wheel.

Brandon sat deep in the seat and laid his head against the rest. He closed his eyes. 'So?' he mumbled.

‘So?’ I took a turn off the metalled road and rattled off down a dirt track, actually towards Hartmann Lake, where Arizona had drowned.

‘So, now’s your chance to ask me some questions,’ Brandon replied. ‘Anything you like.’

I frowned, not believing that compassion was Brandon’s style. But I did want to know - so many blurred details.

‘Phoenix - did he die straight away?’ On the spot where I saw the blood on the road, outside the gas station.

My voice hardly qualified as a whisper. I had to ask the question three times before Brandon picked it up.

‘No, we got him to the hospital, but they couldn’t bring him back.’

‘Was he conscious?’

Brandon shook his head. ‘Only for the first couple of minutes. He was losing blood fast, so he blacked out.’

‘Did he - did he say anything?’

‘About you?’ It made me sound mean and selfish, the way Brandon said it. And he didn’t open his eyes.

‘Yes. Did he mention me?’

Brandon stayed in the same position as we bumped and rattled towards the lake. ‘He asked me to come and talk to you.’

‘To say what?’

‘Goodbye, I guess.’

Goodbye. Two syllables. ‘Just that?’ The lake spread out in front of us now, glimmering silver for miles either way.

‘”Tell Darina I’m sorry”.’ Brandon gave me the exact quote. He pulled himself upright and stared out at the water. ‘He made me promise.’

My struggling heart rose up into my mouth. I couldn’t speak any more.

‘Turn the car around,’ Brandon ordered after a whole silent minute of lake-gazing. ‘Drive back to town.’

‘Who killed him?’ I asked faintly as Brandon gestured for me to pull up outside his apartment block.

It was like metal jaws had snapped shut and trapped all the information inside his head. Brandon shrugged. ‘I have no idea.’

‘But you were there. You saw it.’

He shook his head. ‘Were you ever in a fight?’

‘No.’

‘There were twelve or more guys. Kicking, punching shoving. Someone pulled a knife. That’s all I know.’

Brandon stepped out of the car. He leaned one arm along the roof and lowered his head to look me in the eye. ‘We’re holding a wake out at Deer Creek. Me and a bunch of my brother’s buddies. It was Phoenix’s favourite place.’

‘After the funeral?’ I whispered.

He nodded and walked off.

I gripped the steering wheel and let my head fall forward. I sobbed.

A woman pushing a stroller walked by. She stopped, turned and came back to speak to me. ‘How are you doing?’

I raised my head. ‘Good, thanks.’ Though it was obvious I wasn’t.

‘You sure? Do you need anything?’

I wiped my cheeks with the back of my hand. ‘No. I’m good.’

The stranger hovered a while longer. ‘Whatever it is, honey, it’ll look better tomorrow. And the day after will look better again.’

‘Thanks,’ I told her. She was maybe seven or eight years older than me, with a baby and a life ahead of her - husband, more kids, a home. She smiled kindly, nodded then walked on.

I was left with myself and my own crazy thoughts, re-running events, longing to glance sideways and see Phoenix sitting in the passenger seat, smiling and saying, ‘Hey, Darina, drive this crappy car out of here, why don’t you?’

‘Where to?’ I’d grin.

‘Any place she’ll make it to. Let’s get the hell out of here!’ he’d tell me.

And he’d slide his arm along my chewed-up driver’s seat, put his feet on the dashboard and lay right back.

I’d see his face in profile as I drove. His eyes would be closed, the wind would push his hair back from his face. I would be totally in love with him.

As it was, now that Brandon had gone I was free to drive out to Foxton again.

Do it! I told myself. *What’s holding you back?*

In my mind’s eye I saw the empty house and the broken-down barn, heard the door banging and the rustle of the aspen leaves in the breeze. Maybe that’s where it was, and nowhere else - inside my unreliable, traumatized head. Did the house exist? How come I’d never come across it before, or ever heard anyone mention it?

Foxton wasn't that far out from Ellerton - maybe fifteen miles up a narrow road into the mountains. There were half a dozen houses at a small crossroads and a pokey local store that nobody ever used. Oh, and there were a few weekend shacks overlooking the creek, used by fishermen and hunters - city slickers mostly.

OK, so I could drive to Foxton and check things out. I could ask in the store if they knew about the house in the aspens. It seemed like a plan, so I set off.

Not much of a plan, as it turned out. I pulled up at the Foxton store and found it closed for business and a hand-written For Sale notice taped inside the window. Grit blew across the dirt road and in to my eyes so I got back in to the car. I was expecting tumbleweed and lonely guitar music, like in the Clint Eastwood movies.

'Shoot!' I turned the key and heard the engine splutter. The gas gauge showed empty, due to the extra miles I'd put in lately.

'Always carry spare gas in the trunk,' boring Jim would say. 'You never know when you might run out.'

'Darina, Jim was right. You should've paid attention, at least once in your life!' I muttered, rejecting the obvious choice of calling Laura on my cell phone. She'd be mad as hell with me, and it would mean the end of my expedition out to the old house.

I got out of the car again and thought hard about other options. Hitch a ride to the nearest gas station. Yeah, and get picked up by some psycho weirdo - too risky. Call a buddy and plead for help - it seemed too pathetic. Plus, they'd start asking questions.

‘Hey, Darina,’ Mr Madison said.

I recognised him as he pulled off the road in his silver SUV. He was Summer’s dad, still taking time off his work as an architect to help his wife handle the grief of their daughter’s death. He looked pale and drawn as he stepped down from his vehicle. ‘You got a problem?’ he asked.

‘Clean out of gas,’ I admitted.

He nodded. ‘I lost count of the times I told Summer to check she had a gas can in the trunk.’

‘I know. I’m so dumb.’

‘She never listened either. Kids, huh?’

I felt guilty for still breathing, poor guy.

‘Lucky I came along,’ Mr Madison said, fetching a green can from the back of his car. He unscrewed the nozzle and the strong smell of gas vapour hit my nostrils. I watched him pour the clear liquid into my tank. ‘This’ll get you home.’

‘Thanks,’ I breathed, avoiding meeting his gaze, remembering all the blue-sky evenings I’d spent at the Madisons’ untidy, arty, friendly, out-of-town house before Summer … well, when Summer was alive.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said with a faint smile. ‘Turn the ignition - check you’re OK.’

I did as Mr Madison said. The engine started up. I was good to go.

‘OK,’ he said, climbing back in to his car. ‘Glad I came by. Take care, Darina.’

And he drove off.

I could’ve said, ‘I’m on my way to see Summer’s ghost, Mr Madison. She’s up there, along the dirt road, in a derelict barn. Along with Jonas, Arizona and

Phoenix. All of them together, calling themselves the Beautiful Dead. The fact that you're here right now is kind of Fate. Why not come along?'

But his heart was already broken and I suspected that what I had to offer was pure, grief-fuelled craziness. So I watched his SUV disappear down the road.

And now I had no obstacles left - I had to drive on, up the dirt track past the weekend hunters' and fishermen's shacks perched on jagged granite rocks overlooking the fast running creek, on into the pine forest with the heavy, scented boughs. Then I was out of the long shadows onto a clear road zig-zagging up the mountain to the aspens ahead.

My car bumped over boulders. The tyres crunched over gravel and skidded around tight bends. There were no houses, no other vehicles, just a big evening sky and a pale moon rising.

Still no house, I thought when it felt like I'd driven far enough*. And no barn.* I searched for the place where I had parked my car the day before. A couple of hundred metres further along, I decided, slowing a little and trying to recognise landmarks.

Then I came to a bunch of trees and saw a narrow track to my left. In the long grass, a mule deer raised its startled head.

This is it! I recognised the track rising up through a natural meadow into a cluster of aspens. I glimpsed the top of the rusted water tower beyond the ridge.

So I got out of the car and followed the path, sending the deer bounding through the silvery grass. I came to the trees, whose leaves rustled in the breeze. It reminded me of a million wings beating.

I had to stop before I reached the ridge and take a deep breath. Then I steeled myself to walk on.

The leaves rustled louder than before, though they were still a long way off and I was walking through long grass. Then I struck away from the track, taking the shortest route to the top of the hill and resting again in the shadow of the water tower. Now the land sloped away, down into a wide valley where a creek ran.

At first I didn't see the house. And I was already beating myself up, telling myself how crazy I was to have imagined all that, how grief could play weird tricks, like the mind kicking you when you were already down.

I was ready to give up when I heard a door banging and I spotted the broken down barn.

My heart pounded.

Bang - again! And the rustling leaves still reminded me of beating wings, filling my ears with an immense sound. So I stumbled from the shadow of the water tower, down the slope towards the barn.

But I'd only got half way down the slope when I saw two figures working in the overgrown meadow - a couple of guys fixing a gap in an old razor-wire fence. It was such an everyday sight that I forgot to be afraid, until the younger of the two glanced up and I recognised him.

'Jonas!' My voice came out strangled and hoarse. I stopped on the hillside and gazed at his tall, skinny outline.

Jonas Jonson had ridden his Harley on a straight road out of Centennial with Zoey riding pillion. He crashed and died but there was scarcely a mark on

him. Zoey spent six weeks in a coma and still doesn't remember what happened.

Jonas saw me and turned to the older man - the grey-haired guy they called Hunter who had closed the barn door on my first visit. Straight away Hunter put down the tools he'd been working with and made a beeline up the hill.

'Please!' I croaked. I could hardly breathe. I wanted to run but I didn't know which way to turn.

Hunter kept on coming - a tall figure with grey, flowing hair, dressed in a dark shirt, his face pale and expressionless. I saw Jonas in the background shaking his head at me and warning me off.

I raised my arms in surrender. 'Look,' I said to Hunter, 'I don't know who you are or what's happening, but just back off, OK?'

He stopped around ten paces away. His dark eyes glared.

'I came to find Phoenix,' I explained.

Other people were emerging from the willows - two girls in their twenties, one with short, red hair, the other carrying a little kid with fluffy hair the colour of straw. And there was a small, wiry guy with them. They all went to stand beside Jonas.

'Phoenix,' I said to Hunter in my desperate, strangled voice. 'Where is he?'

Hunter kept on staring, feet planted wide apart, hands on hips.

He didn't react. I was drawn to his gaunt face and unflickering, dark eyes. Why was his skin so pale? I wondered. Outdoors guys like him usually looked tanned and healthy after a summer working in the sun.

It was the last clear thought I had before the sound of beating wings grew louder still and filled my head. Hunter stared and the wings beat, like a force

field battering me back the way I'd come. A smothering sensation came over me, and then a panic. The invisible wings were all around, forcing me to fight with my fists at thin air. I punched but there was no enemy.

Breathless, turning this way and that, I yelled for Jonas to help me.

Hunter didn't glance over his shoulder, seeming to know that Jonas wouldn't move a muscle.

'Phoenix, where are you?' I cried. He loved me. He would save me.

But whatever Hunter was doing was stronger than any plea I could deliver. He was staring at me and making the million wings beat louder, forcing me back to the water tower, sending me reeling into its shadow.

'Where am I?' I gasped. I crouched and put my hands over my head to shield it. 'Please someone, tell me what's happening!'

I was down on the ground, in deep shadow, and suddenly a shape loomed over me, a face came close to me with eyes as dark as death. A skull-face that shifted and dissolved and didn't seem to be attached to a body, and then another came at me, worse than any nightmare, so close that my heart almost stopped and I screamed - again and again.