

An Excerpt of

T A N T H

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TAINTED

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN EVERYONE DIED around me, it seemed the world had crumbled. What had been was gone, and most of what remained was little more than rubble, knocked down by the bombs that had torn our city apart and left to disintegrate in the scorching sun.

A little over a week ago, the city's thick stone walls were breached, and one hundred wolves, which were merely a scientist's pet project, flooded into the city. When the city officials heard the news, they abandoned their post, fled, and blockaded the breach in the wall, trapping us inside the city as the wolves roamed free.

One would think there was nothing to worry about. What could one hundred wolves accomplish in one night? But these weren't just any wolves. They could regenerate.

Yes, this brilliant scientist had discovered a way to mutate a wolf's DNA so that its body could regenerate damaged flesh. Like when a starfish regenerates a severed limb. They were impossible to kill. And as far as I knew, none had died in the attack.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the people. Since it was a Saturday night when the wall was breached, a large amount of the

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population was at the heart of the city for weekly entertainment. Generally, only a handful of people ever stayed home on Saturdays.

When I heard the announcement on the ten o'clock news, the death toll had already reached an estimated 40,000 which was almost half our city's population.

That was the last news report.

Five minutes later, our electricity went out and never came back on. And by then, it was too late to evacuate.

Then I heard the howls. And then the screams. And then the gunfire.

I clutched my little sister tighter against my chest as we huddled inside our bedroom closet, wedged between a dresser and a side wall. I couldn't tell if it was my body or hers that trembled, but I kept shushing in her ear anyway like any big sister would.

"Charlie?" My little sister's voice quivered, barely louder than a whisper.

"Shh," I replied.

"When are they coming back?"

"They'll be back soon." I lied. I knew our parents weren't coming back. When they heard the screams, they locked us inside the closet and went outside to help. But I had seen the news report. The odds were slim to none that they'd return.

I chewed at my chapped lips and recoiled at the taste of salt. I wasn't sure how long we were supposed to stay inside the closet. When would it be safe to leave? At some point, we'd have to get out to relieve ourselves or to go find food and water. But where would we go after that?

With our parents surely dead, I was left to look after my five-year-old sister Dannie. I was only sixteen, barely old enough to take care of myself. And I didn't know how I'd keep us alive.

But as we huddled in the closet, my father's words played over and over in my head: *Whatever you do, Charlotte, take care of your sister...and stay alive.*

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I kind of figured staying alive was a prerequisite for taking care of Dannie, but for whatever reason, my father felt the need to emphasize it, and at the time I was too busy panicking to correct him.

Then they had embraced us one last time before rushing out the door and into the night.

CHAPTER 2

THE HOWLING GREW LOUDER and suddenly a scratching sound came from outside the house. Were our parents back? Or were the wolves trying to get in? Did they know we were inside?

Dannie started to whimper, and I shushed her softly as I rocked her in my lap.

I started to evaluate our options. If the wolves got in, we were dead.

For one, being stuck in the closet, I had no weapon to use to defend us. Not that that would stop them. But it might slow them down.

Two, I hadn't practiced Kung Fu in over a year so there was a good chance I was rusty.

Three, was Kung Fu even a valid method to defend oneself against a wolf attack? I wasn't sure.

Four, I was out of shape.

And five, well, my sister was five.

Finally, the scratching sound stopped, and I took a deeper breath. With any luck, they'd leave us alone. But would sound attract them?

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I wondered what the death toll was now. How many people would survive the night? Was there any hope for us? Or were our deaths inevitable? Just a matter of time before a wolf found us and finished us off?

Setting Dannie on the floor beside me, I whispered in her ear, "Stay here. I need to find a weapon. Don't come out until I come get you."

I had to get to my parents' bedroom.

I saw her blonde head bob in the dark as a thin strand of moonlight came through the slatted closet door. After planting a kiss on the top of her head, I eased the door open. I cringed and held my breath at the squeak it made in its track.

Then I peered out into the bedroom. In the dim light of the moon's glow, I saw the outline of our twin beds and the open door that led to the hallway. In their haste, our parents had left our bedroom door wide open.

I tried to ignore that discovery as I crawled out of the closet. Easing the closet door shut behind me, I took a slow, deep breath before making my way across the room to my nightstand where I kept a small flashlight.

Being exposed like this made my heart pound wildly inside my chest. And I didn't dare stand up and give myself away. The curtains on the window were wide open and our house was all at ground level. A wolf could easily walk by and spot me walking across the room. And guaranteed, it had better vision than I did. I was willing to bet my life on it.

I inched my way down the dark hallway toward our parents' bedroom and sighed with relief when I saw the window blinds were closed. Not willing to take any chances yet, I stayed on all fours until I was inside the walk-in closet.

After latching the door, I stood up and clicked the flashlight on. I aimed the light beam toward the floor and then stood on my tiptoes as I reached for the metal box my father kept on the shelf above the hangers. Feeling the cool metal on my fingertips, I slowly removed it from the shelf. I set it on the floor, unhooked the latch, and opened the lid.

And then I cursed out loud.

The metal box was empty.

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My father must have taken the gun with him when they left. The hundreds of rounds of ammunition he had tucked behind clothing wouldn't do me any good now.

While I cursed him for owning only one gun, I closed the lid and shoved it to the side.

Now I had to figure out my Plan B.

CHAPTER 3

I SAT ON THE FLOOR inside the dark closet and mapped out in my head the locations for every knife we owned. Other than the sharp knives in the wood block in the kitchen, my father had a fillet knife he used when he went fishing. Then there was a set of steel darts in the family game room. I kept a small pocket knife in my nightstand. But that wouldn't do me any good. If I tried really hard, I might be able to fish out an eyeball with the inch-and-a-half-long blade.

I sighed.

There had to be something else. My father still had his hunting gear from when he was a kid, back before the wall went up. Surely, he had a heavy-duty knife. At least something he had used for wood carving.

But where did he keep it? Was it in the attic? I really hoped it wasn't in the attic. There was no good way to get to it without making a lot of noise. And for one, I needed a ladder. Not to mention, I couldn't do too much wandering around the house for fear I'd draw attention to us.

But I had to find something I could use. Otherwise we were sitting ducks.

I turned the flashlight back on and made one last pass of the shelves before concluding that I wasn't going to find his hunting gear inside. I sighed

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as I flicked the light off and waited a minute for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Maybe his gear was in the game room? That was my next best place to look.

Once outside the closet, I crept over the floor, careful not to make even the shushing sound with my bare feet against the carpet fibers. The floor in the hallway suddenly creaked and I stopped in my tracks.

For a few seconds, I held my breath. I didn't move. I just listened. But nothing had changed. I could still hear screaming outside and the occasional gunfire.

And the howls. I could still hear that.

As quietly as I could, I made it the rest of the way to the game room and shut myself inside the closet. This closet was a little bigger than the one in my bedroom and it was lined with shelving instead of hanger rods. At least a hundred different board games and other multi-player games were stacked on the shelves. But on the floor, underneath the bottom shelf, were plastic bins.

I wished now I had paid more attention to what was inside the bins, but there wasn't anything I could do about that now.

I slid a bin out from underneath the shelf across the carpet and popped the lid open. Flashing the light for just a second, I caught a glimpse of camo clothing.

Yes! This was it.

I dug inside the bin in the dark, removing each item and placing it soundlessly on the floor beside me. I hoped I would be able to feel the sheath of a knife soon. Surely, there *was* a knife inside the bin.

My heart raced as my fingertips touched something soft. I turned the light on, careful to shine it inside the bin. And there it was. A hunting blade sheathed in old suede.

I unbuttoned the snap and drew out the blade. About seven inches of polished metal shone up at me. I adjusted my grip and stabbed the air with it. It wasn't the perfect weapon by any means, but it would have to do.

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After hooking the sheath on my belt, I dumped the bin's contents back inside and clamped the lid on. As I slid it underneath the shelf, I heard a noise and I froze.

Was a wolf inside the house?

My blood pulsed faster through my veins, booming inside my head, as I tried to listen. The screams outside had become less frequent. And I no longer heard the sound of gunfire.

Grabbing the knife and holding it out in front of me, I turned off the light. Then I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and released it slowly, trying to calm my nerves. I kept my eyes closed as I listened.

And then I heard the sound of breathing. It was in the hallway. I was sure of it.

The floor creaked, and I knew the wolf was outside my bedroom. I sucked in a slow breath as my mind raced to remember if I had closed the bedroom door. In my haste through the house, had I left the door open?

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat and pushed aside the gnawing doubt. There was nothing I could do about it now. That was one thing I had learned in my martial arts training: don't worry about the past because the past is done.

And then a piercing scream erupted inside the house.

CHAPTER 4

WITH ADRENALINE PUMPING through my veins, I charged out of the closet and down the dark hallway. I almost stumbled and crashed into the doorjamb as I rounded the corner into the bedroom.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at the massive white creature inside the room. Its head stood as high as the door handle. And it was frantically shredding the closet door as Dannie screamed at the top of her lungs.

I crept forward, careful to avoid the spot on the floor that I knew would creak under my weight. My heart beat faster and the pounding grew louder. I thought for sure the wolf would hear it, but it was too focused on my sister to notice me.

Suddenly, the wooden slats splintered, giving way, and the wolf leapt through the hole it had made.

I sprinted across the room, jerked the closet door open, and plunged the knife into the wolf's back again and again. It yelped and spun around, leaping at me and knocking me to the floor. I blocked my face with my free arm and cried out as the wolf's jaws locked down, piercing my skin.

With a loud grunt, I thrust the blade into its chest, right between the ribs. A lucky break.

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It collapsed on top of me and warm blood quickly soaked into my T-shirt. Channeling my strength, I shoved the heavy weight aside and crawled the rest of the way to Dannie.

But it was too late.

My sister was slumped against the wall, the ends of her blonde hair shimmering with blood. I let out a sob as I gathered her into my arms.

"I'm so sorry," I cried as I rocked her on my lap.

It didn't matter now what happened. I had let my sister down. I failed to protect her and now she was dead. Just like all the others around me.

Before long, the wolf would recover, regenerate, and then I'd be dead, too.

Suddenly, I felt strong hands grasping me by the shoulders and pulling me out of the closet, out of the house, and into the street.

It all happened in a blur.

I tried to fight back but my arms were too heavy and slow. And the bite marks burned and throbbed.

When I looked back at my house, the white wolf limped into the doorway and its dark eyes bored into mine.

"Run," a deep male voice said sharply into my ear.

If you enjoyed this excerpt of *Tainted*, you can order your copy [HERE](#) now to read more! It is available on Amazon in both Kindle and paperback.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

She is the author of the YA speculative thrillers, *Shattered* and *Tainted*, and the YA dystopian thriller series, *Bought*.

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