

Welcome to Riverbrook...



TAKEN

THE HEXON CODE | Short Story Prequel

JODY CALKINS

TAKEN

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A short story prequel to The Hexon Code Series

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TAKEN

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ALSO BY JODY CALKINS

THE HEXON CODE

Shattered

Redeemed

Blackout

Outcast

No Way Out

Breakout

Sabotage

Outrage*

All the Strings*

Tainted

Platform 273

Bought

Charged

*Titles available soon!

TAKEN: A SHORT STORY PREQUEL TO THE HEXON CODE

When the traffic light turned green, I stepped off the sidewalk and hurried across the street to the Henry J. Martin Hospital.

When I reached for the door, my cell phone rang. I took a step back and moved to the side of the entrance to get out of the way as I fumbled in my handbag for the phone.

A nurse wearing blue scrubs glanced at me and smiled before she disappeared inside the building.

I answered the call and pressed the phone to my ear as I watched pedestrians walk by. Some of them went inside the medical building while others stood at the corner and waited for the traffic light to signal that they could walk across the street.

“Dana, I just got your message,” my mom said, sounding surprised. “What are you doing out of school so early?”

“It’s finals week. I finished early.”

“All right. Come downstairs. I’m in my office.”

I walked through the lobby, smiling at the ladies sitting behind the reception desk, and then rounded the corner to the elevators. I pressed the button to go down and waited. But after a few long seconds of waiting, I sighed and headed for the stairs. My mom’s office was only two floors below the main level.

As I headed down the empty stairwell, my ballet flats stamped against the concrete steps. When I reached my mom’s floor, I pulled open the door and then walked down the hall. As I slipped my phone back into my bag and stepped through the automatic doorway, the smell of death hit me and my stomach turned.

Covering my mouth with a hand and ignoring the shocked expression on my mom’s new intern’s face, I hurried across the room and threw up in the stainless steel sink.

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After rinsing my mouth with water and patting my face dry with a paper towel, I turned around and caught them exchanging an amused look. I glared at my mom and said, “Mom! Why didn’t you tell me you were performing an autopsy?”

“That’s what I do, dear,” she replied, like it was the most natural thing ever. To be cutting into a dead body. She turned, gesturing toward the young man with the scalpel she held in her hand, and added, “Do you remember I mentioned my new intern?”

I nodded. “Dr., um...” I paused, feeling sick again.

His eyebrows lifted as he watched me. He raised his hand and rubbed the back of it over his forehead to sweep away the stray tendril of wavy dark hair that had fallen over one side of his black-rimmed glasses.

If my face wasn’t a ghostly pale, then it was turning beet red because my cheeks were growing hotter.

As I pressed a hand to my stomach and focused on not throwing up again, he gave me a worried look. Then he glanced at my mom—who seemed oblivious to my discomfort and embarrassment—before opening his mouth.

But she spoke first. “This is Dr. Winden.”

“Donovan,” he added.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I nodded and said, “Right.”

“Dr. Winden is a college graduate from the University of Virginia,” my mom said, glancing up at me from her work. “Finished top of his class, and he sutures the most perfect lines.”

Blushing, he met my gaze as he rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“What?” my mother asked, looking from him and then to me. “There’s no harm in bragging about talents. Especially when they’re someone else’s.”

I gave him an apologetic look.

“Here,” she said, motioning for me to walk over. “Take a look at this.”

Shaking my head, I backed up toward the door. “I, I can’t.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said. “Why don’t you go, Dr. Winters? I’ll finish up.”

My mom sighed. “Actually, can you walk her out to my car? There’s something I want to check first. It’ll just be twenty minutes.”

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“Sure.” He walked across the room toward the sink, closer to me, as he pulled off his latex gloves and tossed them in a trash can. Then he shrugged out of his lab coat and, side-stepping me, hung it on a rack by the door.

Somehow my face grew even hotter. Biting my lip, I backed up farther but gasped when I bumped into the counter.

He gave me a funny look as he began rolling up the sleeves of his pale blue button-down shirt. Then he said, “Let me wash my hands first and then I’ll meet you in the hall.”

Nodding, I hollered, “Bye, Mom,” and then hurried out into the hall where I paced the floor and waited.

A few minutes later, Dr. Winden stepped out, saying, “Sorry for the wait.”

Looking up, I stopped in my tracks and stared at him for a second before realizing that I was holding my breath. His shirt sleeves were folded over muscular forearms and he had his hands in the pockets of his fitted black slacks. He looked too young to have graduated from college.

“Are you ready?”

I opened my mouth and was about to say, “huh,” when I got my wits back. Feeling my face heat up again, I nodded and looked away.

“Come on,” he said, taking a step toward the elevators. “I’ll get you a coffee from the cafeteria upstairs.”

Scrunching up my face, I shook my head.

He chuckled. “I take it you don’t like coffee?”

I shook my head again.

“They have other beverages,” he said. “What do you like?”

“It’s okay. I don’t need anything,” I replied, walking past the elevators as I glanced over my shoulder.

He had his hand hovering over the elevator panel. He must have realized I wasn’t stopping because the corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he cocked his head and then he followed me to the stairwell.

When I pulled the door open halfway, partly because it was heavy and partly out of habit, he reached over my head and pulled it open farther. I looked up at him over my shoulder. He was standing so close. If

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I had swayed backward, I would have bumped into him. And he smelled so good of lemon and vanilla.

Just then the elevator dinged. I jerked my head toward the right and watched as a young woman wearing a knee-length skirt and high heels stepped out of the elevator and walked quickly toward the hallway we had just left, not seeming to notice us. Her long, curly blonde hair bounced as she walked.

I craned my head back to exchange a look with Dr. Winden.

He lowered his gaze to mine and then he pursed his lips as he shrugged. "So, do you like hot chocolate?" he asked as he waited for me to finish walking through the doorway. When I shook my head again, he asked, "Tea?"

I grasped the handrail. "I'm not really a tea drinker either."

"There has to be something you like," he said, glancing over at me as we started up the stairs. "What about a chocolate or banana shake? Or a spiced latte?"

"I like banana shakes. There's this diner across from my school that makes really good shakes. Mom says the coffee is good there, too."

"Where? Several blocks from here?"

I nodded, casting him a sidelong look. "Seven."

"Okay." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. "Let me see if it's okay with your mom."

"No, you don't have to do that. I don't need anything. Really."

He smiled and gave me a little nod as he pressed the phone to his ear and said, "I want to."

A second later, I heard my mom's voice come through the speaker but I couldn't tell what she was saying.

"No, of course not. No problem at all. I was just checking to see if you'd mind if we went for milk shakes. Dana said the diner across from her school serves good banana shakes." He paused as her voice cut in. "No, no. I don't mind at all. I offered." After another pause, he said, "Sounds good. Thank you, Dr. Winters. We'll see you there when you get done."

When he slipped his phone back in his pocket, I asked, "What is she doing anyway?"

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He shrugged. "She didn't say."

We climbed the rest of the stairs in silence and then before I had a chance to push through the door, he reached past me and pushed it open.

"Thanks," I said, looking up at him.

"You're welcome."

When I headed toward the reception desk, he said, "It's this way. I'll drive."

We walked to the exit at the back of the building and then stepped out into the parking lot. Not knowing where to go, I held back and let him lead the way to a black two-door convertible. He opened the passenger door and waited for me to get in.

"Watch your head," he said.

Nodding, I slid into the seat, set my bag on my lap, and then reached for the seatbelt as he gently closed the door. As I waited for him to walk around to the driver's side, I checked out the car. The inside looked spotless, aside from a few dust particles on the dashboard.

He got in behind the wheel and then put an old-style key in the ignition. When he pressed a button overhead, the roof of the car folded down, letting in the warm breeze. A minute later, he was driving out of the parking lot.

I looked over at him and asked, "Do you like working with my mom?"

He nodded as he glanced at me. "I do. I've learned a lot from her. Both of your parents, actually."

"You work with my dad, too?" My dad never talked about his detective work with the FBI. At least not with me. He claimed it wasn't anything twelve-year-old girls should worry about. And my mom rarely talked about hers either, and if she did, it was all in general terms. Or she talked about the people she worked with, like her interns.

"Not often. A couple times a week."

"Do you like it? Working on dead people."

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes for a second and then he said, "I like solving mysteries."

I didn't really understand why anyone would want to work with dead people. Didn't they smell? I didn't think I could stomach it. Ever.

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"It's not that bad," he added. "You get used to it."

I gave him a close-mouthed smile as I scrunched up my nose.

He chuckled as he pulled into a space at the far end of the diner's parking lot, far from any other car. When I turned to him and frowned, he said, "Parking way out here avoids door dings. Plus I figured since you like taking the stairs, you don't mind walking."

"Oh," I said.

"Hold on," he said, getting out of the car. He hurried around to my side before I had a chance to open the door all the way. Then he held it for me as I stepped out.

We walked across the parking lot and along the sidewalk to the main entrance. Reaching past me again, he pulled open the door. As I walked through the doorway, I looked up at him and said, "Thanks. You know I can open doors on my own, right?"

"Halfway," he said with a smirk.

I dropped my jaw and was about to reply when a waitress walked up and asked, "Booth or table?"

"Bar," I said at the same time Dr. Winden said, "Booth."

The woman frowned.

"The bar is fine," he said.

Handing us the usual sticky menus, she said, "Sit wherever you'd like."

I led the way to the end of the bar and slid onto one of the slippery stools.

As Dr. Winden slid into the seat next to me, he asked, "Do you come here often?"

I shook my head. "Sometimes after school with my mom."

"What can I get for you two?" the waitress asked.

"Two banana shakes," he said, glancing at me to confirm. "And a plain coffee."

When she left, he leaned over. "I was teasing, by the way."

"Um."

"About the door..."

"Oh," I said as the waitress came back with a full pot of coffee and poured his cup.

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“Thank you,” he said.

I watched her set the pot back on the burner and then turn to take another customer’s order.

“Stairwell doors are usually heavy.”

I turned to him, catching the sparkle in his eye as he sipped the coffee.

“You know, it’s easier to take the elevators.”

Shrugging, I said, “I don’t like to wait.”

“Ah,” he replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

When the waitress brought over the shakes in tall glasses, he thanked her and slid one in front of me. Then he said, “Nothing. But I’m glad I brought you here then instead of waiting at the hospital.”

I watched him as he closed his lips over his straw. A moment later, he hummed.

“Mm,” he said, lifting his gaze to mine. “This is really good.”

I smiled as my cheeks blushed again. “You’ve never had a banana shake?”

“Never.”

We slurped our drinks and as we pushed the glasses aside, I heard a vibration nearby.

“That’s probably your mom,” he said, retrieving his phone from his pants pocket. He answered it and held it to his ear. After a brief moment, he said, “No, it’s not a problem at all. Don’t worry about it. Dana knows how to get there?”

I could hear my mom’s voice again, but it was too faint for me to make out the words.

“Sure. She’s right here. One second.” He handed me his phone.

I took it and held it to my ear. “Hi, Mom.”

“Dana, I’m so sorry,” she said. “This project is taking longer than I anticipated. Is it okay if Dr. Winden gives you a ride home?”

“Okay. Sure, that’s fine.”

“I’ll be home as soon as I can. I told him there is a pizza in the freezer if he’d like to stay for dinner. Or I can reimburse him for whatever you two decide to order.”

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“Take-out?” I asked.

“Anything.”

“Okay.”

“I told him you’re old enough to be by yourself so he doesn’t need to stay. Don’t make me regret it.”

I rolled my eyes. “When have I ever—”

“Dana, I have to go,” she said, cutting me off. “I love you.”

Before I could reply, the call ended. Slowly, I lowered it and stared at the screen.

“Everything okay?”

Avoiding his gaze, I nodded and handed it back.

He pulled a paper napkin from the dispenser sitting in front of us and cleaned off the phone’s screen before shoving it back in his pocket. As he looked up, he asked, “What would you like for dinner? She said we can get anything.”

I shrugged.

“Do you want something from here?” he asked. “Or maybe a fresh pizza. We can order it now and pick it up on the way.”

“Um.”

“I know this pizzeria on the east side of town called The Spicy Pepperoni. They make the best pizzas. Have you ever eaten there?”

I shook my head.

“Does that sound good?” he asked. Then leaning closer, he said, “Did I lose you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I shook my head again. When I looked up at him, he was giving me a funny look. “Sorry,” I said. “Pizza sounds great.”

He tilted his head as he reached for his back pocket. “You sure?” When I nodded, he smiled and said, “Okay.” He opened his wallet, pulled out a twenty, and set it on the counter.

I hopped off the stool and then we walked out of the diner and to the far end of the parking lot while he called in the order.

Twenty-five minutes later, after driving across town and picking up our pizza, Dr. Winden pulled up to the curb at my house and started closing up the roof of the car. Turning to me, he asked, “You have a key, right?”

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Unable to resist, I gave him my best sheepish grin and shook my head.

“You’re not serious,” he said with a sigh as he leaned his head back against the headrest.

I covered my mouth with a hand to stifle a nervous laugh and then I asked, “Are you any good with picking locks?”

He narrowed his eyes at me as he let out a low chuckle.

Unable to contain myself, I laughed and said, “I’m kidding.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “You are wicked.”

I laughed again as I opened my door and got out. While he grabbed the pizza and sodas and locked up the car, I fished in my bag for the key and then led him up the porch steps.

Once inside, I showed him to the kitchen. He set the pizza and one of the bottles on the island. After he stored the extra bottle in the refrigerator, he looked up and said, “All right. Plates?”

I turned around and opened an upper cabinet. As I stood on tiptoes and reached for the plates, he reached over me, grabbed two, and then handed them to me.

Sighing, I carried them to the island and set them on the counter.

“Glasses?”

I rolled my eyes as I looked over my shoulder.

“What?” he asked.

“You want me to just tell you where they are?”

“Sure. Why not?” When I raised my eyebrows, he added, “This is fun. It’s not every day I get to help someone. I live alone.”

“You help my mom.”

“But that’s work. That’s different.”

I stepped up to the counter again and opened another cabinet. This time, I let him grab the glasses on his own.

After he set them beside the plates, he asked, “You don’t need silverware, do you?”

“It’s pizza,” I said, shaking my head and opening the lid of the box.

He grinned. “Good.”

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I grabbed a slice of the pepperoni and then reached for one of the bottles of lime soda. After I opened it, I poured it in almost equal halves into the glasses. Then we carried the dishes into the living room.

“Your parents don’t mind you eating in here?”

“No,” I replied, setting my glass in the cup holder built into the center console of the reclining loveseat. “We do it all the time.”

When I turned the television on and the curved screen that covered the entire back wall and parts of the side walls lit up, he said, “Oh, wow.”

“What do you want to watch?” I asked, turning to the movie selection screen. “Zombies? They’re really creepy on the curved screen.”

He grinned. “Sure.”

As I queued up the movie, I asked, “Have you ever seen a full 360 film? I’ve only ever seen one. It’s so cool.”

“Bits and pieces of a movie. At the home theater store.”

I nodded. “The equipment is too expensive.”

“Right,” he replied.

As the movie started, I set the remote on the console between us and saw him sitting there with his eyes closed. A few seconds later, he opened them and blushed when he saw me watching him.

Quickly, I looked away and focused on the movie and my food.

“How do you like the pizza?” he asked after I had taken a few bites.

I glanced over at him as I said, “You’re right. It’s the best pizza.”

He smiled.

We watched the movie for a while, but I wasn’t paying much attention. I couldn’t stop thinking about the woman we had seen stepping out of the elevator at the hospital. Finally, I turned to him and asked, “Did you think that woman was pretty?”

He frowned. “What woman?”

“The one from the elevator.”

The furrow between his brows deepened as his gaze shifted. Then his expression relaxed as he said, “Oh, her.” He pursed his lips and shrugged. “Eh.”

When I turned back to the screen to ponder his response, he asked, “Aren’t you a little young to be worrying about things like that?”

“I’m twelve.”

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“Exactly.”

I sighed.

“You shouldn’t be comparing yourself to other girls. Only one person gets to be you. And you are perfect the way you are.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You think so?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “But ask me again in a few years.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

“Can I get you anything?” he asked, rising to his feet and picking up his plate.

I pushed the pause button on the remote and then got up, too, and walked back into the kitchen with him.

He lifted the box lid and slid it toward me. “I’m surprised your mom’s not back yet.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” I paused to lick grease from my fingers after grabbing another slice of pizza. “You don’t have to stay.”

“It’s not that. I don’t mind staying. It just seems a little strange.”

I shrugged.

“Does she work late often?”

“Sometimes. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

He frowned as he grabbed the unopened bottle of soda from the refrigerator. When we sat back down on the recliners and started the movie again, he opened the bottle and began refilling our drinks. A tendril of hair—the same one from earlier at the morgue—fell over the rim of his glasses.

I bit my lip as I watched him.

His gaze lifted to mine and then he cocked his head a little and smiled.

Before I could stop myself, I asked, “How old are you? You don’t look old enough to have graduated from college.”

“Eighteen,” he said. “I was in an accelerated program.”

“Genius or something?”

He half-laughed. “I finished high school at fifteen and completed my medical degree in a little over three years.”

My eyes widened. “Huh.”

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“No sense taking longer than necessary. If you focus and work hard,” he added after taking a drink of his soda. “Do you have any ideas on what you’d like to do when you graduate?”

I shook my head. “When did you know what you wanted to do?”

“When I was about fourteen, I knew I wanted to be a doctor. But it wasn’t until my second year of college that I focused on forensics. That’s when I met your parents.”

“Let me guess,” I said, rolling my eyes. “They twisted your arm into it?”

He laughed. “Well, they can be pretty persuasive.”

I nodded.

“But I like it. It’s like giving someone his last word. When the evidence leads to an arrest, you know you’ve done something good.”

“I don’t think I could do it.”

“I won’t lie. It does take some getting used to.”

I scrunched up my nose. “I’ll take your word for it.”

He chuckled as he set his empty plate aside and folded his hands on his lap.

We turned back to the movie. When it was over and the credits started rolling up the screen, we took our dishes to the kitchen. He rinsed them in the sink and then placed them in the dishwasher while I put the pizza box in the refrigerator.

Turning back to me, he asked, “Are you sure you’ll be okay by yourself?”

“Yeah,” I said, shrugging. “They’ll probably be back in another hour or two.”

“Hmm,” he replied, not sounding convinced. “I’ll leave my number just in case. If you need anything, call me. Okay?”

“Sure.” I opened the utility drawer and set a notepad and a pen on the counter beside him.

He jotted down his number and signed it with his full name. Then he said, “Give me your phone. I’ll program my number in there, too.”

I dug in my handbag for the phone and handed it to him. I watched him punch in the numbers and a message. Seconds later, his own phone

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chimed. He picked it up and added me to his contacts list and then replied to his text.

After giving my screen one last inspection, he handed it back to me. "All right. My name and number are programmed. All you have to do is—"

"Hit the call symbol."

He nodded. "Or reply to my text."

"Got it."

He slid the notepad closer to me. "And keep this with you. In your pocket or something in case you lose your phone but have access to another one."

"Yes, sir." Boy, he sounded just like my dad.

"I'm serious."

With a sigh, I tore the page from the pad, folded it, and then slipped it into my pants pocket. "Happy now?"

He smirked as he narrowed his eyes. After we walked to the door, he said, "Remember, if you need anything at all, call. I don't care what time of day or night it is. I live just fifteen minutes away."

"Okay."

As he pulled open the door, he said, "Lock this behind me."

"I will."

He eyed me for a moment like he was trying to figure out if I'd do as he said. Then his expression softened. "I had fun today."

I smiled. "Me, too."

"Have a good night, Dana Winters."

"Good night," I replied.

When he closed the door and peered through the narrow window at the entrance, I locked the deadbolt and then waved at him. He gave me a thumbs-up and then walked to his car.

I watched him drive away and take a left at the stop sign down the street. Then I turned down the lights and went upstairs to get ready for bed.

The next morning, I got up early and showered. As I was getting dressed, the doorbell rang. Quickly, I slipped both my phone and his handwritten note in my pocket and hurried downstairs to the door. As I

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passed through the kitchen, I noticed it looked the same as it had the night before.

When I peered through the window and saw two uniformed police officers, a man and a woman, standing on the porch, I felt a pit forming deep in my stomach.

Slowly, I unlocked the door and opened it.

Both officers gave me sad smiles.

“Are you Dana Winters?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you here by yourself?”

I nodded as I hugged my arms to my chest. “What’s going on?” I asked, glancing at the man and then back at the woman.

“Dana, my name is Detective Marilyn Hope and this is my partner, Detective Phillip Leotta,” she said. She glanced at her partner for a brief second before looking down toward the floor. “I’m afraid we have bad news about your parents.”

“What do you mean?” I fought hard to keep my thoughts from all the possible scenarios that popped into my head. Had they been in a car accident? Was there an attack at the hospital?

“There has been a terrible accident,” Detective Hope said. She glanced at her partner again before continuing. “I’m afraid your parents have passed away.”

Blinking back tears, I shook my head. “That can’t be. I saw my mom yesterday.”

“I’m terribly sorry. We think it happened late last night.”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

Detective Leotta handed me a soft tissue from a plastic packet he pulled from his pocket.

I pressed the tissue to my eyes to clear away the tears. Then I lifted my head slightly and glanced at the detectives for a brief second and then stared out at the street behind them. It felt like my whole world was crashing down on me.

“Why don’t we sit down,” Detective Hope said, reaching for me. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders and led me to the porch bench.

I sank onto the bench and dropped my head in my hands.

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“Do you have any other family in the area?” When I shook my head, she said, “Someone from Social Services will arrive in a few minutes and take you to a group home until a judge determines which of your relatives should get legal guardianship.”

I shook my head again. Where was I going to go? Who was I going to stay with? I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. There wasn’t anyone left. I tried to remember the last time I had seen any of my family, but I couldn’t think of when that would have been. I vaguely remembered attending the funeral for my dad’s father, my last living grandparent. All the others had passed away before I was born. And the last time I had seen either of my two older sisters was a few years ago.

I thought of Dr. Winden. He had said to call him if I needed anything, but he barely knew me. He wouldn’t want to take care of a twelve-year-old girl.

When a beige four-door car pulled up to the curb, the male detective walked down the porch steps and met a woman as she walked around the front bumper.

Detective Hope handed me a business card. “If you think of anything that might help us in our investigation, please don’t hesitate to call me. My cell number is on the back of the card.”

I turned the card over. Sloppy handwriting was scribbled on the card, but the numbers were legible.

“Again, I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said, patting me gently on the arm. Then she stood up and met with the others.

A tear slipped down my face as I watched them talk. When my phone rang, I pulled it from my pocket and looked at the screen. It was Dr. Winden.

Slowly, I accepted the call and held the phone to my ear. But my throat tightened and I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. Sniffing, I wiped away fresh tears.

“Dana?”

I shook my head as I sniffled again.

“Dana, I’m so sorry. I just got to the hospital and heard the news. I’m on my way over. Are you okay?” When I didn’t reply, he said, “Dana, answer me.”

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"The police are here," I said finally, my voice cracking.

"You stay right there, okay? I'm five minutes away."

I nodded.

"Stay with me on the phone. What are the police doing right now?"

I sniffled as I wiped my face. "They're talking," I said. "To a lady. I think she's from Social Services."

He cursed under his breath. "Okay. I need you to stall. Go use the bathroom or something."

But as he spoke, the lady and the detectives walked up the porch steps.

"I can't," I replied, shaking my head.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Dana," the woman said softly. "I'm so sorry to hear about your parents."

"Who is that?" Dr. Winden asked through the phone.

She reached for me and helped me to my feet as she said, "My name is Jeanne. I'm here to make sure you are safe and cared for until we can make arrangements with your other family members."

I shook my head, trying to tell her I didn't want to go, but she guided me across the porch and down the steps.

"Dana?" he asked, his voice sounding more desperate.

The male detective opened the car door and Jeanne helped me into the backseat.

"Let me have that," she said, her voice so soothing, as she took the phone from my hand.

I could hear Dr. Winden's voice coming faintly through the speaker. Before I could protest, Jeanne ended the call and then closed the door.

When I tried the handle to open the door, it wouldn't budge. Starting to panic, I cried, "Let me out."

As she walked around to the driver's side, the detectives got inside their squad car and drove away.

I tried rolling down the window, but it wouldn't budge either. I pounded on the window and then I pounded on the glass that separated the front seat from the back.

Taken, A Short Story Prequel to *The Hexon Code* by Jody Calkins

It looked like she was trying to ignore me as she slid into the driver's seat and started the ignition. Up ahead, at the stop sign, a black car turned onto my street.

I sucked in a breath. Dr. Winden.

"Let me out," I cried again, pounding on the glass.

The car screeched to a halt beside us and he stepped out and hurried to my door.

"Oh, my," Jeanne said, turning her head to look out her side window.

"Hey, let her out," he said, pulling on the handle as he looked at the woman.

She turned back to the windshield and put the car in gear.

"No," I cried, frantically tugging at the handle.

"Hey. Open the door." He pounded on the side of the car, but it didn't faze her. She drove the car away from the curb.

Tears stung my eyes as I placed my hand on the window and watched him stare wide-eyed after us. He lifted his arms and clenched his hands in his hair. As we reached the stop sign, he got back into his car and made a tight U-turn.

"So, what kind of music do you like?" Jeanne asked.

When I glanced her way, she was craning her neck and looking into the backseat at me.

Ignoring her, I turned back to the rear window and watched Dr. Winden follow us.

"I really like classical music. Violin, mostly. Sometimes the cello."

I didn't reply. What was wrong with her? How could she drive away when it was clear I had wanted out?

For what felt like at least twenty minutes, I watched as she weaved her way through the outskirts of town and then pulled onto a four-lane highway.

Dr. Winden stayed behind us.

Finally, I heard the ticking sound of the car's turn signal. I turned my head to watch the road as we merged into the right lane and took a right at the next exit. The two-lane road was heavy with traffic. I looked out the back window to see if Dr. Winden was right behind us, but a large van blocked my view.

Taken, A Short Story Prequel to *The Hexon Code* by Jody Calkins

Jeanne pulled the car to a stop behind a black sedan at a red traffic light. All of a sudden, the vehicle in front of us started backing up. I whipped my head around to look out the back window again. The van with dark tinted windows pulled up so close behind us that I thought it was going to hit us.

Jeanne honked her horn. "What on earth is going on?" she exclaimed. She honked again. Then she rolled down the window and stuck her head out. "Excuse me. Is there something wrong with your car?"

My heart raced inside my chest. What were they doing? And why would they block us in like that?

A man appeared at the driver's side of the car. I didn't see where he had come from, maybe from the van. And then my eyes widened when I saw him point a gun at Jeanne's head.

"Oh, no, please," she pleaded, holding up her hands in surrender.

"We'll take it from here," he said. When he pulled the trigger, the sound of a dull pop echoed inside the car.

As I screamed, strong hands grabbed me by the arms. I twisted my body and flailed my arms, trying to get free, but then I felt a sting on my neck.

More tears stung my eyes, blurring my vision, and then my head started to whirl.

I stared up at the man who held me. And as he hauled me to the van and pushed me inside, I thought I saw Dr. Winden's car sitting at the curb several hundred feet back.

I collapsed on the padded floor and stared up at the ceiling as my head continued to whirl.

When I woke up again, I lifted myself onto an elbow and slowly got to my knees to peer out the windows. But all the windows were blacked out.

In the dim light, I crawled to the front and leaned against the partition that separated the back of the van from the front. More tears trickled down my face as all of the scenes from my house replayed in my mind. The way Dr. Winden had made sure I was okay the night before, giving me his number and hijacking my phone. The horrified look on his face when Jeanne's car pulled away.

Taken, A Short Story Prequel to The Hexon Code by Jody Calkins

Where was he now? Had he followed the van? Would he find me?
Was he even going to look?

When the van slowed down, I turned my head to the left and stared at the side door. A few minutes later, the van stopped and then the side door opened and a man appeared.

“Let’s go,” he said, gesturing for me to come to the door.

I rose to my feet, hunching down a little to keep from bumping my head on the ceiling and stumbled across the padded floor. He grasped my upper arm and helped me out onto the ground.

When I lifted my head, my breath hitched and my pulse quickened. Looming above me was a large five-story building with barred windows. As I studied the elaborately carved wooden doors, the man said, “Welcome to Riverbrook.”

Turn the page for a look at [*Shattered*](#), the first book in The Hexon Code series!



Assumptions can be deadly...

SHATTERED

THE HEXON CODE | BOOK 1

JODY CALKINS

Preview of *Shattered* by Jody Calkins

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?"

Grab [Shattered](#) today to keep reading! Available at Amazon and on Kindle Unlimited.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jody Calkins grew up in the Minnesotan woods and now lives in rural Virginia with her family. She has a degree in classical studies and literature, loves studying languages, enjoys arboriculture, and writes psychological thrillers, dramas, and love stories.

She is the author of the edgy and heart-wrenching young adult dystopian series The Hexon Code, including *Shattered*, *Redeemed*, and *Blackout*.

Other books in the series include *Tainted*, *Platform 273*, and *Bought*.

If you would like to follow her for book news and updates on the writing life, you may do so here:

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Also, be sure to join her VIP Readers' Group mailing list at her website for exclusive content, book release news, and other updates!