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Opening extract from

Contagion

Written by

Teri Terry

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TERI TERRY

contagion

ORCHARD

ORCHARD BOOKS

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XANDER

DESERTRON, TEXAS
1993

Eroooo … Eroooo … Eroooo …

Alarms reverberate through my skull, high-pitched and insistent. I scramble out of bed. Disbelief fights reality: how do you think the unthinkable? The fail-safes have failed. This is really happening.

We run.

Henri barks orders; Lena and I rush to comply. My hands are shaking on the controls, fear and adrenalin rushing through my body, but we've nearly finished the manual shutdown now. It'll be all right, we'll be all—

BANG

Waves of sound knock us from our feet. *Intense* cold. Shards of metal fly towards us, and worse.

Much, much worse.

It gets out.

It finds us.

There is pain.

PAIN

PAIN

Screams mingle and join, to become one – Lena's, Henri's, mine. Three sing together, in the perfect pitch of agony.

But then my voice fades away. A duet of pain is left behind.

Cells, tissues and organs are destroyed from the inside out, a chain reaction that rips them apart. A brief moment of lucidity at the end shows what could have been, before Henri and Lena – friends, colleagues, brilliant scientists, both of them – slip away. *Lena, my Lena*. Dead.

I survive. They're gone, but their last moments are imprinted inside me, for ever.

No one notices how I am changed – the things I've lost, the skills I've gained. Part pleasure, part curse.

My new senses register waves I liken to sound and colour; they come from all things – inanimate, animate, human. *Especially* human.

Each man, woman and child has their own unique pattern that emanates from them, without their knowledge – more individual than fingerprints, more telling than thoughts or actions. It's as if I can see their very *soul*. Their Vox, I call it – a voice they do not know they have.

But I do. And with knowledge comes power.

And I want *more*; always more.

To know all that can be known.

First came the accident. Then came the plan …

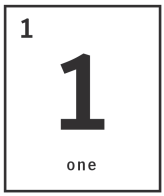
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
P	R	E	S	E	N	T	D	A	Y
one	two	three	four	five	six	seven	eight	nine	ten

PART 1

THE STRAY

The state of Schrödinger's cat is not the paradox he thought. If the finite, observable world is left behind – and the infinite accepted – the cat may live and die, both at once.

Xander, *Multiverse Manifesto*



SUBJECT 369X

SHETLAND INSTITUTE, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 32 hours

They say I'm sick, and I need to be cured. But I don't feel sick. Not any more.

They wear shiny onesies that cover everything, from their shoes to the paper hats that hide their hair, making them look strange and alien – more Doctor Who villains than anything human. They reach hands to me through heavy gloves in the transparent wall, push me into the wheelchair, and do up the straps that hold me in it tight.

They wear masks, as do I, but theirs stop air getting to them from outside, in case whatever it is they are afraid of makes it through the wall, the gloves and the suit. They can still talk in murmurs behind an internal breathing thing, and think they can choose for me to hear what they say, or not, by flicking a switch. They needn't bother; I can hear enough. More than I want to.

My mask is different. It stills my tongue. It lets me breathe, but stops me from speaking – as if any words I might say are dangerous.

I don't remember coming to this place, or where I came

from. There are things I know, like that my name is Callie, that I'm twelve years old, that they are scientists searching for answers that I may be able to give. When things have been very bad, I've held on to my name, saying *Callie, Callie* over and over again, inside. As if as long as I can remember my name, all the forgotten things don't matter; at least, not so much. As long as I have a name, I am here; I am me. Even if they don't use it.

And the other thing I know is that today, I'm going to be cured.

My wheelchair is covered in a giant bubble, sealed all around with me inside, and a door is opened. Dr 6 comes in and pushes my enclosed chair out through the door, while Nurse 11 and Dr 1 walk alongside.

The others seem awed that Dr 1 is here. Whenever he speaks, his voice like velvet, like chocolate and cream and Christmas morning all together, they rush to do as he says. He is like me – known only by a number. The others all have names, but in my mind I number them. They call me Subject 369X, so it only seems fair.

I can walk; I'd tell them, if I could speak, but I'm wheeled along a corridor. Nurse 11 seems upset, and turns. She walks back the way we came.

Then we stop. Dr 1 pushes a button in the wall, and metal doors open. Dr 6 pushes me in. They follow and the doors close behind us, and then another opens, and another, until finally they push me into a dark room. They turn and go back through the last door. It shuts with a *whoosh* behind them, leaving me alone in darkness.

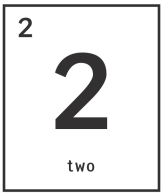
Moments later, one wall starts to glow. A little at first, then more, and I can see. I'm in a small square room. Empty. No windows. Apart from the glowing wall, it is a blank.

There is no medicine, no doctors, needles or knives, and I'm glad.

But then the cure starts.

I'd scream if I could make a sound.

Callie, Callie, Callie, Callie …



SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 31 hours

I shrink down behind the shelves, but it's too late – they saw me.

I bolt to the left, then stop abruptly. Duncan stands at the end of the aisle. I spin around the other way – again, too late. His two sidekicks, the ones I'd seen over the shelves, are there now. Not good: no one else is in sight.

'Well, well. Look, guys: if it isn't *my Sharona*.' Duncan swaggers towards me, while the other two start to sing the song, complete with pelvic thrusts. Nice touch. I'd hoped when I moved to Scotland last year that they wouldn't find out my real name. I'd hoped that if they did, they wouldn't know the song. I mean, how old is 'My Sharona', anyway? About a million years? But as if I wasn't weird enough already, someone found out, and someone else played it on the school bus. And that was it for me.

'How about it, baby?' Duncan says, and guffaws.

'Just as soon as you grow one, loser.' I scowl and try to push past him, but it was never going to be that easy, was it?

He grabs my arm and pushes me against a shelf. I face him,

make myself smile. Duncan smiles back, surprised, and it makes me angry, so *angry* that I'm letting him get to me – letting myself be scared of this idiot. And I use the fear and the anger to draw my knee up and slam it between his, hard.

He drops to the floor in the foetal position, and groans.

'Well, my mistake. I guess you have one, after all.'

I run for the door, but an old lady with a walker is coming through it just as I get there. I cut to the side to avoid knocking into her, and slam into the wall.

The guy behind the till by the door glares, and I turn, rubbing my shoulder, and realise I've knocked the community noticeboard to the floor. I glance back, but there's no sign of them; Duncan's mates must still be helping him up off the floor.

'Sorry, I'm sorry,' I say, and bend to pick it up and lean it against the wall. As I do, a few notices that have come loose flutter to the floor, but I've got to get out of here.

That's when I see her.

That girl. She's staring up at me from a paper on the floor.

Long dark, almost black, hair. Blue eyes, unforgettable both from the striking colour that doesn't seem to go with her dark hair, and the haunted look that stares at me right from the page – the same way she did that day. Not a trace of a smile.

I hear movement behind me, and shove the paper in my pocket and run for the door. I sprint across the road to where I locked my bike and fiddle frantically with the lock; it clicks off. I get on my bike just as they're nearing, and pump the pedals as hard as I can. They're getting close, a hand is reaching out; they're going to catch me.

Fear makes me pick up speed, just enough. I pull away.

I glance back over my shoulder. His sidekicks have stopped running; they're wheezing. Duncan follows more slowly behind.

In case they have a car and cut me off, I don't go straight

home. I veer off-road to the cycle path, and then take an unmarked branch for the long, twisty hill through the woods: up, up, and more up.

The familiar effort of miles settles my nerves, makes what happened begin to fade, but honestly: what was my mother thinking, naming me Sharona? Not a thought I am having for the first time. As if I didn't stand out enough with my London accent, and knowing the kind of stuff I should hide at school but too often forget to – like the crazy way quantum particles, the teeniest tiniest things in existence, can act like both waves *and* particles at the same time; and – my current favourite – the structure of DNA, the genetic code that makes my hair dark and curly and Duncan such a jerk. And as if calling me Sharona wasn't bad enough, Mum will tell anyone who'll listen why I got the name from the song. How I was conceived in a field at the back of a Knack concert.

No matter how I try to get everyone to call me Shay, even my friends sometimes can't resist *Sharona*. As soon as I'm eighteen – in a year, four months and six days – I'm changing my name by deed poll.

I stop near the top of the hill. The late-afternoon sun is starting to wane, to cool, and I need to go soon, but I always stop here.

That's when I remember: the girl. The paper I'd shoved in my pocket.

It had been just here, almost a year ago, that I saw her. I was leaning against this same curved tree that is just the right angle to be a good backrest. My bike was next to me, like it is now.

Then something caught my eye: a moving spot, seen below me now and then through gaps in the trees. I probably only saw her as soon as I did because of the bright red of something she was wearing. Whoever she was, she was walking up the

hill, and I frowned. This is *my* spot, picked precisely because of the crazy hill that no one wants to walk or cycle up. Who was invading my space?

But as she got closer I could see she was just a kid, much younger than me. Maybe ten or eleven years old. Wearing jeans, a red hoody, hood down with thick dark hair down her back. And there was something about her that drew the eye. She walked up the hill at a good pace, determinedly, without fuss or extra movement. Without looking around her. Without smiling.

When she got close, I called out. 'Hello. Are you lost?'

She jumped violently, a wild look on her face as her eyes hunted for the source of the voice.

I stood up, waved. 'It's just me; don't be scared. Are you lost?'

'No,' she said, composed again, and kept walking.

And I shrugged, and let her go. At first. But then I started to worry. This path leads to a quiet road, miles and miles from anywhere, and it's a long walk back the way she came. Even if she turned around now it'd probably be dark before she got there.

I got my bike, wheeled it and followed behind her on foot. Ahead of me she stopped when she reached the road, and looked both ways. Right leads back to Killin – this is the way I generally go from here, flying down the hill on the tarmac. Left is miles to nowhere. She turned left. I remember thinking, *She must be lost. If she won't talk to me, I should call the police or something*.

I tried again. 'Hello? There's nothing that way. Where are you going?'

No answer. I stopped, leant my bike against a tree on the side of the road and took off my pack, bent down to rummage

around in it for my phone. My fingers closed round it just as a dark car came from the direction of Killin. It passed me, slowed and stopped.

A man got out.

'There you are,' he said to the girl. 'Come.'

She stopped in her tracks. He held out a hand; she walked towards him, but didn't take it. He opened the back door and she got in. The man got into the driver's seat, and the car pulled away seconds later.

I remember I'd felt relieved. I didn't want to call the police and have to talk to them and get involved. Mum and I were heading out the next morning for our summer away, backpacking in Europe, and I still had to pack. But I was uneasy, too. It was weird, wasn't it? That was a long walk for a kid that age, all on her own. The way he'd said, *There you are*, it was like she'd been misplaced. Or run away. And if she'd really been lost, wouldn't she have smiled or seemed happy when she'd been found?

But how many times would I have liked to run away from home at that age? Or even now. It wasn't my business.

I cycled home, and forgot about it.

Until today.

I take the scrunched paper out of my pocket. It's dusty, like it's been hanging on that board for ever. I smooth it out, and draw in a sharp breath. It's definitely her, but it is the words above her image that are making my stomach twist.

Calista, age 11. Missing.

She's *missing*? I feel sick, and lower myself down to sit on the ground and read the rest of it. She's been missing since last June 29th: almost a year ago. She was wearing –

I swallow, hard – a red hoody and jeans when last seen, just miles from here.

Oh my God.

When *exactly* did I see her? Was it before or after she went missing? I think, really hard, but can't come up with a date. I know it was around then – we break up early for summer in Scotland. Mum and I had left one day the week after school finished, but I can't remember what day.

She couldn't have been missing yet, could she? Because we'd have heard about it if we'd still been at home. It would have been all over the news.

Underneath her photo are these words: *If you think you've seen Calista, or have any information about her disappearance at all, no matter how minor it may seem, please: call this number. We love her and want her back*.

SUBJECT 369X

SHETLAND INSTITUTE, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 30 hours

There is *pain*, like no other pain before. It sears not just flesh but every thought and feeling from my mind, leaving only one word behind: *Callie, Callie, Callie*. Naming myself to try to hold on to who I am, but all I am is pain. Flames eat my skin, my lungs, every soft part of me.

And then, abruptly, the pain stops. The flames carry on, and I'm above myself now. I see my body and the chair. The fire must be so hot; even my bones burn. Soon they are rendered to ash along with the rest of me.

Am I dead?

I must be. Mustn't I?

I stand in fire, and feel no pain. Living things can't do that. I hold out a hand, and I can see it – it soothes my eyes, cool darkness in the midst of an inferno. I look down: my legs are there, dark and whole.

After a time, the flames stop. Shimmers of heat fade away, and the brightness of the walls fades.

I explore the walls, every inch, the floor and ceiling, too, but there is no way out of this place. I lie on the floor and stare

at the ceiling; then, bored, I lie on the ceiling and stare at the floor. Gravity doesn't seem to apply to whatever I am now. But if I was a ghost, I could sail through the walls, couldn't I? And get out of here. But no matter how I push, I can't get through. The walls taste of metal, many feet thick.

4

4

four

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 29 hours

'I'm home,' I yell, and kick off my shoes and start for the stairs, breathing hard. No phone on me today, I'd pedalled home as fast as I could.

Mum comes into the hall. 'So I see. Have you been forgetting the milk again, then?'

'Uh, not exactly,' I say, not wanting to get into a long explanation when something else can't wait.

'Honestly, Sharona, for someone who is supposed to be so smart, I don't know what is in that wee head of yours sometimes.'

'*Shay*. Please, call me Shay.'

She rolls her eyes, laughs, then looks at me more closely. 'Is something wrong?'

For all that she drives me crazy, Mum is good at that kind of stuff. Like the hippy throwback that she is, she's standing there in some sort of long skirt; her dark hair is curly like mine, but where mine is cropped at my shoulders hers hangs down to her waist, and there are long strings of beads around her neck. She's one to talk about forgetting things; half the time

she'd forget to eat if I didn't remind her. But she notices the important stuff.

'Yes. Something's very wrong.'

'Is it those boys bothering you again?'

'No. Well, not really. It's this.' I pull the crumpled paper out of my pocket. She smooths it out, reads it. Looks back at me with a question in her eyes.

'I saw her; I saw this girl. I have to call them.'

'Tell me.' So I tell her the whole story, everything, while she draws me into the kitchen, and makes a special herbal tea that is supposed to be good for nerves. It tastes pretty rough.

'Are you *sure* it was this girl? That was a long time ago: were you paying attention? Are you very sure?'

'Yes.'

'This isn't one of those crazy stories your Iona reports on her blog, is it, Shay?' she says, hesitantly. 'You're not getting confused between one of them and this, are you?'

'Of course not!'

'I just had to make sure. I believe you.'

'What day did we go away last year?'

She frowns, thinking. Then she rummages in a bottom drawer, and holds up last year's calendar. She opens it, and … her face falls. 'It was the thirtieth of June.'

'So the day I saw her was the twenty-ninth – the day it says she went missing.'

'Do you want me to call them?'

I shake my head. 'No. I'll do it.'

She gets the phone, and holds it out.

I dial the number, hands shaking a little. If only I *had* called the police that day; if that car had been a minute later, I would have. But was it even after she went missing that I saw her? Maybe that man I saw was her dad. Maybe she went missing

later that day, and nothing I could have done would have changed anything.

It rings – once, twice, three times, four times. I look at Mum, shake my head. Finally it picks up.

'Hello. Sorry we can't answer just now, please leave a message at the beep.' A warm voice, male; accent posh English, with a touch of something foreign.

'It's a machine,' I hiss to Mum, wondering what to say.

Beep.

'Uh, hi. I saw this flier in a shop. About a girl named Calista. And—'

'Hello, hello? This is Kai Tanzer. I'm Calista's brother. Do you know where she is?' His voice is the one from the machine, his words out in a rush, full of hope. Without even knowing who he is or anything about him, I hate to crush that hope.

'No, I'm sorry. I don't know where she is. But I saw her.'

'Where? When?'

'It wasn't recently. I just found your flier today, but it was on the twenty-ninth of June last year that I saw her, the day it says she went missing.' A flier that was pinned to a shop board I must have walked past a hundred times since then, and not noticed. 'It was late afternoon. She was walking, and got into a car with a man. I thought it was her father.' Did I? Did I *really*, or am I just covering for the fear that if I had questioned what was going on, I could have stopped something happening to her?

'Oh. I see.' There is pain in his voice. 'She was missing in the morning, so this was after. Do you remember what he looked like?'

'I think so.'

'Where are you?'

‘Just outside Killin, in Stirlingshire. Scotland.’ I give him our address, tell him the single track road to follow, explain the hill. Our lane, with the signpost to *Addy’s Folly*.

‘Wait. Right there. I’m coming to talk to you. Don’t go anywhere, do you promise?’

‘I’ll be here.’

‘It’ll take me about two, maybe two and a half, hours to get there. What’s your name?’

‘Shay.’

The line cuts off.

5

5

five

SUBJECT 369X

SHETLAND INSTITUTE

Time Zero: 28 hours

Time ticks slowly by.

Finally, something moves. A door starts to open on one of the walls, and I shrink into a corner of the room. Suited figures come in.

They ignore me, and after a while I come out of my corner. I wave my hands in front of one of their faces; no reaction.

They have instruments and are testing the ash on the floor, taking little scoops and putting it in some sensor. They seem happy, and out comes a broom. That's a little low tech. They sweep what is left of my body into a pile, and then pull in a silver piece of equipment, attach a nozzle, and then … oh. It's a fancy Hoover. They hoover me up. Just like that. Gone.

They take the bag out of the Hoover, and write 'Subject 369X' on the bag.

And now I'm angry. *So angry*.

'It's Callie!' I shout.

They stop, uneasy. Look at each other, then shrug and carry on gathering up their equipment. They start out the door,

with me close behind. I don't want to get trapped in this empty place.

Their reaction said that they could hear me, at least a little. Whatever I am now, my mask is gone – I can talk, and it is so long since I've had a voice that finding it makes me happy.

I can sing! I begin a song one of the nurses sometimes sang when I was in bed, sick, and one of the techs starts to whistle along in time.