



WILDER GIRLS

**THE ISLAND
TAKES
EVERYTHING**

R O R Y P O W E R

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Power, Rory, author.

Title: Wilder girls / Rory Power.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2019] | Summary: Friends Hetty, Byatt, and Reece go to extremes trying to uncover the dark truth about the mysterious disease that has had them quarantined at their boarding school on a Maine island.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018039286 | ISBN 978-0-525-64558-0 (hc) |

ISBN 978-0-525-64559-7 (glb)

Subjects: | CYAC: Quarantine—Fiction. | Diseases—Fiction. | Survival—Fiction. | Boarding schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.P6947 Wil 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018039286>

The text of this book is set in 11.3-point Scala Pro.

Interior design by Betty Lew

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

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**ATTENTION, READER:
THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED ADVANCE EXCERPT**

WILDER GIRLS

RORY POWER

DELACORTE PRESS

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .

HETTY

CHAPTER 1

Something. Way out in the white-dark. Between the trees, moving where the thickets swarm. You can see it from the roof, the way the brush bends around it as it rustles to the ocean.

That size, it must be a coyote, one of the big ones hitting shoulder high. Teeth that fit like knives in the palm of my hand. I know because I found one once, the end of it just poking through the fence. Took it back and hid it under my bed.

One more crash through the brush and then the stillness again. Across the roof deck Byatt lowers her gun, rests it on the railing. Road clear.

I keep mine up, just in case, keep the sight raised to my left eye. My other eye's dead, gone dark in a flare-up. Lid fused shut, something growing underneath.

It's like that, with all of us here. Sick, strange, and we don't know why. Things bursting out of us, bits missing

and pieces sloughing off, and then we harden and smooth over.

Through the sight, noon sun bleaching the world, I can see the woods stretching out to the island's edge, the ocean beyond. Pines bristling thick like always, rising high above the house. Here and there, gaps where the oak and birch have shed their leaves, but most of the canopy is woven tight, needles stiff with frost. Only the radio antenna breaking through, useless now the signal's out.

Up the road someone yells, and out of the trees, there's Boat Shift coming home. It's only a few who can make the trip, all the way across the island to where the Navy delivers rations and clothes at the pier the ferries used to come and go from. The rest of us stay behind the fence, pray they make it home safe.

The tallest, Ms. Welch, stops at the gate and fumbles with the lock until at last, the gate swings open, and Boat Shift come stumbling in, cheeks red from the cold. All three of them back and all three of them bent under the weight of the cans and the meats and the sugar cubes. Welch turns to shut the gate behind her. Barely five years past the oldest of us, she's the youngest of the teachers. Before this she lived on our hall and looked the other way when somebody missed curfew. Now she counts us every morning to make sure nobody's died in the night.

She waves to give the all clear, and Byatt waves back. I'm gate. Byatt's road. Sometimes we switch, but my eye doesn't

do well looking far, so it never lasts. Either way I'm still a better shot than half the girls who could take my place.

The last Boat girl steps under the porch and out of sight, and that's the end of our shift. Unload the rifles. Stick the casings in the box for the next girl. Slip one in your pocket, just in case.

The roof slopes gently away from the flattop deck, third floor to second. From there we swing over the edge and through the open window into the house. It was harder in the skirts and socks we used to wear, something in us still telling us to keep our knees closed. That was a long time ago. Now, in our ragged jeans, there's nothing to mind.

Byatt climbs in behind me, leaving another set of scuff marks on the window ledge. She pushes her hair over one shoulder. Straight, like mine, and a bright living brown. And clean. Even when there's no bread, there's always shampoo.

"What'd you see?" she asks me.

I shrug. "Nothing."

Breakfast wasn't much, and I'm feeling the shake of hunger in my limbs. I know Byatt is too, so we're quick as we head downstairs for lunch, to the main floor, to the hall, with its big high ceilings. Scarred, tilting tables; a fireplace; and tall-backed couches, stuffing ripped out to burn for warmth. And us, full of us, humming and alive.

There were about a hundred girls when it started, and twenty teachers. All together we filled both wings off the old house. These days we only need one.

The Boat girls come banging through the front doors, letting their bags drop, and there's a scramble for the food. They send us cans, mostly, and sometimes packs of dried jerky. Barely ever anything fresh, never enough for everyone, and on an average day, meals are just Welch in the kitchen, unlocking the storage closet and parceling out the smallest rations you ever saw. But today's a delivery day, new supplies come home on the backs of the Boat Shift girls, and that means Welch and Headmistress keep their hands clean and let us fight for one thing each.

Byatt and me, though, we don't have to fight. Reese is right by the door, and she drags a bag off to the side for us. If it were somebody else, people would mind, but it's Reese—left hand with its sharp, scaled fingers—so everyone keeps quiet.

She was one of the last to get sick. I thought maybe it had missed her, maybe she was safe, and then they started. The scales, each a shifting sort of silver, unfolding out of her skin like they were coming from inside. The same thing happened to one of the other girls in our year. They spread across her whole body and turned her blood cold until she wouldn't wake up, so we thought it was the end for Reese, and they took her upstairs, waited for it to kill her. But it didn't. One day she's holed up in the infir-

mary, and the next she's back again, her left hand a wild thing but still hers.

Reese rips open the bag, and she lets me and Byatt root through it. My stomach clenching, spit thick around my tongue. Anything, I'd take anything. But we've got a bad one. Soap. Matches. A box of pens. A carton of bullets. And then, at the bottom, an orange—a real live orange, rot only starting to nip at the peel.

We snatch. Reese's silver hand on my collar, heat roiling under the scales, but I throw her to the floor, shove my knee against the side of her face. Bear down, trap Byatt's neck between my shoulder and my forearm. One of them kicks; I don't know who. Clocks me in the back of the head and I'm careening onto the stairs, nose against the edge with a crack. Pain fizzing white. Around us, the other girls yelling, hemming in.

Someone has my hair in her fist, tugging up, out. I twist, I bite where the tendons push against her skin, and she whines. My grip loosens. So does hers, and we scabble away from each other.

I shake the blood out of my eye. Reese is sprawled halfway up the staircase, the orange in her hand. She wins.

CHAPTER 2

We call it the Tox, and for the first few months, they tried to make it a lesson. Viral Outbreaks in Western Civilizations: a History. “Tox” as a Root in Latinate Languages. Pharmaceutical Regulations in the State of Maine. School like always, teachers standing at the board with blood on their clothes, scheduling quizzes as if we’d all still be there a week later. The world’s not ending, they said, and neither should your education.

Breakfast in the dining room. Math, English, French. Lunch, target practice. Physicals and first aid, Ms. Welch bandaging wounds and Headmistress pricking with needles. Together for dinner and then locked inside to last the night. No, I don’t know what’s making you sick, Welch would tell us. Yes, you’ll be fine. Yes, you’ll go home again soon.

That ended quickly. Classes falling off the schedule as

the Tox took teacher after teacher. Rules crumbling to dust and fading away, until only the barest bones were left. But still, we count the days, wake every morning to scan the sky for cameras and lights. People care on the mainland, that's what Welch always says. They've cared from the second Headmistress called Camp Nash on the coast for help, and they're looking for a cure. In the first shipment of supplies Boat Shift ever brought back, there was a note. Typed and signed, printed on the Navy's letterhead.

FROM: Secretary of the Navy, Department of Defense
Commanding Officer, Chemical/Biological Incident
Response Force (CBIRF), Camp Nash Director,
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
TO: Raxter School for Girls, Raxter Island
SUBJECT: Quarantine procedures as recommended by
the CDC

Implementation of a full isolation and quarantine effective immediately. Subjects to remain on school grounds at all times, for safety and to preserve conditions of initial contagion. Breach of school fence, save by authorized crew for supply retrieval (see below), violates terms of quarantine.

Termination of phone and internet access pending; communication to route only through official radio channels. Full classification of information in effect.

Supplies to arrive via drop-off at western pier. Date and time to be set via Camp Nash lighthouse.

Diagnostics and treatment in development. CDC cooperating with local facilities re: cure. Expect delivery.

Wait, and stay alive, and we thought it would be easy—together behind the fence, safe from the wildwood, safe from the animals grown savage and strange—but girls kept dropping. Flare-ups, which left their bodies too wrecked to keep breathing, left wounds that wouldn't heal, or sometimes, a violence like a fever, turning girls against themselves. It still happens like that. Only difference is now we've learned that all we can do is look after our own.

Reese and Byatt, they're mine and I'm theirs. It's them I pray for when I pass the bulletin board and brush two fingers against the note from the Navy, still pinned there yellowing and curling. A talisman, a reminder of the promise they made. The cure is coming, as long as we stay alive.

Reese digs a silver fingernail into the orange and starts peeling, and I force myself to look away. When food's fresh like that, we fight for it. She says it's the only fair way to settle things. No handouts, no pity. She'd never take it if it didn't feel earned.

Around us the other girls are gathering in swirls of high laughter, digging through the clothing that spills out of every bag. The Navy still sends us enough for the

full number. Shirts and tiny boots we don't have anybody small enough to wear them.

And jackets. They never stop sending jackets. Not since the frost began to coat the grass. It was only just spring when the Tox hit, and for that summer we were fine in our uniform skirts and button-downs, but winter came like it always does in Maine, bitter and long. Fires burning in daylight and the Navy-issue generators running after dark, until a storm broke them to bits.

"You've got blood on you," Byatt says. Reese slices off the tail of her shirt and tosses it onto my face. I press. My nose squelches.

A scrape above us, on the mezzanine over the main hall. We all look up. It's Mona from the year ahead of me, red hair and a heart-shaped face, back from being taken to the infirmary on the third floor. She's been up there for ages, since last season's flare-up, and I don't think anybody expected her to ever come back down. I remember how her face steamed and cracked that day, how they carried her to the infirmary with a sheet over her like she was already dead.

Now she has a lattice of scars across her cheeks and the beginning of an aura to her hair. Reese is like that, with her blond braid and the glow the Tox gave it, and it's so much hers that it's startling to see it on Mona.

"Hey," she says, unsteady on her feet, and her friends run over, all fluttering hands and smiles, plenty of space between them. It's not contagion we're afraid of—we all

have it already, whatever it is. It's seeing her break apart again. Knowing someday soon it'll happen to us. Knowing all we can do is hope we make it through.

"Mona," her friends say, "so glad you're okay." But I watch them let the conversation drop, watch them drift out into the last daylight hours and leave Mona stranded on the couch, staring at her knees. There's no room for her with them anymore. They got used to her being gone.

I look over at Reese and Byatt, kicking at the same splinter in the stairs. I don't think I could ever get used to being without them.

Byatt gets up, an odd little frown creasing her brow. "Wait here," she says, and goes over to Mona.

They talk for a minute, the two of them, Byatt bending so her voice can slide right into Mona's ear, the shine of Mona's hair washing Byatt's skin red. And then Byatt straightens, and Mona presses her thumb against the inside of Byatt's forearm. They both look rattled. Just a little, but I see it.

"Afternoon, Hetty."

I turn around. It's Headmistress, the angles in her face even sharper now than they used to be. Gray hair twined tight in a bun, her shirt buttoned up to her chin. And a stain around her mouth, faint pink from the blood that's always oozing out of her lips. Her and Welch—the Tox is different with them. It doesn't cut them down the way it did the other teachers; it doesn't change their bodies the

way it does ours. Instead, it wakes weeping sores on their tongues, sets a tremor in their limbs that won't go away.

“Good afternoon,” I say to Headmistress. She's let a lot of things slide, but manners aren't any of them.

She nods across the hall, to where Byatt is still bent over Mona. “How's she doing?”

“Mona?” I say.

“No, Byatt.”

Byatt hasn't had a flare-up since late summer, and she's due for one soon. They cycle in seasons, each one worse than before until we can't bear it anymore. After her last one, though, I can't imagine something worse. She doesn't look any different—just a sore throat she can't shake and that serrated ridge of bone down her back, bits of it peeking through her skin—but I remember every second of it. How she bled through our old mattress until it dripped onto the floorboards underneath our bunk. How she looked more confused than anything as the skin over her spine split open.

“She's fine,” I say. “It's getting about time, though.”

“I'm sorry to hear it,” Headmistress says. She watches Mona and Byatt a little longer, frowning. “I didn't know you girls and Mona were friends.”

Since when has she cared about that? “Friendly, I guess.”

Headmistress looks at me like she's surprised I'm still standing there. “Lovely,” she says, and then she starts

across the main hall, down the corridor to where her office is hidden away.

Before the Tox we saw her every day, but since then, she's either pacing up in the infirmary or locked in her office, glued to the radio, talking to the Navy and the CDC.

There was never any cell reception here in the first place—character building, according to the brochures—and they cut the landline that first day of the Tox. To keep things classified. To manage information. But at least we could speak to our families on the radio, and we could hear our parents crying for us. Until we couldn't anymore. Things were getting out, the Navy said, and measures had to be taken.

Headmistress didn't bother comforting us. It was well past comfort by then.

Her office door's shutting and locking behind her when Byatt comes back over to us.

"What was that?" I ask. "With Mona."

"Nothing." She pulls Reese to her feet. "Let's go."

Raxter is on a big plot of land, on the eastern tip of the island. The school has water on three sides, the gate on the fourth. And beyond it the woods, with the same kind of pine and spruce we have on the grounds, but tangled and thick, new trunks wrapping around the old ones. Our side of the fence is neat and clean like it was before—it's only us that's different.

Reese leads us across the grounds, to the point of the island, rocks scrubbed bare by the wind and pieced together like a turtle's shell. Now we sit there side by side by side, Byatt in the middle, the chilled breeze whipping her loose hair out in front of us. It's calm today, sky a clear sort of not-blue, and there's nothing in the distance. Beyond Raxter, the ocean drops deep, swallowing sandbanks and pulling currents. No ships, no land on the horizon, no reminder that the rest of the world is still out there, going on without us, everything still the way it always was.

"How are you feeling?" says Byatt. She's asking because two mornings ago the scar across my blind eye bloomed wide. It's left over from the early days, a reminder of the ways we didn't understand what was happening to us.

My first flare-up blinded my right eye and fused it shut, and I thought that was all, until something started to grow underneath. A third eyelid, that's what Byatt thought it was. It didn't hurt, just itched like hell, but I could feel something moving. That's why I tried to tear it open.

It was stupid. The scar is proof enough of that. I barely remember any of it, but Byatt says I dropped my rifle in the middle of Gun Shift and started clawing at my face like something had taken hold of me, working my fingernails between my crusted eyelashes and ripping at my skin.

The scar's mostly healed, but every now and then it splits open and blood weeps down over my cheek, pink and watery with pus. During Gun Shift I've got plenty else to think about, and it's not so bad, but now I can feel my

heartbeat in my skin. Infected, maybe. Though that's the least of our worries.

"Can you stitch it for me?" I'm trying not to sound anxious, but she hears it anyway.

"That bad?"

"No, just—"

"Did you even clean it?"

Reese makes a satisfied sound. "I told you not to leave it open."

"Come here," Byatt says. "Let me see."

I shift around on the rocks until she's kneeling and my chin's lifted to her. She runs her fingers along the wound, brushing my eyelid. Something underneath it flinches.

"Looks like it hurts," she says, pulling a needle and thread from her pocket. They're always with her, ever since my eye first scarred over. Of the three of us she's closest to turning seventeen, and at times like this you can tell. "Okay. Don't move."

She slips the needle in and there's pain, but it's small enough, the cold air wicking it away. I try to wink at her, make her smile, but she shakes her head, a frown hanging on her brows.

"I said don't move, Hetty."

And it's fine, Byatt and me, and she's staring at me like I'm staring at her, and I'm safe, safe because she's here, until she digs the needle in too deep and I buckle, my whole body folding in. Pain blinding and everywhere.

Around me the world's gone water. I can feel blood leaking into my ear.

"Oh my God," she says. "Hetty, are you okay?"

"It's only stitches," says Reese. She's lying back on the rocks, her eyes closed. Shirt riding up so I can see a pale strip of stomach, stark through the dizzy blur. She's never cold, not even on days like this when our breaths hang in the air.

"Yeah," I say. Reese's hand never gives her trouble, not like my eye does me, and I smooth a snarl off my lips. There's enough to fight about without picking at this. "Keep going."

Byatt starts to say something when there's a yell from near the garden. We turn around to see if somebody's had their first. Raxter runs sixth grade through high school, or it did, so our youngest girls are thirteen now. Eleven when this whole mess began, and now it's started to take them apart.

But there's nothing wrong, just Dara from our year, the girl with the webbed fingers, waiting where the rocks start. "Shooting," she calls to us. "Miss Welch says it's shooting time."

"Come on." Byatt ties off my stitches and gets up, holds out her hand to me. "I'll do the rest of your eye after dinner."

We had shooting before the Tox, too, a tradition left over from the start of the school, but it wasn't like it is now. Only the seniors—and Reese, best shot on the island, born to it like she was born to everything on Raxter—got to go into the woods with Mr. Harker and fire at the soda cans he'd line up along the ground. The rest of us got a class on gun safety, which usually turned into a free period when Mr. Harker inevitably ran late.

But then the Tox took Mr. Harker. Took Reese's firing hand and changed it so she couldn't grip the trigger anymore. And shooting stopped being shooting and turned into target practice, because now there are things we have to kill. Every few afternoons, as the sun comes back to earth, one by one, firing away until we hit a target dead center.

We have to be ready, Welch says. To protect ourselves, each other. During the first winter, a fox got through the fence, just slipped between the bars. Afterward, the Gun Shift girl said it reminded her of her dog back home, and that's why she couldn't take the shot. That's why the fox made it through the grounds to the patio. That's why it cornered the youngest girl left living and tore out her throat.

We practice out in the barn, near the island's point, with its big sliding doors open on each end so the stray shots fly into the ocean. There used to be horses, four of them, but early in the first season, we noticed how the Tox was starting to get inside them like it got inside us, how it was pushing their bones through their skin, how

it was stretching their bodies until they screamed. So we led them out to the water and shot them. The stalls are empty now, and we pile into them to wait our turn. You have to fire at the target, and you're not allowed to stop until you've hit the bull's-eye.

Ms. Welch keeps most of the guns locked in a storage closet in the house, along with the bullets the Navy started sending once they heard about the animals, so there's only a shotgun and a carton of shells out here for all of us, laid out on a table made from sawhorses and a thin plywood plank. Not like the rifles we shoot with during Gun Shift, but Welch always says a gun's a gun, and every time, it makes a muscle in Reese's jaw twitch.

I hoist myself up onto the door of a stall, feel it swing as Byatt jumps up next to me. Reese slouches between us. She's not allowed to shoot because of her hand, but she's here every day, tense and quiet and watching the target.

At some point the order was alphabetical but we've all lost things, eyes and hands and last names. Now it's the oldest girls who go first. We get through them quickly, most of them good enough to hit home in only a few shots. Julia and Carson both done in two, an endless, mortifying wait as Landry takes more than I can count, and then it's our year. Byatt makes it in three. Respectable, but there's a reason they pair her with me on Gun Shift. If she doesn't hit her target, I will.

She hands the shotgun to me, and I blow on my hands to work the feeling back in before I take her place, lift the

shotgun to my shoulder, and aim. Breathe in, focus, and breathe out, finger squeezing tight. The sound rattles through me. It's easy. It's the only thing I've ever been better at than Byatt.

"Good, Hetty," Welch calls. Somebody at the back of the crowd repeats it, singsong and laughing. I roll my eye, leave the shotgun on the makeshift table, and join Reese and Byatt again by the stable door.

It's usually Cat who goes next, but there's a little shuffle, a whimper, and someone shoves Mona out into the middle. She stumbles a step or two and then rights herself, scanning the faces of the girls around her for some ounce of pity. She won't find any—we keep it for ourselves these days.

"Can I have a pass?" she says, turning to Welch. There's a waxy calm on Mona's face, but a fidget in her body. She almost made it, almost got by with skipping her turn. But the rest of us won't let it happen. And neither will Welch.

"Afraid not." Welch shakes her head. "Let's go."

Mona says something else, but it's too low for anybody to hear, and she goes to the table. The gun is laid out. All Mona has to do is point and shoot. She lifts the gun, cradles it in the crook of her arm like it's a doll.

"Any day now." From Welch.

Mona levels it at the target and sneaks a finger onto the trigger. We're all quiet. Her hands are shaking. Somehow she's keeping the gun aimed right, but the strain is tearing at her.

“I can’t,” she whimpers. “I don’t . . . I can’t.” She lowers the shotgun, looks my way.

And that’s when they slice, three deep cuts on the side of her neck, like gills. No blood. Just a pulse in them with every breath, the twitch of something moving under her skin.

Mona doesn’t scream. Doesn’t make a noise. She just drops. Flat on her back, mouth gasping open. She’s still looking at me, her chest rising slow. I can’t look away, not as Welch hurries over, not as she kneels at Mona’s feet and takes her pulse.

“Get her to her room,” she says. Her room, and not the infirmary, because only the worst of us wind up there. And Mona’s been sicker than this before. We all have.

The Boat Shift girls, marked out by the knives they’re allowed to keep stuck in their belt loops, they step away from the rest. Always them, and they take Mona’s arms. Haul her up, lead her away, back to the house.

Chatter, and a break as we start to follow, but Welch clears her throat.

“Ladies,” she says, and she drags it out like she used to do during dorm checks. “Did I dismiss you?” Nobody answers, and Welch picks up the shotgun, gives it to the first girl in the order. “We’ll start again. From the top.”

There’s no surprise in any of us. We left it someplace and forgot where. So we line up, we wait, and we take our shots, and we feel the warmth—Mona’s warmth—seeping out of the shotgun and into our hands.

Dinner is scattered and fraying. Usually, we manage at least to sit in the same room, but today we get our rations from Welch and then split, some here in the hall and others in the kitchen, crowded around the old woodstove, the last of the curtains burning to keep them warm. After days like this and girls like Mona, we peel apart and wonder who's next.

I'm by the stairs, propped up against the banister. The three of us were last to get food today, and there was barely anything good left: just the ends of a loaf of bread, both slimy with mold. Byatt looked about ready to cry when that was all I brought back—neither of us got anything for lunch, not when Reese won that orange fair and square—but luckily, Carson from Boat Shift gave me some expired soup. We're waiting for the can opener to come our way so we can eat, and until then, there's Reese on the floor trying to nap, and Byatt looking up to where you can just see the door that bars the staircase up to the third-floor infirmary.

It used to be the servants' quarters back when the house was first built. Six rooms branching off a narrow hallway, with a roof deck above it and the double height main hall below. You can only get there using the staircase off the second-floor mezzanine, and it's locked behind a low, tilting door.

I don't like looking at it, don't like thinking of the sickest girls tucked away, don't like that there isn't room for

everyone. And I don't like how every door up there locks from the outside. How, if you wanted to, you could keep someone in.

Instead, I stare across the main hall, to the glass walls of the dining room. Long empty tables ripped apart for kindling, silverware dumped into the ocean to keep the knives away from us. It used to be my favorite room in the house. Not on my first day, when I had nowhere to sit, but every one after I'd come in for breakfast and see Byatt saving me a seat. She had a single our first year, and she liked to get up early, take walks around the grounds. I'd meet her in the dining room, and she'd have toast waiting for me. Before Raxter, I ate it with butter, but Byatt showed me jam was better.

Cat catches my eye from across the room, and she holds up the can opener. I push off the banister and pick my way toward her, skirting where a quartet of girls are arranged in a square on the floor, their heads resting on one another's stomachs as they try to make one another laugh.

"Saw you got Carson to cave," Cat says as I approach. Black hair, so straight and fine, and dark considering eyes. She's had some of the worst of the Tox. Weeks in the infirmary, hands bound to keep her from clawing at her skin as it boiled and bubbled. She still has the scars, pockmarks of white all over her body, and blisters that bloom and bleed fresh every season.

I look away from a new one on her neck and smile.

“Didn’t take much.” She gives me the can opener, and I tuck it in my waistband, under my shirt so nobody can steal it from me on my way back to the stairs. “You guys good? You warm enough?” She’s only got the detachable fleece lining of her friend Lindsay’s jacket. The two of them had bad luck in the last clothing draw, and nobody manages to keep a blanket around here for long unless you never take your eyes off it.

“We’re all right,” Cat says. “Thanks for asking. And hey, with your soup, make sure the can’s not bulging at the lid. We’ve got enough to worry about besides botulism.”

“I’ll pass that on.”

That’s Cat, kind in her own way. She’s from our year, and her mom’s in the Navy like my dad. Raxter and Camp Nash are the only life for miles up here, and over the years they’ve twined so close that Raxter gives a scholarship to Navy girls. It’s the only reason I’m here. The only reason Cat’s here. We took the bus down to the airport together at the end of every quarter, her on her way to the base in San Diego, and me on mine to the base in Norfolk. She never saved me a seat, but when I sidled in next to her, she’d smile and let me fall asleep on her shoulder.

I’m just sitting down next to Byatt again when there’s a commotion by the front door, where Landry’s girls are clustered. You can break the whole of us into maybe eleven or twelve parts—some bigger, some smaller—and the largest group is centered around Landry, two years above me and from an old Boston family, older even than

Byatt's. She's never liked us much, not since she complained that there were no boys on the island, and Reese gave her the blankest look I've ever seen and said, "Plenty of girls, though."

It made something jump in my chest, something I can still feel at night when Reese's braid casts a rippling glow on the ceiling. A reaching. A wish.

But she's too far away. She's always been too far.

Somebody yelps, and we watch as the group shuffles and knits itself into a ring, clustered thick around a body laid out on the floor. I bend down, try to get a glimpse. Glossy brown hair, frame frail and angular.

"I think it's Emmy," I say. "She's having her first."

Emmy was in sixth grade when the Tox happened, and one by one the other girls in her year have crashed headlong into puberty, their first flare-ups screaming and bursting like fireworks. Now it's finally her turn.

We listen as she whimpers, her body trembling and seizing. I wonder what she'll get, if it's anything at all. Gills like Mona's, blisters like Cat's, maybe bones like Byatt's or a hand like Reese's, but sometimes the Tox doesn't give you anything—just takes and takes. Leaves you drained and withering.

At last, quiet, and the group around Emmy starts to clear. She looks all right, for a first flare-up. Her legs wobble as she gets to her feet, and even from here, I can see her veins in her neck standing out dark, like they're bruises.