

An Excerpt of

SMATTERED

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SHATTERED

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PROLOGUE

WHEN YOU DIE, you don't learn everything. You don't always get to learn why you were told your parents died in a car accident that left you in an orphanage when you were eight years old. Or what happened to the family dog. Was he shoved inside a small cage and forced to live out his miserable existence in the pound? Or was he dropped off at the local kill shelter and given a death sentence upon his arrival?

I liked to think Roger managed to escape. That he had a better fighting chance than I did. That he wasn't broadsided by my parents' death like I was. I hoped he had found a safe place. For me, I wasn't safe until I died.

I should have seen it coming. But back then, I wanted to believe that there were still good people in the world. That my life had meaning. That I would one day turn eighteen and be turned out on my own, ready to face the world as an adult where I'd attend medical school and become someone important. Someone who could make a difference. Someone who could heal sick kids. Who could find a cure for cancer and make the hurting stop.

It's almost laughable how utterly naïve I was. But when you're a kid desperate to be loved, you'll believe anything. Even when it's the farthest thing from the truth.

CHAPTER 1

THE RIVERBROOK ACADEMY for Unwanted Children sprawled across seventy acres of heavily wooded national forest land. Razor wire topped twelve-foot chain-link fences surrounding the entire property, and security cameras covered every inch of the perimeter. Strict instructions were given to every child who set foot inside the academy's intricately carved wooden doors.

Children must not attempt to go outside the fence.

Children must not damage property surrounding the fence.

Children must behave at all times.

Misbehavior will not be tolerated.

All misbehavior will result in strict punishment.

The severity of the punishment per level of misbehavior was never explicitly explained. Twelve years ago, in the year 2068, the year the academy opened to house its two hundred unwanted children, an unfortunate few learned the hard way. They had never fully recovered. Since then, no one else had done anything so stupid.

I leaned my head back against the bark and stared up at the fence. Just as I had done every summer since I arrived seven years ago. In three more years, I'd be able to set foot outside the fence. To go off on my own and discover everything the world had to offer. No more invasion of my privacy. No more being stuck in one place.

Unwanted children were never allowed outside the fence. Not even for field trips that I had read about in books. The only field trips I could take were the ones to the woods or imaginary ones while I was sitting in bed, too sick to even walk the halls.

Somehow, I had to get through the next few years. But they seemed lightyears away. Unreachable. Desperation didn't even seem to be enough.

I closed my eyes and listened to the crickets and cicadas chirping all around. A warm light breeze brushed against my face. I felt Cullen reach for my hand and squeeze it, interlacing his fingers with mine. Rolling my head against the tree trunk, I lifted my eyelids to meet his deep blue eyes.

"You're beautiful, Marris," he said softly.

I gave him a weak smile. I didn't feel beautiful. I felt sick to my stomach like I was going to hurl at any minute.

"When your hair brushes away from your face in the breeze and your long dark lashes gather in small arcs, you're an angel who takes my breath away."

"Stop," I said with a small laugh. "You've been reading too much poetry."

"You inspire me. You really do." He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. His soft lips on my bare skin sent warm flutters through my insides. With a sigh, he said, "I used to think coming here was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. But I know now, it was so I could be here with you."

I caressed his hand with my thumb and felt the corners of my mouth turn up slightly as I willed my stomach and

everything I had eaten for breakfast to stay put. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I’m really sorry about your parents was one of the most commonly used responses whenever a new kid showed up. But for those of us who had been living inside the orphanage for more than two years, it became so contrite that we lost interest. It didn’t matter what happened to the parents or how the kid ended up at the orphanage. They were stuck there. That was their life and there was nothing they could do about it. So, when Cullen arrived a little over a year ago, it was the newbies who swarmed him and told him how sorry they were about his parents. Why else would he be dumped off at an orphanage, right? After all, weren’t all of our parents dead?

That day, as I sat curled up in a stuffed chair by a window overlooking the courtyard, I peered over my paperback and listened to him thank the kids. But there was something in his tone that sounded off.

Later, I ran into him in the hall on the way to the bathroom and asked, “So, what really happened to your parents?”

Unfortunately, my timing wasn’t always the best. He turned around and walked off while I stared after him.

As we sat under the tree, I glanced over at him again. “What happens when you leave in a year and I’m stuck here? How will you live without me?”

His eyes shifted away toward the fence. With a faraway look, he said, “We could run away together.”

I rolled my head slowly from side to side. “We can’t leave. You know that. Not until we turn eighteen.”

“You could come with me.”

“I’ll still be a ward of the state.”

Cullen sighed and turned back to face me. “There has to be a way.”

“We have a year to figure it out,” I said, sounding hopeful.

“I wish it could happen sooner. Maybe they would make an exception if we got married.”

I rolled my eyes at his problem-solving skills. But I had to give him credit for trying. What good were rules if they didn’t come with a short list of exceptions, right? That was his philosophy. I stifled a yawn with my hand.

Cullen brushed a tendril of hair behind my ear. He frowned, looking concerned, and then pressed his wrist to my forehead. “You’re burning up.”

CHAPTER 2

I JERKED AWAKE at the sound of clanging metal and winced as a million tiny pinpricks of blinding light stabbed at my irises. I shielded my eyes with a hand and turned my face into the softness of Cullen's T-shirt. His arms felt warm against my back and the crook of my legs.

The sound of running footsteps and squeaking wheels grew closer.

"Set her down," a voice said. "What's wrong with her?"

Cullen laid me down gently on a gurney and my head sank into the soft pillow. "She passed out on our walk back from the woods. She has a fever." Cullen's voice shook, and I wanted to reach out and touch his cheek with my fingertips, to reassure him somehow, but my arms felt like iron weights.

"I'll get the doctor," the nurse said. The soles of her shoes squeaked across the infirmary's shiny floor that they kept waxed. Without fail or delay, the janitor had waxed that floor once a week for as long as I could remember.

I felt Cullen's palms cradling my face, and I peeked an eye open, squinting against the harsh light. His face was flushed and his forehead glistened with sweat.

"You're going to be okay, Marris," he said firmly. "You hear me?"

Nodding, I gave him a slight smile despite my exhaustion and closed my eye.

Suddenly, his hands left my face and I was moving. I lifted one droopy eyelid again. Cullen stayed back by the infirmary

entrance. His furrowed brows seemed to deepen the farther away I got. I cast a shielded look around as walls and ceilings and doors with room numbers passed by.

Dr. Roben was walking at my right. She glanced down at me, frowning. She squeezed my shoulder and said, "You're going to be fine, Marris. We'll patch you right up."

I nodded and blinked back tears. I was unsure of what she meant. Would it be another vaccine?

A month ago, all of the kids, including me, received our yearly vaccines along with a concoction of vitamins depending on which ones our lab tests showed we were deficient in. The testing lasted for several days, and then the vaccines were administered. Over the next two weeks or so, most of the kids got sick. It was like a rotation of illness throughout the orphanage. It seemed like once a kid got better, someone else got sick.

The nurses and teachers were abundantly cautious for the first three weeks. It was almost like they knew what bug or virus was going around and they wanted no part of it. Lucky for them, classes had been cancelled, and while they kept their distance, we were left to keep ourselves busy. Not that we could do much, being sick and all.

Classes had started up again three days ago. Most everyone was feeling back to normal. Everyone except me.

The gurney stopped rolling and I opened my eyes again, squinting against the bright light. The all-too-familiar confines of the hospital room's stark white walls loomed above me, closing in all around me.

Dr. Roben grabbed a blood pressure monitor off the small counter and wrapped the armlet around my bicep. Then she swung her stethoscope over her head and fitted the earpieces into her ears.

The monitor had a digital pressure gauge but she always backed it up with her manual count. I asked her once why she did it that way, why not let the machine do the work, and she said if she didn't keep up on the manual process, eventually she'd become worthless as a doctor and could then be too easily replaced with a robot. She said the medical industry would always need qualified doctors because there were too many variations in medical cases. A robot couldn't possibly figure everything out and wouldn't have the capacity to handle highly complex cases. I figured that was a good thing, considering I was studying for pre-med.

She pressed the round sound receiver against my bare skin, making me flinch at its smooth, frigid surface. After a moment, she swung the stethoscope back over her head, draped it over her shoulders, and then removed the cuff from my arm. She sank down onto a padded stool and settled her dark green eyes on me. With furrowed brows, she asked, "How are you feeling now?"

I turned my head and stared at the room's sole window that looked out into the nurses' station. A nurse in blue scrubs walked by without looking our way. "I'm really tired." I paused to glance at her and to swallow a lump in my throat. "And I feel sick to my stomach, like I'm about to throw up."

Dr. Roben nodded. "It's probably just a reaction to the vaccines," she said. "But I'll have one of the nurses get a blood sample so we can run a few tests."

I pressed a hand to my stomach and willed myself not to throw up as I asked, "Is it normal to have a reaction this late after a vaccine? I've been sick for the last four weeks."

"It's rare, but it can happen. Once we get your test results from the lab, we'll know more." She patted my shoulder. "I'll give you something to help with the nausea. I'd like to keep you here overnight so we can monitor your vitals."

I sighed. "Can I see Cullen?"

Dr. Roben smiled warmly. "Of course. I'll have a nurse bring him in."

As she left the room, I stared up at the white ceiling tiles that surrounded the fluorescent lights. I heard the squeak and heavy footsteps of someone running on the waxed floor and then Cullen appeared through the glass of the window. He hurried into the room, sat down on the guest chair, and took my hand in both of his.

"Does she know what's wrong?"

I shook my head. "She ordered blood tests."

Cullen lowered his head to our hands. I brushed my free hand over his head. His hair felt silky against my fingertips.

Rebecca, one of the nurses, walked into the room and glanced at Cullen as she pushed a metal cart up to the head of the bed. She asked for my arm and then set to work on finding a vein. I tried not to watch as she removed the wrapper from a butterfly needle. The needle prick at the side of my wrist didn't even make me wince. Maybe it was the exhaustion. Or

maybe I was getting used to the routine. After all the blood draws they had done in the last five weeks, it wasn't a surprise that I had become desensitized to the pain.

I closed my eyes and focused on the touch of Cullen's hands on my flesh, his thumb gently caressing my knuckles, the pad of his index finger barely brushing over the tendons of my wrist, making my skin tickle.

The loss of blood from the draw made my head whirl as I rolled my head against the pillow, feeling its coolness against my left cheek. It seemed they always took too much. My small five-foot frame never handled blood tests well and it took a good ten minutes to recover every time.

"You're all set, my dear," Rebecca said, closing a heart rate monitor over my index finger and then patting my arm. I lifted my heavy eyelids and nodded. Cullen squeezed my hand. "Dr. Roben wanted you on an IV of fluids and antibiotics for the night. Get some rest now. I'll be back to check on you in a bit."

Her eyes shifted to Cullen. "You can return to your class, Mr. Hendricks. Marris will be fine here. She needs her rest."

Cullen shook his head. "No way. I'm not leaving her side."

Rebecca gave him a disapproving look before she turned on her heel and left the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Standing up, Cullen let go of my hands and pulled the bed sheet and blanket over my legs and up to my shoulders. He tucked the blanket gently around my arms, being especially careful with my right arm that was attached to the IV, and then touched his lips to my forehead. The touch was so gentle it sent shivers down my side.

“How do you always know what I need?” I asked, smiling.

He laughed. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said, shrugging. “You just looked cold.”

“No, not that,” I replied. He gave me a questioning look. “The kiss.”

He waved it off. “A kiss on the forehead doesn’t count. Just wait for the real thing. When you get out of here and you’re feeling better, we’ll have a picnic in the woods and I’ll show you what you’re missing.” With a wide grin, he winked at me, making me laugh.

“How come you haven’t kissed me already?”

He looked down at his hands for a moment. Then looking back up at me, he shrugged. “I didn’t want to rush anything. I’m not like the other guys. I care about people other than myself. I care about you.”

He was right. He wasn’t like the other guys. Despite the strict rules and punishments, they were quick to get into a girl’s pants whether she liked it or not. Any reports of wrongdoing, also considered *immoral activity*, were handled in a variety of ways. I only knew of two: with a whip or with solitary confinement in the basement.

Most of the boys chose the whip. Especially after several boys were relocated to the psych ward after spending a solid 72 hours inside their dark cells. Some of the kids thought they could hear wailing coming through the heating vents from the basement. I didn’t want to know what they were wailing about. Just the thought gave me the shivers.

“It’s smart,” I said. “If they were to catch us doing something immoral, I’d hate to suffer the consequence.”

“Well, *you* wouldn’t,” he replied, sinking back into the chair beside the bed. “No girl has been punished for such a thing. None that I’ve heard about anyway.”

“I could claim it was all me. That *I* seduced you.”

He patted me on the head, kissed my forehead again, and smiled. “That’s just nonsense. I think you need your sleep.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, right?”

CHAPTER 3

SPEAKING OF FIRST TIME for everything, once the blood test results came back later that night, Dr. Roben released me from the infirmary without additional medication.

“The antibiotics should help. You just had a mild case of the flu,” she said. “Drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, and stay away from the other kids for another day or two.”

I was a bit surprised by her recommendation. If that’s all it was, why was I sick for four weeks? What about the overnight stay for observation?

But I didn’t press the issue. Instead, after the IV was removed and I was bandaged up, I let Cullen walk me back to my shared room and tuck me in my own bed. He fluffed up the pillow, folded it in half, and stuck it under my head so I was elevated a little. Then he left to get food from the cafeteria.

The room that I shared with seven other girls of varying ages, from six to seventeen, was quiet. For at least another thirty minutes while they wrapped up their last class of the evening. It was the same room I had stayed in on my first night seven years ago. And the same bed. The academy wasn’t big on upgrading bedroom furniture. I assumed it was an expense they didn’t want to make since the sole purpose was to improve comfort.

Most of the time, the kids didn’t stay long anyway. After a year or two, the majority of kids were adopted into new families. It still boggled my mind how I was stuck at the

academy while so many of the other kids got to experience life outside the fence. There were still a few of us from the academy's earlier days. Maybe they wanted to keep us around to show how wonderful the place was. Never one to turn children away or ship them off to another orphanage where they might have better luck finding a new family.

About a year before Cullen arrived, my best friend Dana had been adopted. She had left abruptly, without even saying goodbye. I prayed for her every day, hoping she had found a good home and was enjoying life and going on all the trips she had dreamed about. Her big dream was to travel to Ireland and tour as many castles as she could.

In my mind, I wished her well. But if I were being truly honest, I couldn't help but feel a little envious that she had an opportunity to experience life outside the fence. What was it like out there? Were the teachers as strict as the ones I was used to? Did she have access to medical care like we did? Did she feel loved by a new set of parents, a family? Was she allowed to go to movies and eat ice cream in the park? Or go shopping at the mall? Did she have access to the internet?

The academy refused to give us access to the internet. They said children didn't need advanced technology to learn to behave. And there were plenty of books in the library to pore over and keep us busy. Occasionally, we got to see old black-and-white films from the 1950s.

Evidently, the films had been a donation from the Library of Congress in an effort to keep history alive. More like cheesy acting.

I was young when my parents died, but I could still remember short clips of movies we had watched together on the weekends. The film industry had changed a ton in 120 years. The graphics were crystal clear. And one time I had even seen a 360-degree film that put me right there on the set, smack dab in the action. It was the coolest thing I had ever seen. My parents couldn't afford that technology, but one of my friends had a parent who worked with computers and was obsessed with having the latest and greatest.

What I wouldn't do to get out of this place and see the world... Three more years seemed like an eternity.

I heard footsteps on the wooden floor in the hallway outside my room and watched Cullen walk in carrying a tray of food. He set it down on the bed beside me and pulled up a chair from the corner of the room.

"You're lucky I have good rapport with the cook," he said, snatching a dinner roll from the tray. He pulled it apart and handed me half while he stuffed his share into his mouth. "I almost left empty-handed."

I smiled and took a small bite of the bread, chewing slowly. My stomach still hurt and the simple act of chewing made me nervous I was going to ruin our tray of food.

"The cook walked into the cafeteria at the last second just as I was leaving." Cullen picked up an apple and took a bite.

"That was lucky," I said. "Thanks for this."

He nodded, his mouth full. After a moment, he said, "When I was waiting for the food, I overheard that one of the kids who arrived a month ago was adopted. He left earlier today."

My eyes bugged out as I took another small bite of bread. I felt a new pang of jealousy. “I don’t get it. Why not one of us?”

Cullen shrugged. “Doesn’t much matter to me. But I only have one more year to go. And if it were you, I wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on you or keep you safe.”

“But you could easily find me once you got out.”

He squeezed my hand and gave me a sympathetic smile. “Some things just aren’t meant to be. Maybe you’re being saved from some horrible home life situation.”

I rolled my eyes. “I doubt that. But maybe. You never know.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jody Calkins grew up in the Minnesotan woods and now lives in rural Northern Virginia with her family. She started writing and editing professionally in 2008. She has a degree in classical studies and literature, loves studying languages, and writes young adult speculative fiction.

Look for her upcoming YA thriller, *Tainted*, in early 2018!

More information and her blog can be found at:

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