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Opening extract from

Ultraviolet

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To Josh, who never stopped believing

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PART ONE:

SCENT OF YESTERDAY

ZERO (IS TRANSLUCENT)

Once upon a time there was a girl who was special. Her hair flowed like honey and her eyes were blue as music. She grew up bright and beautiful, with deft fingers, a quick mind and a charm that impressed everyone she met. Her parents adored her, her teachers praised her, and her schoolmates admired her many talents. Even the oddly shaped birthmark on her upper arm seemed like a sign of some great destiny.

This is not her story.

Unless you count the part where I killed her.

ONE (IS GREY)

The darkness behind my eyelids was thick and stank of chemicals, as though someone had poured black oil inside my head. My tongue lay like a dead slug in my mouth, and my limbs felt too heavy to lift.

Had I been sick? Was I injured? Or...

My stomach sloshed, rebelling against the thought. I couldn't be dying. I was only sixteen years old. Yet my skin itched with the coarseness of unfamiliar sheets, and the mattress beneath me felt rubbery. The air was stale and lukewarm. Where else could I be but in hospital?

As the oily slick across my senses thinned, colours and shapes crept into my awareness. Faint blue splashes of footsteps on tile, the dry buzz of air conditioning, a silken ribbon of murmurs outside my door. Muffled thumps from the end of the corridor felt like cotton puffs dropping onto my forehead, until they ended in a sandpaper rasp of, '*Nurse!*'

I winced, and opened my eyes.

I was lying alone in a room so stark that its blankness hit me like an assault. There were no IV

stands or heart monitors, no bedside table covered in flowers and get-well cards. No windows, no cupboards, no shelves, not even a clipboard hanging on the wall. Nothing but the bed, and me in it.

My arms lay limp by my sides, skinny and white as ever. They looked whole enough, but the forearms were a mess of half-healed scratches and bite marks, as though I'd tried to shake hands with a wolverine. My wrists were chafed red, my fingernails were ragged stubs, and my grandmother's ring, a square-cut topaz I'd worn every day for the past five years, was missing.

I was staring at my bare finger when the door opened, and a woman in petal-pink scrubs came in. 'Good morning, Alison,' she said brightly. 'How are you feeling? Ready for some fresh air and a change of scenery?'

She talked like someone used to not getting an answer, the way people talk to babies or coma patients. Clipped to her pocket was a laminated tag that said *Rachael* – a shimmery purple-violet name with flecks of silver, one I'd always liked. But I couldn't recall ever seeing her before.

'What happened to my ring?' I tried to ask, but my whisper was so faint even I could barely taste it.

'*Nurse! Help me, nurse!*' screeched the voice in the

distance, punctuated by more thumping. But the aide didn't seem to hear it any more than she'd heard me.

'We're just bringing a wheelchair around for you,' she said. 'Can I help you sit up, Alison?'

'Where am I?' I asked, forcing out the words. 'Where are you taking me?'

The aide looked surprised, but it only took her an instant to recover. 'You're at St Luke's Hospital,' she said. 'But not for much longer. Your mom put in a transfer request for you, so we're going to take you to a place where you'll be with other patients your age, and where you can get the treatment you need.'

'What kind of treatment?' I didn't mean to sound hostile, but I was starting to get scared. 'What kind of place?'

'A good place,' she said soothingly. 'It's called Pine Hills. You'll like it there.'

I'd heard that name before, but right now I couldn't place it. My memories were all in a tangle. 'How long have I been here?'

Rachael's eyes flicked away from mine. 'Only a little while,' she said, but the words rang so sour in my ears, so unexpectedly foul, that bile rose in my throat. 'You were agitated, so we brought you here to calm down—'

‘Not the room,’ I gasped. ‘The hospital. How long?’

‘You were admitted on June 7th,’ she said. ‘It’s the 22nd now.’

I sank back against the pillow, stunned. I’d been here for more than two weeks. Why couldn’t I remember any of it?

‘Let me help you get dressed,’ Rachael coaxed. ‘Then we’ll talk.’

I struggled upright, a yellow-grey stink of sweat wafting around me. The clothes she held were my own, so clean and fragrant that I felt ashamed putting my filthy body into them. I wanted to ask for a shower, but Rachael had already tugged up my jeans and pulled the T-shirt over my head. Another aide appeared in the doorway with a wheelchair; she helped me over to it.

‘It’s been a hard couple of weeks for you,’ Rachael said as she wheeled me down the corridor to a locked door, buzzed it open, and steered me through. ‘So things will probably seem a little hazy for a while. But now your medication’s really starting to work, you’ll be feeling a lot better soon...’

She chattered on, but I wasn’t listening any more. I was staring at the sign above the nurses’ station. It said, in my hometown’s two official languages:

PSYCHIATRIC UNIT / UNITÉ DE PSYCHIATRIE

My worst nightmare had become reality. I'd gone crazy, and my mother had locked me away.

I was six years old, watching my pregnant mother wash the dishes. Cutlery clinked, filling the air with sparkling bursts of colour.

'Do it again!' I begged her, bouncing in my seat.

My mother glanced back at me. 'Do what?'

'Make the stars.'

'Stars?'

It never occurred to me that she couldn't see what I was seeing. 'The gold ones,' I said.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she replied, and with a child's impatience, I hopped down from my stool to show her.

'Like this,' I said, taking two spoons and clanging them together. Each clink produced another starburst, expanding luminous through the air between us.

'You mean,' said my mother slowly, 'the sound makes you think of stars?'

'No, it makes the stars. Why aren't you looking? You have to look,' I told her, and clashed the spoons again. 'See?'

My mother stood rigid, the bewilderment in her face

shading slowly into horror. Then she snatched the spoons from my hands and flung them into the sink. 'There. Are. No. Stars,' she hissed, her voice full of icy peaks and seething valleys. 'Do you hear me?'

'Yes, there are, they're right—'

My mother slapped me across the face. 'Don't argue with me!'

She'd smacked me once or twice in the past, but never like this. Tears sprang to my eyes. 'But...'

'No buts!' She backed away, one arm wrapped protectively around her belly. 'Just stop it. Stop pretending, or – whatever you're doing.'

'So you don't...see the stars?' I could hardly get the words out.

'No!' she shouted at me, her face a blotchy mask. 'Normal people do not see things like that!'

I felt like my insides were climbing up my throat. I wanted to burst into tears. But I could also see how scared my mother was – and worse, I knew she was scared of me.

So I swallowed. I forced my misery back, pushed it deep down inside myself, and I said in a small voice, 'I'm sorry.'

'Go to your room, Alison,' said my mother, breathing hard. 'Go and think about what I've told

you. And I never, ever want to hear you talk about seeing stars or – or anything else like that again.'

I slunk out of the kitchen and was halfway up the stairs when a wavering moan floated up behind me, followed by another sound I had never before heard my mother make. It was a deep grey bubble, and it followed me all the way to my bedroom, where I flung myself down on the bed and sobbed until the air was full of them.

That day I'd learned that my mind didn't work the same as other people's – that perceptions I took for granted could seem incredible or even frightening to them. So I couldn't talk about the colour of three, or whether triangles tasted better than circles, or how playing Bach on my keyboard made fireworks go off in my head, because people would think I was crazy. And then they'd be scared of me, and wouldn't want to be around me any more.

So I hid those alien sensations inside myself, a secret I swore I'd never betray again. I made a few mistakes at first, because it wasn't always easy to know what was 'normal' and what wasn't, but by the time I was nine years old my transformation was complete. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, there was nothing extraordinary about me, nothing unpredictable, and

certainly nothing anyone needed to be afraid of.
Until now.

‘Alison, can I get you something to eat? Are you hungry?’

I shook my head distractedly, too shellshocked to speak. Rachael had parked my wheelchair in a little glass-walled office opposite the nurses’ station, then excused herself to help another patient. The woman stooping over me was thickset and greying, a grandmotherly stranger.

‘How are you feeling?’ asked the older nurse as she pulled up a chair and sat down, pen and clipboard in hand. ‘Any dizziness? Nausea? Headache?’

Ever since I saw that sign reading PSYCHIATRIC UNIT, I’d had all three. But I was afraid to admit it, because it would give these people another reason to believe that I was sick. I needed to convince them that I was better now, that I didn’t need any more treatment, before they could find out about my colours and try to take them away.

‘No,’ I lied, and the gorge surged into my mouth so fast I nearly choked. I had to swallow three times to get it down again, and then fake a coughing fit before I could gasp, ‘Could I – have some – water?’