

BITE RISK

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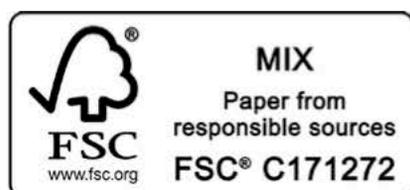
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CHAPTER ONE

APRIL - CONFINEMENT NIGHT

I'm so busy repairing the tripwire across the front porch that I almost forget to take Mum her dinner. It's only when I hear her clanging about downstairs that I realize it's nearly eight o'clock. The street lights cast a feeble yellowish haze as far as the house, but I don't need them - the moon is more than enough. It hangs heavy and ripe over Tremorglade, watching everything we do.

At least the explosive charges are finally set round the outer perimeter, and the graphene nets are checked. Satisfied, I sit back on my heels and watch the neon warning bunting flapping in the breeze. All safe for tonight, even if I did leave it a little late. Dangerously late, Mum would say, if she knew. She always complains that I never change, and I point out that I definitely will, just not this month, but it never makes her crack a smile. She doesn't think we should laugh about that stuff.

My eyelids feel like sandpaper and my fingers are sore from twisting the wires, but I shuffle to the fridge and haul out tonight's meal, wrinkling my nose as ever at the smell. In my haste, I pull the shelf out too far and it tips forward, its contents thudding wetly into my chest. Great.

The clanging downstairs is louder now. Mum's getting antsy, like she always does around this time. I should've left dinner with her ages ago, but I got distracted.

The basement stairs are steep and the light stays off when I flick the switch. It happens from time to time. We don't always keep up with the bills and occasionally the electricity company notices. Mum will ring them first thing tomorrow and plead for mercy until she gets paid at the end of the week.

I hold the tray against my chest with one hand and feel my way down the wall with the other, treading super carefully on the stone steps. I don't want to fall and injure myself right now. Especially not before Mum's eaten.

There's a soft moan as I approach the bottom of the stairs and I feel guilty for my lateness.

'Sorry, Mum, it was just really fiddly tonight.' Plus I reached level twenty on Happy Trappers, but she doesn't need to know that.

Silence. I get the feeling she's not in the mood to hear excuses.

I can't see a thing in the darkness now, so I take my phone out of my back pocket and fumble to turn on the

torch. I accidentally shine it right in her eyes and she rears back. A flash of white teeth.

‘Sorry, sorry.’ I place the tray and the phone on the basement floor so the beam of light points up at the ceiling and pick up the slab of raw beef. It’s as big as my head, and I realize I’ve forgotten to cut it up. The bone is still in it. It might not even fit through the bars of the cage.

Too late now, though – she can smell it. At once, she looms out of the darkness, fast and hard. There’s a sharp metallic clang as she throws herself against the door, making the whole cage rattle, then she retreats a little.

Better get on with it.

I throw the meat on the floor and stamp on it to flatten it, trying not to splatter the neatly folded clothes she’s left to the side, then pick it up and step forward, holding it next to the cage at arm’s length.

She doesn’t move from the shadows.

She’s waiting for something.

If she thinks I’m going to open the door she’s got another think coming, although I doubt what’s going through her mind right now could really be described as thoughts.

Sensations, maybe. Hunger. Rage.

Blood from the meat is oozing over my wrist, dribbling down the statutory notice welded to the middle of the cage door: **CAUTION – BITE RISK.**

‘Come on, will you, it’s heavy.’

My arm’s getting weak, I’m dead tired. Even though it’s Confinement, I was seriously considering staying in tonight and just chilling out in front of the TV. But now I can’t, plus she’s messing me about. A wave of irritation overtakes me and I shove the meat in further, the bone resisting against the bars, then finally pinging through.

It’s all she needs.

A millisecond later her teeth are bared and snapping, claws ripping at my sleeve as I struggle to withdraw my arm through the bars.

Adrenaline surges through my veins as I yank back in panic, eventually remembering I need to let go of the meat. But my knuckles are in the way, bashing against the iron cage. At last my hand slithers through and I crash-land on the floor into the puddle of bloody meat juice.

I sit there for a moment letting my heartbeat return to normal. It’s okay. She’s tearing into the beef, crouching, watching me with her yellow eyes.

My arm still seems to be attached to me, though there’s a thin red line down the back of my hand where the tip of one fang has caught it and drawn a neat incision. It’s just a scratch. Could have been a lot worse. Stings so much, though.

I rub my back and tut. ‘Mu-um.’

Chunks fall from her jaws, and a pink-tinged string of saliva drops to the floor as she makes short work of

her dinner. In my annoyance, I'm tempted to take a photo right now and put it on the internet, but she'd kill me.

It's ten past eight, according to my watch. There's a dull throbbing at the back of my head and around my shoulders - the usual Confinement headache - but I'm wide awake, thanks to that little shot of adrenaline.

Too fidgety for a movie now, and with no electrics anyway, I decide to hang out with Elena after all. Unlike me, she'll have had her dad and brother sorted out hours ago.

I leave Mum to it and head gingerly up the stairs, out of the door and through the garden, skipping neatly over the tripwire and heading to Elena's house across the road, where there's a faint light seeping between her bedroom curtains. Earlier, when I was setting the tripwires, I could hear her singing. She has a pretty good voice.

It's a warm spring evening; the scent of the first cut grass is in the air. The bunting and luminous DANGER signs mark the hazards at every house, like twisted birthday-party decorations. Up and down the road loads of kids are out, the younger ones playing, older ones standing and fiddling on their phones or talking in groups, tranquillizer guns slung over their shoulders. Even little Mika, who started Caretaking only a couple of months ago, is already settled on her front porch in the wheelchair she's using while she recovers from her operation, cleaning the barrel of her X50 like a veteran.

Rudy and Asim are in the middle of a ten-pin bowling game in the street. A few toddlers have been plonked in the handy fenced-off area around the hazel tree, where they're happily chucking handfuls of grass at each other and eating bugs. They've all been ready for ages.

I should be more organized, I know. *Set up, lock in, watch out.* The protocol we all need to follow.

Here in Tremorglade, because we're so isolated, we don't have to put up with many of the horrors that the rest of the world does – deadly weather, plagues, violent crime and marauding pirates.

We just have to live with each other's mistakes.

CHAPTER TWO

Music drifts down from one of the upper windows of Elena's house – that's her brother Pedro's bedroom. He always wants something upbeat and poppy blasting into his cage for Confinement. Elena usually starts off by singing to him, and then puts the player on for the rest of the night. She wears headphones in bed as her room is right opposite his, but she keeps her alert bracelet on so she'd know if there were ever a problem, which there never is. Well, there hasn't been for ages, anyway.

Pedro swears music helps, so he's been playing various tunes to himself during Confinements and recording his reactions. So far the results have been . . . marginal. In that maybe, *maybe*, a bit of electropop turns his rage level down a notch. Half a notch. Maybe.

I've just mounted the first step up to the front door when it crashes open and Elena appears, her grin wide

and mischievous. Her long fringe is stuck to the light brown skin of her forehead and she's out of breath. Been dancing, probably.

Then she does a double take. 'Woah. Did you just kill someone?'

I look down at myself. In the moonlight, and standing right under the street lamp, it's quite a bit worse than I thought. My T-shirt has a large, uneven circle of blood with spatter marks all round it, and my trousers are unpleasantly wet on my thighs. My milk-white arms have red streaks up them. There's a sickly butcher-shop smell coming from somewhere and I think it might be me.

'Oh, no, I just... kind of fumbled Mum's dinner. Should I go change?'

'Nah. Don't worry about it. The blood spatter is actually an improvement on those trousers. It hides the pattern nicely.'

'Thanks.'

She punches me amiably on the arm. 'You are such a doofus, Sel.'

There's no denying it. Being a doofus is pretty much my thing. If you can drop it, fall over it, break it, tread on it or choke on it, you can bet I'll have done it.

At school in target practice everyone stands back a good few extra metres on either side, ever since I hit our teacher. It was a practice dart, obviously, not one of the proper ones - that would've killed her outside of a

Confinement night. But even the practice ones hurt when they pierce your flesh. It was an accident, but if I'm honest I can see how she might think it wasn't – she was standing behind me at the time. I'd slung the tranquillizer over my shoulder at the end of a session but forgotten to put the safety back on. She gave me detention every night for a month: just me, a bunch of targets and dozens of rounds of darts. Even that hasn't noticeably improved my aim.

'Shady Oaks?' I suggest.

Shady Oaks Retirement Community is where our friend Harold lives. We play cards together, and he's the only adult in Tremorglade who won't tear us to shreds if we get too close tonight.

» » »

We take our bikes and ride to the other side of town. The whispering of the river accompanies us all the way, a dark ribbon glimpsed in the gaps between houses and shops, meandering gently downwards along the western edge of Tremorglade, growing wider until it meets the forest, where it falls away in a hundred-metre-high waterfall. Behind us and to either side are the mountains that hold Tremorglade in a horseshoe-shaped embrace. It's like nature knew the world was going to end up a warring, crime-ridden, disease-blizzard-and-drought-afflicted mess, and set aside a little nook to keep a lucky few of us safe.

Around the halfway point we pass the Wellness Centre. There's no one there tonight, of course. All us kids are first-aid trained, though. If any of us were to get seriously injured, we'd just have to try not to bleed out until one of the medics opened up in the morning. A car-sized delivery drone lifts off from its drop zone in the grounds and buzzes off, propellers a blur, sweeping up and over the trees, back in the direction of Hastaville. It will have picked up this month's expired tranq darts, dropped fresh ones, and brought medical supplies or equipment for us. Its red light blinks into the distance before disappearing.

We get everything by drone – some as big as that one, others small enough to fit into the palm of your hand. A lot of places use them these days, since they're much harder to hijack than vehicles. That's not a problem here – we're just too small and too remote to be worth the trip. We can order off the internet and have stuff dropped to our doors, although we do try to buy from local shops when we can because Mum says it's important to support the community. I don't think I've ever met a visitor from out of town.

As we ride, I'm conscious of the usual low-grade anxiety and nausea dragging at me. We call it the doldrums. Us kids get a ping on our alert bracelets at the onset of dusk once a month, but none of us needs it. Our bodies know, and they don't like it. Everything gets heavier. The air feels oppressive, as though the adults

suck the energy out of the atmosphere as they Turn.

Mum doesn't remember the doldrums being a thing when she was young, even after the Disruption, but old people always think things were better in the past. The dizziness, headaches and nagging sense of doom are always gone by morning, but most of us kids sleep badly on these nights. The guidance says we should go to bed at a sensible time on Confinement, once we've done our duty, although we're supposed to be ready to spring out of bed if there's an alarm, tranq at the ready. Who's to say what's a 'sensible time', anyway? These nights belong to us.

I've wondered what it would be like if I could ride my bike fast enough to keep up with the daylight around the Earth, a hair's breadth in front of that sundown moment through time zones, and never get caught. Behind me, the tidal wave of adults convulsing, their bodies bulging and bursting, the full moon remoulding them until they're all Turned, while I fly on, light and free as a swift.

Turning. That's the official term. A very prim and proper word when you consider the gory flesh-erupting process it's referring to. More commonly known around here as 'getting long in the tooth', 'buying a real fur coat', 'coughing up a hairball', 'on the way to the vet' and so on. My personal favourite is 'digging in the litter tray'. And what you have, when all the eye-popping and hair-sprouting is done, are the beasts themselves: the Turned.

We generally use their nickname, which is Rippers. For obvious reasons. We don't keep them in cages for fun.

Other languages have their own names for them, of course, but no matter what you call them, they're the same across the world, and have been since the Disruption twenty-five years ago. Since then, every full moon, from dusk till dawn, everyone over the age of about fourteen, sometimes fifteen, Turns. *Almost* everyone, that is.

I won't bore you with the technical details, how they work out the exact night it's going to happen – but it's due to the 'synodic month', which is an average of twenty-nine and a half days. It has something to do with the precise moment the moon is fullest, and which dawn or dusk it's closest to. Suffice to say the nerds do the maths and it gets automatically added to your Seekle calendar. Your local council also makes sure no one can miss it. Rumour is that things get weird some places way up north. Like, they have months on end when the sun doesn't even rise, and with no dawn or dusk to trigger their bodies, Turning is unpredictable, glitchy. You might Turn for twenty-four hours, or it might be a whole week, before waking up dazed and drooling. How messed up is that?

'Oof, it feels worse tonight, don't you think?' I say.

Elena shrugs. She gets the doldrums a bit too, but always seems to be able to brush them off – tonight her knotted frown is gone and she holds herself straighter, swerving round potholes like a level-sixty Ripper on the

Extreme setting of Happy Trappers. She smiles to herself, her dimpled, round cheeks flushed a deep rose-bronze with the exhilaration of speed and the wind in her face. The doldrums definitely affect some people more than others. It probably helps that Confinement is the one night she doesn't have to worry about her dad.

Just before we get to Shady Oaks, the chain pings off my ancient bike, as it regularly does. Neither of us can get it back on, so we walk the short distance the rest of the way, before dumping the bikes on Shady Oaks' wide lawn, which is dotted with circular flowerbeds. The grounds run right down to the line of tall pines that mark the very edge of town and the start of the thick forest. The building itself is single-storey, modern brick, with shrubs against the walls. You can just about hear the hum of the waterfall – the river hurling itself down that sheer drop before continuing through a deep gulch away into the forest.

When we knock on the open door of Harold's room, he looks up from shuffling a pack of cards and his eyes light up. 'Ah! Finally! My willing victims!'

Harold's little terrier, Eddie, trots over to me and licks my leg. I tickle him behind the ears and he closes his eyes in bliss for a moment before curling up at Harold's feet again.

Harold is Immutable, which, as you know, is pretty rare. He's the only adult in Tremorglade, in fact, that doesn't Turn, though there are others scattered around

the world. Apparently, they tend to form little clubs, have Confinement pizza nights and stuff like that. When I say little, I do mean little – according to its website, the Hastaville Immutables Society has four members in a city of a hundred thousand.

But here in Tremorglade, Harold's only company is us. We got to know him properly a few years ago, when he fell over in the greengrocer's right in front of me and I helped him get to the Wellness Centre. We kind of hit it off – he's different from the other adults, and I don't just mean because he's Immutable. He doesn't hide his disdain for Mayor Warren, who as well as being a sort of ceremonial figure, is ultimately responsible for organizing Confinement night in Tremorglade – his council pairs adults with Caretakers and constantly nags us about following the guidelines.

Warren wants Harold to be more responsible, to make the most of his Immutability. So he tried to make Harold a community support officer, with the job of patrolling the streets on Confinement nights to check us kids were all behaving appropriately. Harold suggested that, instead, maybe Warren should check his own behaviour for the rest of the month when he wasn't Turned, because frankly the town's administration left a lot to be desired, and maybe he should focus on all that and leave the kids the heck alone.

Now, Harold raises an eyebrow at the state of me, but

merely declares that tonight's game is Go Fish. We watch as he deals, his trembling, liver-spotted hands sending the cards carefully in more or less the right direction, though Elena and I have to intercept one or two before they slide off the table. We go round a few times and, as ever, my luck is out. Then Harold asks Elena the question I was too scared to ask earlier.

'So, how's your dad's job search going?'

My stomach tightens. I keep my eyes on my cards but can't help holding my breath. Lucas has been job hunting online ever since his wife Valeria, Elena and Pedro's mum, died three years ago. Which would be fine, except that he's been searching for jobs as far away as Colmea, where Valeria grew up, and loads of other countries too. Anywhere but Tremorglade, in fact. Elena says he thinks they need a new start. She has mixed feelings about it, because it would mean leaving her best friend – me – but on the other hand, she's never been anywhere else, and thinks it might be kind of exciting. *Exciting?* Dangerous, more like.

'No luck,' she says, and I breathe again.

I don't get it. Elena and her family watch the news like the rest of us. They *know* what it's like out there. They see the crime levels rising, the Rotting Plague epidemics, the sudden weather anomalies that sweep away whole communities, leaving broken homes and broken people. In some towns, I've heard people are sloppy on

Confinement. In those places, it's the kids that have to take cover, while Rippers roam the streets mauling each other and killing livestock – and worse. In the morning, crows peck at the corpses. I saw it on a documentary and the images are burned into my brain.

We live in literally the safest little nook on the planet right now. Why would anyone give that up?

'Got any threes, Elena?' Harold asks. 'So how many jobs is that now?'

'Go fish. Twenty-two job applications in fifteen different towns,' she sighs. 'He keeps getting close, had a few video interviews, but then they give it to someone else at the last minute. It's really getting him down.'

Harold catches my eye. That's an understatement, and we all know it. The nights Lucas is howling to feed on human flesh are his best ones at the moment. In between applying for jobs online, he mostly sits watching the TV. Sometimes he cries, even when it's cartoons. Other times he gets angry and breaks stuff. He refuses to apply for jobs in Tremorglade. Luckily Pedro has a decent-paying job fixing computers, even though he's only nineteen. Otherwise there'd be no money coming into their family at all.

Not much gets past Harold. People talk to him, so he knows most things that go on round here, which is both good and bad. Good because he can see both sides of arguments and sometimes even fix problems for us, and