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Opening extract from

Slated

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SLATED

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To Graham
who didn't know what he was getting into,
but always came along, just the same.

PROLOGUE

I run.

Fists of waves claw the sand as I force one foot to pound after the other. Scramble up, slip down, repeat. Faster. Eyes fixed on dunes ahead. Don't look back. Mustn't look. Ragged breath; in, out; in, out. Still I run.

Just when lungs might burst and heart explode, a crimson star on the sand, I stumble.

A man turns back. He pulls me to my feet and urges me on.

It's getting closer.

I cannot stand, and fall again. I can run no more.

He kneels to hold me, and looks in my eyes. 'It's time. Quick, now! Put up the wall.'

Closer.

So I build it, brick by brick. Row by row. A high tower, like Rapunzel's, but this has no window, nowhere to lower my hair.

No chance of rescue.

'Never forget who you are!' he shouts, grips my shoulders and shakes me, hard.

A blanket of terror obliterates the sea. The sand. His words, the bruises on my arms and pain in my chest and legs.

It's here.

CHAPTER ONE

Weird.

All right, I haven't got much experience on which to base this judgement. I may be sixteen and I'm not slow or backward and haven't been locked in a cupboard since birth – so far as I know – but Slating does that to you. Makes you lacking in experience.

It takes a while for everything to stop being firsts. First words, first steps, first spider on the wall, first stubbed toe. You get the idea: first *everything*.

So today feeling weird and unknown could just be that.

But I am biting my nails and sitting here waiting for Mum, Dad and Amy to pick me up at hospital and take me home, and I don't know who they are. I don't know where 'home' is. I don't know *nothing*. How can that not be…weird?

Bzzzz: a gentle warning vibration from the Levo at

my wrist. I look down: I've dropped to 4.4, the wrong side of happy. So I have a square of chocolate and it starts a slow climb up as I savour the taste and watch.

'Much more of your nerves, and you're going to get fat.'

I jump.

Dr Lysander is framed in the door. Tall, thin and white-coated. Dark hair pulled straight back. Thick glasses. She glides, silent as a ghost the whispers say, always seems to know *before* it happens when someone falls into red. But she's not like some of the nurses who can bring you back with a hug. She isn't exactly what you would call *nice*.

'It's time, Kyla. Come.'

'Do I have to? Can't I stay here?'

She shakes her head. An impatient flick of her eyes says *I've heard this a million times before*. Or, at least, 19,417 times before, as 19,418 is the number on my Levo.

'No. You know that isn't possible. We need the room. Come.'

She turns, walks out the door. I pick up my bag to follow. It is everything I have but it's not heavy.

Before I shut the door, I see: my four walls. Two pillows, one blanket. One wardrobe. The sink with a chip on the right side the only thing to mark my room as any different from the endless row of boxy rooms on this floor and others. The first things I *remember*.

For nine months, the boundaries of my universe. This and Dr Lysander's office and the gym and school one floor down with others like me.

Bzzzz: more insistent now, it vibrates up my arm, demanding attention. Levo's dropped to 4.1.

Too low.

Dr Lysander turns, clucks under her breath. She bends down so we are eye to eye, and touches a hand to my cheek. Another first.

'Truly, you will be fine. And I'll see you once a fortnight to start with.'

She smiles. A rare stretching of lips across teeth that looks uncomfortable on her face, as if unsure how it got there or what to do once it did. I am so surprised I forget my fear and start to climb away from red.

She nods, straightens and walks down the hall to the lift.

We go silent down ten floors to 'Ground', then down a short hall to another door. One I haven't been through before for obvious reasons. Over the top it says 'P&R': Processing and Release. Once you pass through this door, you are never seen again.

'Go on,' she says.

I hesitate, then push the door part open. I turn to say goodbye, or please don't leave me, or both, but she is already disappearing into the lift with a swish of white coat and dark hair.

My heart is thumping too fast. I breathe in and out,

and count each time to ten until it begins to slow, like they taught us; then square my shoulders and push the door open wider. Over the threshold is a long room with a door at the far end, plastic chairs along one wall, two other Slateds sitting with a regulation bag like mine on the floor in front of them. I recognise both of them from lessons, though I've been here much longer. Like me, they are out of the pale blue cotton overalls we always wear, and into actual jeans. Just another uniform, then? They are smiling, thrilled to be leaving hospital at last with their families.

Never mind that they've never met them before.

A nurse at a desk on the other wall looks up. I stand in the doorway, reluctant to let it shut behind me. She frowns slightly, and flicks her hand to beckon me in.

'Come. Are you Kyla? You must check in with me before you can check out,' she says, and smiles widely.

I force my feet forward to her desk; my Levo vibrates as the door shuts with a swoosh behind. She grabs my hand and scans my Levo just as it vibrates harder: 3.9. She shakes her head and holds my arm tight with one hand, and jabs a syringe into my shoulder with the other.

'What is that?' I ask, pulling away and rubbing my arm, though I am pretty sure I know.

'Just something to keep you level until you are somebody else's problem. Sit down until your name is called.'

My stomach is churning. I sit. The other two look at me with wide eyes. I can feel the Happy Juice begin to ease through my veins, taking the edge off, but it doesn't stop my thoughts even as my Levo slowly rises to 5.

What if my parents don't like me? Even when I really try – which, to be fair, isn't all the time – people don't seem to warm to me. They get annoyed like Dr Lysander when I don't do or say what they expect.

What if I don't like them? All I know are their names. All I have is one photograph, framed and hung on my hospital room wall, and now tucked in my bag. David, Sandra and Amy Davis: Dad, Mum and older sister. They smile at the camera and look pleasant enough, but who knows what they are really like?

But at the end of it all, none of this matters, because no matter who they are, I have to make them like me.

Failure is not an option.