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Opening extract from

Dark Inside

Written by

Jeyn Roberts

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D4RK INSIDE

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MACMILLAN



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NOTHING

I'm standing at the edge of existence. Behind me, a thousand monsters descend. Their disguises change with each stride.

When they look in a mirror, do they see their true selves?

Arms open wide. In front of me is nothing. No one ever knew how existence would end. Sure, they made assumptions: fire, flood, plague, etc. They studied the skies for locusts and watched for rain. They built their cities, destroyed the forests and poisoned the water. Warning signs left behind in the ruins of ancient civilizations have been misinterpreted. The sins of mankind are always to blame. But who would have guessed it would be so grey? So empty.

Is there really a way back?

Hello? Is there anyone there?

Sorry, wrong number.

There are too many thoughts to cover in such little time. I knew they would find me. I'm glowing in the moonlight. My darkness was too bright to hide forever. They find all of us eventually. They play the odds and they're up a thousand to one.

In front of me is nothing. No bright lights, no darkness. No energy. Just nothing.

There is no future because we no longer have a past.

Our present is devised of basic survival and it's about to end.

They have made sure of that.

I am Nothing.

I am existence.

I am pain.

I kneel down in the dirt and write some of my last words. I'd speak them but there is no one left to listen.

Game Over

MASON

'There's been an accident.'

No words have ever been so terrifying.

It was a sunny day. Beautiful. Early September. He'd been laughing. School had just started. Someone told a joke. Mason had finished first period and returned to his locker when the principal found him. Pulled him aside and away from his friends and spoke those four words.

There's been an accident.

Twenty minutes later Mason arrived at Royal Hospital. They wouldn't let him drive. His car was back at the parking lot. Mr Yan, the geology teacher, drove. He'd never even met Mr Yan before. He'd never thought to study geology. Since when did any of that matter?

It was sunny outside. Bright. Hot. The girls were noticeably wearing fewer clothes. Warm light filtered through the Honda's window, warming Mason's jeans. He absently thought about removing his hoody but the consideration was too casual. Too normal. How could he think of being warm? How selfish was he?

The teacher offered to come in but Mason shook his head. No. His head bounced up and down when asked if he'd be all right. Yes. He'd be sure to call the school if he needed a ride home. Yes. As he drove off, Mason

noticed that Mr Yan's white Honda Civic had a dent in the bumper.

Another car drove through a red light and hit her. Side collision. Your mother was the only one in the car. She's at the hospital. We'll take you there. You can't drive – you're in shock.

Shock? Was that what this was?

Somehow he made it inside. A woman in Admitting told him where to go. She was eating a bagel. There was a coffee stain on her sleeve. A permanent frown tattooed into her forehead, her mouth drawn taut against her teeth. She pointed towards the main room and told him to wait. There were too many people around. More than the waiting room could hold. It seemed awfully busy for a Wednesday afternoon. He couldn't find a seat, so he squeezed his slender frame into a corner between a vending machine and the wall. From there he could see and hear everything.

Ambulance lights flickered through the windows. Paramedics rushed to bring stretchers through the emergency doors. Doctors shouted in the hallways and nurses ran with clipboards and medical supplies. People crowded the tiny waiting-room chairs. None was smiling. Most stared off into space while others spoke in hushed voices. A woman a few feet away, kept opening and closing the clasp on her purse. Her eyes were red and puffy, and when she looked at Mason tears welled up and rolled down her cheeks. She was holding a pink blanket in her lap; drops of blood stained the fabric.

Mason looked down at his sneakers. He didn't want to

see any more. His shoelace was coming untied.

Eventually a doctor called his name.

'They're taking her into surgery,' the doctor told him. 'There's nothing you can do except wait. We can call someone if you'd like. Are there other family members you'd like us to contact?'

There was no one else. Just Mom and him. Mason's father had died five years ago when he was twelve.

'Will she be OK?'

'We're doing the best we can.'

Not an answer. That wasn't a good sign.

A nurse brought him coffee. The paper cup burned his fingers but he didn't drop it. Instead he raised the liquid to his lips and took a large gulp. Burned his tongue. He barely noticed. He placed the cup on the waiting-room table and promptly forgot about it.

His phone began to ring. People glared at him. A mother with two small children looked at him as if he was pure evil. There was a sign on the wall reminding people to turn off their mobiles. No electronics were allowed in the emergency room. Why hadn't he noticed it before? He hit the power button without taking the call. There was nothing to say anyway.

More ambulances arrived and stretchers and paramedics piled in through the doors. The waiting room went from being crowded to ridiculously out of control. Where were all these people coming from? They were beginning to overflow into the hallway. No one seemed to know what was going on.

There was a television mounted in a metal frame above the heads of an Asian family who didn't speak a word of English. The grandmother was lying on a stretcher pushed up against the wall by the nurses' station. The orderlies didn't know what to do with her. Stretchers filled with people were lining the hallways. The hospital seemed to have run out of room.

The television was turned to a local channel, and a talk-show host was interviewing someone about some upcoming movie. The volume was low, and very few people paid attention. Mason watched for a bit; it was a helpful distraction although he couldn't hear the words. He was still pressed up against the vending machine. Glancing at his watch he discovered it was almost two. He'd been there for four hours and had no idea what was going on. Was his mother still in surgery? He thought about asking the nurse for an update but changed his mind quickly once he saw the queue of twenty people screaming for attention. No one else was getting information, why should he be any different?

'Mason Dowell?'

The doctor had stopped in front of him and Mason hadn't even noticed. He was holding the same clipboard from before and his face was stern and unreadable. Blinking several times, he looked down at the paperwork with heavy eyes.

'Is she OK?' The words blurted out. He hated the sound of his voice. High-pitched. Breathy. Panicky.

'For now.' The doctor wouldn't look at him. 'We've

managed to stop the internal bleeding but she's still unconscious. All we can do is wait. I think it might be best if you go and get some rest. I can try and arrange for someone to take you home.'

'Can I see her?'

'There's nothing to see. She's just resting. We're very busy right now. Go home and get something to eat. Make some phone calls. Come back later tonight and you can see her then.'

Someone gasped.

Both of them turned to look. The waiting room had grown awfully quiet. Everyone stared at the television. Someone rushed over and turned up the volume.

It took Mason a few seconds to realize what he was looking at. The talk show had been replaced by a news bulletin. Somewhere live on location. Fire trucks and police cars blocked off the remains of a building. They were using hoses to control the flames that burst through the destroyed structure. Emergency lights flashed and people rushed about but it was impossible to recognize them because of the smoke and dust.

'I repeat,' the news announcer's voice said in the background. 'Tragedy strikes at local Saskatoon high school. Channel Nine doesn't know all the details yet but we believe that four men and three women entered the school around one thirty, armed with explosives. The bombs were ignited in the gymnasium, cafeteria and about five classrooms. There is no word on who did this and if it's linked to a terrorist organization. We are not sure of the

casualties yet but estimates are in the hundreds. They're bringing some of the bodies out now.'

The camera panned over to the building where officials were bringing out black bags. The glass entrance was destroyed and half the doorway had caved in but Mason had walked through those doors a few hours ago.

'That's my school,' he said.

No one heard him.

'I've never seen anything like this,' the announcer said. Her voice was shaking and constrained. She was no longer reading the script; the words leaving her lips were her own. 'The whole school has been destroyed. It's all gone. What kind of monsters would do that?' Tears glistened in her eyes.

The studio camera panned over to the left as a police officer walked into the shot. His forced expression filled the screen. 'If you or anyone you know has children attending the school, please do not come down here. I repeat: do not come down. There is nothing you can do to help but there is a number you can call.' Local numbers came up on the screen. 'I repeat, do not come down. The authorities are busy and cannot help you.'

The camera panned across the parking lot and the hundreds of cars that remained empty. Mason spotted his Toyota Corolla next to a smashed Ford truck covered in rubble. Funny, his car looked untouched. There didn't seem to be a single scratch.

'That's my school,' he repeated.

'Son?' The doctor put his hand on Mason's shoulder.

'You'd better go home.'

'Yeah, OK.' The weight of the entire hospital crushed down on Mason's back. He needed to get out of there and make some phone calls. Find out what had happened.

'Let me get someone to take you.' The doctor looked around the waiting room. 'Stay here and I'll go see who's getting off duty. Give me twenty minutes.'

'No, don't bother. I can go myself.' Mason zipped up his hoody. If he hurried, he could get to the school in less than half an hour.

'I don't think—'

'It's fine.' Mason stepped backwards. 'I'm not that far away. I've got to go. I'll be back in a few hours. I'll – um – eat something like you said. Take a rest. Have a shower.'

The doctor smiled. 'Do what you've got to do. We'll see you this evening. Your mother is lucky to have you.'

It was still bright and warm outside. Sunny. Beautiful. Shouldn't it be darker? Mason stumbled over the kerb, nearly falling right into the path of an incoming ambulance. Stepping backwards, red lights washed over him as the vehicle sped by. His mobile phone bounced out of his hoody pocket but he managed to grab it before it hit the ground. Turning it on, he remembered that someone had called earlier. There was one new message.

'Dude!' The voice on the recording was his friend Tom. 'I heard about your mom. I'm really sorry, hope she's all right. I'll call you the second I'm done in class. Let me know if you're still in the hospital. I'll head down. Gotta go. Coach'll have me running laps if I'm late again.'

There was a beep and a voice asking him if he wanted to replay the message, save or delete it.

Running laps. Gym.

Explosives.

Tom had been in the gym along with all the others. Kids he'd grown up with. They were all the friends who shared his life. He should have been in the gym. He would have been if it hadn't been for those four horrible words. Had his mother just saved his life?

He scrolled through his phone until he found Tom's number. Pressed the button and held it against his ear. Waited for it to ring. Nothing happened. It didn't go straight to voicemail. Not even a recorded voice telling him to try again.

Ending the call, he looked through his list of numbers. Dozens of them, all friends – every single one had been at the school. If he called them, would he get nothing but dead air? He wasn't brave enough to try to find out.

Flagging down the first taxi, Mason climbed in and asked the driver to take him to the 7-Eleven a block from the school. He'd walk the rest. He ran his fingers through his tousled brown hair nervously, trying to distract himself – anything to keep him from kicking the back seat and screaming.

He needed to see. To make sure. He wouldn't allow himself to believe it was real until he saw with his own eyes.