



The *Ganzfield* Series

Minder (June 2010)

Adversary (August 2010)

Legacy (January 2011)

MINDER

A GANZFIELD NOVEL BY

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SPENCER HILL PRESS

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First Edition June 2010

Kaynak, Kate, 1971—
Minder : a novel / by Kate Kaynak – 1st ed.
p. cm.

Summary:

Sixteen-year-old Maddie Dunn discovers her amazing abilities when she survives an attack that leaves several people dead. At a special training facility, she develops her new powers and meets the man of her dreams. But Ganzfield is a place where every social interaction carries the threat of mind control, and a stray thought can burn a building to the ground. Maddie needs to figure out how to protect the people she cares about, or she might lose them forever.

Cover design by K. Kaynak

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ISBN 978-0-9845311-0-3 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-9845311-1-0 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

To My Turkish Souvenir and Our Irish Triplets

CHAPTER 1

I felt the eyes on the back of my head, like a too-warm itch within my skull. Someone was watching me.

Hunting me.

Cold dread splashed through my chest and my pace quickened. I'd gotten flashes like this before—I knew to trust them. I needed to find other people. More than a block away, cars whooshed along the main road.

Hurry.

I pulled my bag in close and started to run, cutting across the suburban lawns in the fading late-afternoon light. Perhaps I could flag someone down or even step out into traffic and cause a scene.

I didn't make it.

I glanced back at the rumble of the approaching engine and a white van thunked over the curb behind me, screeching to a stop halfway on the sidewalk. The side door rolled back with a metallic scrape. Quick footsteps slapped the sidewalk and thudded in the

grass behind me. Rough hands grabbed my arm and closed over my mouth, stifling my scream.

The driver pulled out so fast the tires squealed. Someone tried several times to close the side door of the lurching vehicle before the latch finally caught. The large hand of my attacker remained clamped over my mouth and my breath ripped through my nose.

Oh my God... oh my God... oh my God.

His weight crushed my chest and my hammering heart pounded against the pressure. The smells of stale cigarettes, cheap beer, and a slightly rancid locker room overwhelmed the small space. I nearly threw up.

The driver laughed. I knew that laugh—I'd heard it in the lunchroom and halls at school. Delbarton Evans was a junior—like me—although we weren't in any classes together. His friends called him Del, and I wasn't one of them. The other two in the van also looked familiar.

Mike. Carl.

Mike was the one holding me down. He joined Del in his laughter. Carl stared at me, paling to an even more sickly green when he realized I was staring back at him.

The van pulled into a garage and the door motor hummed overhead as the last of the daylight slid away.

Oh, no, no, no, No. No. NO. NO!

That closing door was my last chance. I shifted and bit down hard on Mike's hand. He yelped in pain, and then growled—actually growled—and punched me in the jaw. Pain speared through my head and I tasted blood. Del jumped from the driver's seat and grabbed the arm that Mike couldn't hold. The alcohol smell hit me again as his face came close to mine. He looked me straight in the

eye. Then, with his free hand, he grabbed the front of my shirt and ripped it straight down to my waist.

Oh, God. No.

“Shut up and lie still,” he said, as his eyes slid down my body. Mike laughed and grabbed at the button of my jeans. I tried to kick him away but he crushed my legs with his knees. Carl, still looking sick, hung back and silently watched.

How could this be happening? Panic threatened to overwhelm me again.

No!

I felt a surge of energy start low in my gut—growing taller and stronger—burning like an icy flame up into my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut. “No!” I shouted. It sounded as if I was in chorus with many other versions of myself as an unseen fire exploded from my forehead. The hands gripping me momentarily tightened, and then fell slack.

I opened my eyes. All three of my attackers had fallen to the floor. Del lay face down only inches from me. His eyes were open and empty without the colored ring of an iris.

What the hell?

I shoved myself out from under Mike. I felt as if an electrically charged spike had driven itself through my forehead. I was shaking so violently I could barely get to my knees. Mike was also shaking, but it looked like he was having a seizure. As I watched, he went still. He wasn't breathing. I glanced at Carl. He'd slumped against the side of the van and his face hung slack from his skull as though he'd started to melt. The only sound in the van was my own ragged breathing.

Dead—they were all dead.

And I knew—somehow—I had killed them.

I've got to get out of here. I stumbled from the van, tripping over Mike's sprawled leg. I couldn't make my mind work—couldn't figure out how to open the garage door. I pulled on it, hearing my own desperate sobs echo in the cold space. The single bare bulb suddenly clicked out, plunging me into darkness. My scream came out as a whimper. *Oh, God. Help me. I'm trapped. I'm trapped in the dark and they're dead, dead, dead. Oh, God!*

My hands slid along the side of the van until I felt the handle.

Trapped in the dark.

I finally opened the driver's door and the dome light flashed on. My fingers groped for the button on the driver's visor. I tried not to look in the back.

All dead.

Light worked its way across the garage as the outside world reappeared under the rolling door. I couldn't stop myself; I looked at my three dead attackers. *Oh, God. What happened—what did I do?*

WHAT AM I?

CHAPTER 2

By the time the world stopped tumbling around me, I found myself at home. I showered until I ran out of hot water and then dressed in sweats. Cold seeped through my body despite the fact that the day was warm for early October. The last of the afternoon light melted away as I sat on my bed in my darkening room. I'd stopped shaking, but my mind twisted and churned around the facts.

I'd been abducted and assaulted—punched in the face. They'd been planning to do terrible things to me. *After they ripped my clothes they would have—oh, God.* There was nothing I could've done to stop them but still... I'd stopped them.

What did I do?

Did I really kill three people with my thoughts? How was that possible?

Unnatural.

Was it because I'd gotten angry? I'd been angry at people before and they still had pulses.

Killer.

Was it because I'd been in danger? Had something changed when Mike punched me? The ugly bruise on my jaw hurt when I touched it or opened my mouth too wide. I experimentally opened and closed it, just to see when and how much it hurt. There wasn't much of a lump, which was good. I looked in the mirror as I applied concealer over the reddish-purple mark.

Freak.

The pale girl looking back seemed like a stranger, so I tried not to meet her eyes. How did I do it? Would it happen again? Could I stop it? If something like today triggered it again, would I want to stop myself from killing them?

Monster.

My mom came home in time for dinner. I avoided answering the unspoken questions in her green eyes. She looked young for her forty-seven years, although she needed to lose at least thirty pounds. My mom had put on weight after my father had died and, like her wedding ring, she'd never taken it off. She wore her grief like an extra layer of flesh.

"Do you want me to make cookies?"

I shook my head. She seemed hurt by my refusal, as though I'd dodged a hug.

I zombied through the remaining hours of the evening. I did my homework and threw a load of laundry into the machine. I'd shoved the ripped shirt I'd been wearing deep in the bathroom trash, hiding the evidence. A strange combination of numbness and hyper-awareness played tug-of-war with my senses. I heard noises in the neighborhood that I'd never noticed in the years we'd lived here; suddenly I was attuned to the auditory wallpaper of my life. A few late-arriving commuters pulled their cars into their driveways

and the sound of one of their garage doors started me trembling again.

Flashback.

It was after midnight when I finally fell asleep, and nearly two in the morning when the first nightmare drenched me in a shaky sweat and shocked me awake. Across the hall, I heard my mother stirring, as though she'd also had a bad dream. I waited in the dark as she came to my door and pretended to be asleep when she silently checked on me. She stood there for a long time, watching me—worried. Finally, she closed my door. I heard her settle back in her own room, but I couldn't get back to sleep. Flipping on the light, I finished reading a book without registering the words on the pages, and then I started another.

Three students had been found dead and no one knew what had killed them. The school seemed electrically charged with rumor. Some people cried, but many discussed wild ideas with hushed voices and dancing eyes. Scenarios involving horror movie monsters and alien abductions bounced around the halls.

One girl stood alone just outside the main door with a look of grim satisfaction on her face. She held her books protectively against her chest. I didn't know her name, but I thought she was a year younger than me. I watched her for a few seconds and she glanced my way. As our eyes met, I had another of those flashes and I knew I wasn't the first person to be pulled into that van. I dropped my gaze and went inside.

I didn't have any close friends here—just a group of five other honors-track kids I hung out with sometimes. We ate lunch together and tried to separate ourselves from the other group of “smart kids,”

the ones who dressed up as wizards or hobbits or something on the weekends. My mom and I had moved to Chatham just over two years ago. This was supposedly one of the best public high schools in the state of New Jersey. That bar was apparently pretty low. Our little three-bedroom house was in the tiny strip of town that wasn't full of extravagant McMansions. More than half of the parents worked in the City, and their kids reaped the social-camouflage benefits from expensive clothing and cars.

I didn't blend in with the herd. My action plan had been to stay under-the-radar socially, get good grades, and get into a really good college. High school is full of games and I intended to win the one that mattered. But today, even getting into the Ivy League didn't seem important.

During third period, I heard the tinny sound of a police radio in the hallway outside my A.P. history class. Two uniformed figures threw silhouettes against the frosted glass of the classroom door. Something went tight in my chest. Mr. Storrs opened the door to their knock and spoke with them on the threshold. His eyes widened as he glanced in my direction. I felt empty and cold as I gathered up my books. The stares of the entire class followed my steps to the door and the urgent whispers started before it had a chance to close behind me.

So much for staying under the radar.

I wasn't in handcuffs, but I suspected my police escort from the building was going to hit the school rumor machine at a dead run as soon as history class ended. Normally, that would mortify me, but something told me I might not be coming back here anytime soon. Maybe I was in shock or something, but I just felt numb. I'd killed three people less than twenty-four hours ago, and now I was in police custody.

Monster.

I'd never been inside a police station before. We came in through the back entrance, passing an expensive, chauffeured, silver town car that looked out of place among the black and white police vehicles. The door closed behind us like the jaws of an immense steel trap. The officers escorted me to a small room with a frosted glass door, leaving me sitting alone at a table, staring at the empty chair across from me. I saw myself reflected in the one-way glass; I looked like my own ghost. My green eyes seemed glassy; my skin was wax; and my straight, brown hair fell lifelessly to my shoulders.

The sound of the door made me jump. A uniformed officer stood aside for a tall, African-American man who filled the room with his presence. "Madeline Dunn." An air of calm, competent power radiated off him.

I nodded, although it hadn't seemed like he was asking a question. The man looked about fifty. He seemed polished in his expensive-looking suit.

Formidable.

A bored-looking blonde girl in a trendy, black top trailed behind him. She sighed dramatically and then looked up at the cop and said, "You questioned Ms. Dunn for several minutes." Her voice had a strange, resonant quality to it. "You found she had no connection to the case. She is no longer a person of interest. You released her into Dr. Williamson's custody."

The officer nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him. I stood there with a furrowed brow and a few loose strings dangling from my thoughts.

What just happened?

The girl then looked at me. "Forget what I just said to the officers." Her voice still echoed with the resonance. Fog seeped through my

mind and a gently-pushing thought—forget—floated across it. I could feel the memory slipping for a moment, but then I sharply inhaled and pushed back.

“No,” I said. The memory came back as if it was being poured into my head, leaving a pressing ache behind my eyes.

The blonde girl gasped, as though I was being rude.

The tall man chuckled. “Thank you, Cecelia,” he said to her. “That won’t be necessary.”

Cecelia gave me a narrow-eyed look of catty dislike. I hadn’t made a new friend.

“We won’t be long,” he continued. “Would you prefer to wait in the car?”

Cecelia left the room with a long-suffering sigh.

The man turned to me with a pleasant smile and an extended hand. “Madeline, I’m Jon Williamson. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I felt annoyed at being addressed by my full first name. *Maddie*, I thought, but didn’t correct him. Instead, I clasped his hand hesitantly, meeting his eyes. My head spun with ideas. Had Cecelia just hypnotized the police officers? There had been a weird resonance in her voice when she’d spoken to them. She’d tried to do the same thing to me but it hadn’t worked. Something strange had been in my voice yesterday as well, when the three of them—*oh, God*.

Dr. Williamson’s smile disappeared and his eyes widened with concern.

What happened yesterday?

The thought floated across my mind, and suddenly I vividly recalled the scrape of the van door as it slid open, the smells, the fear, their hands on me, and then the rising anger and the intensity of the “No!” that had made them stop.

Made them die.

Dr. Williamson's hand tightened and I realized that mine was still in his grasp. I broke eye contact with him and pulled my hand away. I felt trapped in the too-small room. My heart pounded wildly, but it was from remembered fear. My instincts told me I could trust Dr. Williamson.

"Maddie," he said. He hadn't taken offense at my sudden pulling away. "I run a training program for young people with special abilities. I think you should join us."

"My mom—" I had no idea how I'd intended to finish that sentence. My mom needs me here? My mom won't want me to go away? My mom will freak out if I tell her I need to go somewhere she's never heard of with someone she's never met? I suddenly realized that I'd simply assumed I'd go with him. I wanted to go with him. It was as though I'd been waiting for the invitation. I had no idea what this program was or where it might be, but I knew two things: I needed to get the heck out of Chatham, and I needed to figure out what had happened to me in the garage. This "training program" sounded like it could do both.

Count me in.

Dr. Williamson waited until it was clear I wasn't going to finish my sentence, and then he smiled. "Don't worry about it. We'll talk to your mother."

I don't know what he and the blonde girl with the strange voice said to my mom when we stopped at her office. Dr. Williamson asked me to wait in the car. However, within two hours, I'd hugged my mom goodbye, packed my bags, and was sitting in the back of the town car.

Escaping.

On my left, Dr. Williamson worked on his laptop. Cecelia, who still seemed vaguely hostile, listened to her iPod on my right. My

two suitcases filled the trunk. As we sped north on Route 287, I focused on the road and let my mind go blank.

CHAPTER 3

More than seven hours later, we pulled off the highway and wove through darkening pine forests. I'd seen the "Welcome to New Hampshire/Bienvenue au New Hampshire" sign more than two hours earlier and wondered why had they bothered to put it in French.

Occasional lights shone from porches and through windows— islands in a sea of darkness. These grew less frequent as we drove. Next to me, Dr. Williamson suddenly stiffened, as though someone had called his name. He scowled out the window into the night, his profile visible in the light from his computer screen. What had caught his attention? All I could see outside was the light from the town car's headlights cutting through the blackness. Then a sudden cold trickled down the back of my neck and I felt the same itch within my skull I'd felt just before Del and his friends—

My heart moved up into my throat and I suddenly couldn't get enough air. I gasped sharply as the headlights reflected off a car parked on the side of the road. I might have imagined a flash of

movement in the vehicle—I couldn't be sure. Was someone watching me here, too? Had someone followed me from New Jersey? And why were we slowing down? The headlights fell across a forbidding metal gate. It sat in a new-looking brick wall that cut across the old-looking road.

Where are we?

The bronze sign near the security box read "Ganzfield." The driver tapped a code into the keypad and the metal gate slid sideways with surprisingly little noise. We rolled in through the blackness and the asphalt deteriorated into an unpaved, gravel drive that crunched under the tires. I turned to look out the back window. What was giving me this flash, this feeling that someone wanted to hurt me?

The gate clanged closed behind us and another thought shocked me. What the hell had I done? I'd gotten into a car with people I didn't know who had brought me to some kind of secure compound without any assurance they were who they said they were. To top it off, someone had been watching outside the gate. I felt—

Trapped.

What if they wouldn't let me leave? And if I tried, would the person I'd sensed outside the gate still be there, waiting? My breath got shaky and a little whimper escaped my throat. Then a thought went through my head.

Calm down. You are safe. Everything is okay.

Dr. Williamson. The idea made my eyes go wide and my heart seemed to stutter in my chest. My mom's a psychologist, so I knew believing that someone was inserting thoughts into my mind was textbook schizophrenia.

Dr. Williamson surprised me with a quick humph of laughter. I looked over at him; the light from his laptop screen washed his

face pale. He smiled right up to his eyes. "Don't worry. You're not crazy."

My jaw dropped. A sharp ache came from my bruised face, pulling memories from the attack back into focus and splashing them cold across my heart. The smile left Dr. Williamson's face. "After dinner, I'd like to have one of our... um... doctors take a look at your jaw."

The mention of dinner made my stomach rumble, as if it, too, had been listening. That was just weird. We drove into a large, sweeping driveway. It circled an old crossroad edged by porch lights and the glow from curtained windows. The town car pulled up in front of an enormous, three-story, white farmhouse with a large, open porch. It made me think of an old lady dressed in finery for a family wedding.

We hadn't fully stopped before Cecelia opened her door. She stalked off toward another, slightly smaller white farmhouse, which wrapped an L-shaped extension around the driveway. It seemed to lean deferentially toward the main building and the old, red barn between them. This must be Ganzfield.

Whatever that is.

A breath of winter hit me as I slid out of the car. It was at least twenty degrees colder than New Jersey.

"Please don't take Cecelia's rudeness personally," said Dr. Williamson. "She's not used to dealing with people who are immune to her ability."

"Her ability? The thing she did in the police station?"

"Exactly. Come in. Let's get some dinner and I can explain things while we eat."

We faced each other across a thick, wooden table in a large, country kitchen. A heavysset, middle-aged woman who looked too stern to make tasty food grudgingly brought two plates. She muttered something about how people who missed dinnertime should go hungry, and then busied herself shutting clattering drawers and wiping spotless countertops in protest before stomping off down the winding back hall.

Once she'd gone, Dr. Williamson turned to me. "Maddie, The Ganzfield program is for people with special abilities."

I nodded and took an unenthusiastic bite of my food. Despite not eating for most of the day, I didn't really feel like chowing down. The trance of the road that had kept my mind blissfully blank on the trip was gone and traumatic memories of the attack filled my thoughts again. How could that have only been a day ago? Already it felt like it completely defined my life.

"Now that you are here," continued Dr. Williamson, "I'll be direct. I believe that you are a telepath—a mind reader—and a very strong one."

What?

I'd never read anyone's mind. A lump formed in my throat. I wasn't the special person they thought I was. They were going to send me back home to all of the problems waiting for me there. Perhaps the police would get involved again. How had they known to come for me?

As though I'd spoken aloud, Dr. Williamson replied, "Your fingerprints were found on the door of the van with the three dead boys. A set were already on file from an old background check. Apparently, you'd applied to be a camp counselor two years ago. We have someone in... well... a *sensitive* position. She watches

for unusual cases like this. When she got the information, we immediately came down to New Jersey and to check it out.”

I suddenly went cold with understanding.

Telepath.

“You... you read my mind... just now... and in the police station.”

Dr. Williamson had seen the attack through my memories. *He'd seen me kill them.* I felt exposed and vulnerable and my whole body started to shake. Dr. Williamson's eyes widened. I suddenly knew he was afraid of what I could do when I got upset.

Everything is okay now. You're safe here. We're going to help you. The reassuring thoughts were inside my head, but I knew they had come from Dr. Williamson.

Dr. Williamson was speaking inside my head.

Holy crap.

Our eyes met as I acknowledged what he'd said... or thought. I felt my jaw set and I drew a ragged breath, willing myself calm. “Is that what you meant about me being a mind reader?” I forced myself to appear outwardly cool and blasé. A part of my mind sarcastically slow-clapped at my self-control.

Dr. Williamson sighed, and then smiled gently. *What you are experiencing is part of my gift. All telepaths can hear the thoughts of others, but I can project my thoughts to other people.*

I suddenly felt as though all of the energy had been drained from my body. I'd had a surreal couple of days and it all seemed to catch up to me in that kitchen—at that moment. I slumped down in the chair and for a second, I wondered if the energy drain was part of Dr. Williamson's “gift.”

No, just the thoughts.

I looked back at him. “And you think I can do this, too? Because of the—” My voice broke and the jumbled torrent of horror from the

past two days flooded out of me as if a dam had broken. “I couldn’t control it! It just happened!”

And you’re afraid it could happen again.

I nodded. Forcing the panic back down felt like swallowing a huge pill.

“Maddie,” Dr. Williamson spoke aloud again and the sound made me jump. Weird—it’d seemed almost normal to have his thoughts directly in my mind. “A few of us—a very rare few—have a genetic abnormality that allows us to pick up on what other people are thinking. Everyone has moments when they just ‘know’ what someone else is thinking. We tend to have a bit more of this intuition.”

I nodded. I’d had insights like that all my life.

Flashes.

I suddenly thought of my mother, who was so good at reading people. Dr. Williamson smiled.

“We call them ‘G-positives,’ those with this particular genetic sequence. I suspect your mother is one, as well, and she passed the code on to you. It’s a recessive genetic trait, so your father was also a carrier if he wasn’t a G-positive himself. Now, most G-positive people go through life fairly normally. However, the ability occasionally manifests more strongly, often in response to a massive rush of adrenaline.

“Several years ago,” he continued, “I was involved in a government program called Project Star Gate. The goal was to develop extrasensory abilities for espionage—to make spies who could read the minds of their enemies or find the location of hidden weapons, that sort of thing. For years, the project had only mild success. Then, with the advent of gene mapping at NIH in the early 1990s, we found the G-positives and, shortly afterward, we

developed a treatment that enhanced their abilities. The treatment is basically a synthetic neurotransmitter. Do you know what neurotransmitters are? The chemical messengers in the brain?"

I nodded.

"Well this one revs up a portion of the brain called the basal ganglia. G-positive people who receive this treatment develop certain abilities, like telepathy. They continue to get treatments about every four to six weeks to maintain these abilities."

Dr. Williamson looked at me intently. "Maddie, I believe that you are one of us—a G-positive. I also believe that, if we give you this treatment, you'll be able to control your abilities. Telepathy is a sensitivity to the electrical fields in others' brains. Our brains interpret those electrical fields in much the same way we process our own thoughts. I think your response to the attack was to overload the electrical circuits of their brains. I've seen that ability once before."

I fried them.

I was still processing what Dr. Williamson had just told me... still trying to believe it.

Basically, yes. You fried them. Not to take away from the seriousness of the situation, but I've seen your memories, Maddie. I personally think they had it coming.

I burst into tears. I'd been thinking the same thing about the three who had attacked me and I'd been feeling guilty about it. It was a relief to know I wasn't a monster.

Just a freak.

Dr. Williamson waited for me to regain control. He then spoke aloud again. "Maddie, I want to take you to our infirmary tonight. We can run some tests and take care of that jaw."

I touched my face and winced. Then I nodded.

The infirmary was on the ground floor of the house across the driveway in what had probably been the kitchen in the old farmhouse's previous life. An old wooden sign—shiny with amber varnish—hung over the front door. The name “Blake” was burned into it, surrounded by a curling, decorative design. As we entered, a woman looked up from a desk. She had dark brown skin, close-cropped hair, and large, kind eyes.

For nearly a minute, she and Dr. Williamson looked at each other without speaking. The woman momentarily cast a worried glance over at me and I realized Dr. Williamson had been silently sending his thoughts to her.

What was he saying about me?

I frowned; I didn't like being out-of-the-loop.

The woman smiled to put me at ease. “Hello, Maddie. I am Matilda Taylor.” She spoke with a softly-accented voice; it sounded like she might be from Africa. She seemed to be in her mid-thirties, although she had an ageless quality to her that meant that my estimate might be way off. As Matilda stood to extend her hand, I saw that she was slightly built—even smaller than my five-foot-three. She sized me up and we smiled at each other in shortness solidarity. I liked her at once.

Dr. Williamson excused himself. “Maddie, please stay here tonight. There are beds in the other room. We'll talk in the morning and I can then introduce you to the program.” He nodded at the woman. “Matilda.”

She smiled back as he left, and then turned her attention back to me. “Maddie, I would like to take a sample of your blood tonight, and then see what I can do for the injury to your face.”

At the mention of the bruise, I brought my hand up to touch it again and winced. *Ow*. Why did I keep doing that? I knew it was still there and touching it only made it hurt.

Matilda swabbed the inside of my left elbow with alcohol then drew the blood sample. I held a cotton ball on the injection site as she capped the vial of blood and placed the needle into a red plastic container. I expected she would put a band-aid over the cotton. Instead, she stripped off her latex gloves, and then gently gripped my arm with her thumbs on either side of the needle prick. An electrical current seemed to shoot through the wound.

Whoa.

It felt like intense pins and needles, like when my foot had fallen asleep—simultaneously hot, cold, and prickly-painful. I lifted the cotton from the puncture site to find the skin was smooth and healed. No scar—not even a mark—although the skin was still very pink and warm, as though it had been slapped.

“Wow.” I said, although that didn’t seem to cover it. Apparently, Matilda had some special abilities, too. What else could people here do? I’d assumed it was all telepathy and Jedi-mind-tricks, but here was something different.

Amazing.

Matilda flashed a quick, shy smile at me. She seemed both pleased and embarrassed. “Let’s take a look at that bruise on your face.” Her hands came toward me.

I flinched back before I realized what I was doing.

“Oh!” She seemed as startled as I was, and a belated wave of cold shocked through me. “I’m so sorry. I should have asked first.”

“I’m sorry.” My cheeks flamed and I dropped my gaze to the floor.

“No, I should know better.” After what you’ve been through, I should’ve asked before I tried to touch you.”

“Does everyone here know?” My heart thudded too loudly at the thought. *Are people here going to see me as a victim?*

A killer?

“I’m sorry. Dr. Williamson told me when you came in. I don’t know any of the details. We don’t have a psychiatrist on staff, but I’m here if you need to talk.”

“My mom’s a psychologist. I know I’m probably all posttraumatic stress right now. I just... I just don’t want everyone to know that about me, you know? I don’t want that to be what people think when they look at me.”

Pathetic.

Matilda smiled kindly. “I understand.”

I smiled back; she had a calming manner. She would’ve been a good doctor even if she didn’t have that amazing ability.

“How do you do it?” I asked, changing the subject.

“The healing? Well, I just... well... visualize the damaged area. It is like I’m going in like a surgeon. I can *feel* the damaged places. Then I pull in the person’s own healing mechanisms and... I suppose... I speed them up—give them extra energy. I focus them on the injury and the people heal themselves. It’s hard to describe beyond that.”

“Wow,” I said again, impressed.

“We all do things with energy in our bodies. We receive it through our eyes and ears and sense of touch. We pulse it through our nerves to send messages and we send it out through the sound of our voices. What G-positives do is not so strange; we just have slightly different ways of processing energy. It’s like sharks. Did you know they can sense the electrical fields of living things in the ocean? Even things hiding under the sand.”

“We’re like sharks?” I asked. Something about that was discomfoting, like being predatory toward other people.

Monsters.

She flashed another shy smile. “Not very much like them, just in relation to having an extra sense. Now, is it alright if I take a look at your face?”

This time I didn’t flinch. I also was ready for the pins-and-needles tingling that followed, which lasted longer and was more intense than in my arm. After she let go, I opened and closed my jaw experimentally, and then touched my fingers to the place where I’d been punched. The pain was gone.

“Thanks.”

Matilda shrugged modestly. “It’s what I do.” She turned to the refrigerator in the corner and looked inside, pulling out a small vial.

I was suddenly curious. “How strong is your... ability? Could you... like... cure cancer?”

Matilda’s eyes lit up at the idea. “Morris and I have been discussing how we could do just that. It’s much harder since it involves tissue destruction. We’re still working on how to tell the body to attack the tumor but not the healthy systems. Right now, we think it’s safer for us to focus on injuries like cuts and burns and broken bones.”

“Who’s Morris?”

“My brother. He has the same healing ability I have. You’ll meet him in the morning; I’m on-duty for the night shift.” While she was talking, she prepared a syringe, drawing a dose of a clear liquid from the vial with a bright orange label.

Oh, crap. I suddenly realized that the injection was intended for me. A cold wave splashed through me. “What’s the shot?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

Escape.

Could I make it out of the door ahead of her? She was even smaller than I was, so I didn't think she could force the injection on me—not if I was ready to fight.

Matilda read the anxiety behind my forced calm. "I'm sorry! I keep forgetting to explain myself. This is dodecamine; it's the synthetic neurotransmitter that enhances the abilities in G-positives."

"Don't you have to do the blood test to see if I *am* a G-positive?"

Don't touch me.

Matilda put down the syringe. "I would never give you an injection against your will. A dose of dodecamine is actually an effective test to see if someone has the genetic code. If you are a G-positive, then the effects of the neurotransmitter will start in a matter of days after you receive the injection. All neurotransmitters work like fitting a key into a lock; the key turns on the effects. If you aren't a G-positive, then you won't have the receptor sites in your brain and it will have no effect on you. A dodecamine injection is like a shot of saline water to G-negatives."

The same impulsiveness that had been driving my decisions all day took over. "Okay," I said as I held out my arm. Matilda gave me the injection, and then healed the needle prick with the same power she had used on my other injuries. She settled me on a surprisingly comfortable cot in the long annex room. It had a row of a half dozen beds lined up like a small hospital ward, although I was currently the only occupant. Matilda dimmed the lights and left. My racing mind could not win against my exhausted body and I fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 4

I'm blue, da ba dee da ba die...

The music played quietly. If I hadn't been near waking, it might not've been enough to register. It had a bouncy techno quality—good dance music. I slid my feet to the floor and pushed around with my toes until they located my shoes. In the main infirmary next door, a man whom I guessed was Matilda's brother, Morris, sat at the desk with his feet up and hummed quietly along with the music.

Except there isn't any music playing.

I gasped and the music abruptly ceased, along with Morris's humming. I felt concern coming from him like a warm wave. *This must be Maddie. Is the dodecamine having any effect on her?*

"Yes, it is," I said, before he could ask aloud... then I collapsed onto the floor. I didn't faint; my legs simply gave out. *Such a loser.* Who fell down like that when something freaked her out? Morris picked me up and carried me lightly back to the cot. I felt like an idiot. After all, I'd been warned the drug would allow me to hear thoughts. But wasn't it supposed to take a few days?

Morris picked up a handset from the wall, hit some numbers, and then said, “Dr. Williamson, I think you need to come to the infirmary immediately.” He hung up without waiting for a reply. His family resemblance to Matilda was strong and he had the same West African accent with warm vowels.

“Maddie,” he said, looking at me with wide, serious eyes. It struck me as strange to be so concerned with the well-being of a stranger, but I could feel the worry coming off him. Why did he actually care?

Did she hit her head when she fell?

“No,” I said.

“No, what?” Morris asked.

“No, I didn’t hit my head.”

This is the fastest reaction to dodecamine I have ever seen. This shouldn’t happen for another day or two.

“Is having a fast reaction bad?”

I have no idea. “I don’t think it’s a problem.”

I frowned at the lie. It was almost as if his spoken voice had interrupted his thoughts, yet I’d heard both clearly. I would’ve asked more questions, but I was suddenly distracted.

“Dr. Williamson’s coming,” I said. I could actually *hear* him outside, as though he were talking to himself. His mental voice grew louder as he got closer. I could hear him wonder what the problem was. *Holy*—My eyebrows shot up. I could sense his thoughts; that made it more real, somehow, than hearing Morris’s.

Dr. Williamson was dressed more casually today, but he was still impeccable. He radiated power and authority, like an idealized father figure. I could barely remember my own father, but took comfort in the impression that a competent, caring person was going to make everything okay.

What's wrong? I heard it as clearly as if Williamson had spoken aloud. In fact, his mental voice was louder and stronger than Morris's, as though it was amplified through a high-end sound system.

Maddie is already responding to the dodecamine. She can hear my thoughts.

But the blood test won't be back for —

Matilda gave her the first injection last night.

What? How much?

Morris's eyes flicked to the chart on the desk. 2 ccs.

But Maddie is still recovering from trauma! She is still having flashbacks and nightmares. The high residual cortisol and epinephrine levels would magnify the initial effects.

I felt cold blossom in my chest. *That doesn't sound good.* Dr. Williamson's head whipped around even before I spoke aloud. "Is that bad?" I asked.

He wasn't kidding. How much did she hear? "Did you hear what we were discussing?"

"I think ... I think I heard everything."

This isn't the way I would have introduced you to this. I thought you would do better with a gradual approach. I suppose Matilda thought this might help you adjust faster. His voice was in my head so I tried to frame my thoughts to answer him.

Am I going to be okay?

Physically, you should be fine.

He was concerned about my emotional stability. I hated being considered emotionally weak. I paused for a moment and concentrated on how I was feeling. This morning I felt okay. I wasn't nearly as freaked out about hearing other people's thoughts as I probably should've been. It seemed almost normal. *How weird*

is that? They were all babbling around me now; I could hear the two men in the room very clearly, especially Dr. Williamson. The other people in the building were there as background noise, like strangers talking down the hall at school.

A sudden, burning pain made me gasp and my concentration broke. I looked at Dr. Williamson, mentally demanding an explanation.

One of the sparks. He paused for a moment, as though listening. He seemed to be feeling the same pain; his brow furrowed and his jaw clenched. *Drew, I think.* “Morris, Drew McFee is on his way.”

Stupid sparks. Morris pulled some medical stuff out of a cabinet.

“What’s a spark?” I asked. It came out in a gasp. I trembled from the pain, which grew stronger with every passing second. It hurt like a fresh injury, yet I could feel that the pain wasn’t coming from my own body.

Beyond weird.

“Sparks is our name for people with pyrokinesis,” Dr. Williamson said. “They have the ability to control fire—make it move where they want it to go or make it die down.” He squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a moment and exhaled strongly. “Most of them can start fires, as well.”

Drew crashed through the infirmary door. It hit the wall hard enough to raise plaster dust from the new indentation made by the doorknob. Drew was tall and built like a linebacker—strong and wide—with red hair and blotchy brown freckles. Black marks singed his t-shirt and burns blistered his hands and torso. He carried another person over his shoulder. I realized with sudden dread that I couldn’t hear any thoughts from this person. *Is he dead?* Drew practically flung the other boy onto the exam table.

“It’s Harrison,” Drew said, breathing heavily. “He torched his own bed in his sleep... again.”

I watched as Morris moved into action, smoothly and without panic. He touched his hands to Harrison’s chest, and then gave an involuntary, inhaled hiss through his teeth as he assessed the extent of Harrison’s burns. *It’s bad.* I watched through his mind as he felt out the burns and injuries. It was a strange sensation—I could tell his thoughts were not my own, yet I was able to see how his mind worked with clarity, as if I was watching a movie from inside his head. His first priority was the heart and lungs. He checked to “feel” Harrison’s heart, and then mentally spider-walked through the delicate lung tissues, repairing burnt bits as he drew some kind of energy through the damaged portions. I had no idea how he was doing it.

Harrison regained consciousness just as Morris finished repairing his lungs. A scream filled his thoughts and the sudden awareness of his pain lashed through me. It was much worse than what I’d felt from Drew’s burns. I crumpled and bent over with a moan.

Drew moved quickly to my side. “Hey, are you okay?” I could feel his genuine concern though the pain. *She’s pretty, but too short.* It was such a guy thing—to be noticing what a girl looked like when he was in the middle of a trauma. “What’s wrong?”

I worked my way to the nearest cot and sat down heavily. I forced myself to refocus, trying to calm my racing heart and wild breathing. Morris applied first aid spray to Harrison’s burns before channeling energy through them. It must be a painkiller; the sprayed areas stopped hurting as intensely. I could think again and could finally feel things beyond the boy’s agony. Why would a guy with super healing powers use first-aid spray? Oh... antibacterial. There’d be no pockets of infection later.

Dr. Williamson had gone through the same experience I had—Harrison’s pain had also hit him strongly, although he seemed better prepared for it. As he clutched the doorframe to keep himself standing, he met my glance and I suddenly knew this was normal for people like us.

You’re handling this well.

Thanks. I smiled weakly. I felt clammy and sweaty. If this was taking it well, then a bad reaction must be horrible.

Next to me, Drew thought I was about to faint. From his point of view, I was not handling this well. He reached out to steady me and I flinched away from his hand, causing him to pull it back.

The minds of the other people in the room faded slightly into the background as I concentrated on Drew.

Oh, good. She’s not going to pass out. She’d be better looking if she were taller and had a bigger rack. She’s probably another charm... like we need another stuck-up bitch around here. Maybe if I’m nice to her before she gets the shot, she won’t force me to do crap later on.

“What’s a charm?” I asked him.

His face reflected the tumbling emotions of his thoughts. All of his concerns for my well-being were forgotten as he jerked back from me. *Crap! Not a charm. Minder! Did I have any sex thoughts about her? Don’t have any now!*

“Just that I needed a bigger rack.”

He laughed good-naturedly, embarrassed.

Decent guy.

Drew’s almost stereotypical head of Irish-red hair was sooty and disheveled, and his face was open and friendly. It matched his personality, as far as I could tell. I realized I was going to be able to tell a lot more about people from now on.

“So, what’s a charm?” I asked again.

Drew glanced at the others in the room before leaning in and telling me quietly, “Charms are what we call those who can ‘push’ people into doing what they say. It’s like hypnosis.”

“That Jedi-mind-trick stuff? ‘Forget I was ever here?’ That sort of thing?” I remembered Cecelia in the police station and the pull of her voice, telling me to forget.

Drew smiled at the *Star Wars* reference. “That’s it. Nearly half of the people here are charms. You’re only the fourth minder.” *Don’t think about sex!*

“Minder?”

“It’s what some people here call telepaths,” Drew replied, lowering his voice and glancing at Dr. Williamson.

I could’ve mentioned that Dr. Williamson could hear his thoughts so lowering his voice probably wasn’t doing anything useful, but I decided not to interrupt.

“It’s short for mind-reader, I think, but also it’s because they’re always in charge.”

I was going to be in charge?

His eyes met mine as he earnestly added, “Stay clear of the charms. They’re...”

Psychotic. Vicious.

“...they like to... um... use their abilities on the rest of us.” Drew’s fear and embarrassment twisted through me. I blushed in response.

Harrison sat up, rubbing his arm. The familiar pins and needles echoed to me from his newly-healed injuries. He looked around the room, trying to figure out where he was and how he’d gotten here. His eyes landed on Drew. I felt a wave of hot guilt radiate from him as he took in Drew’s burns.

“Sorry, bro,” he said, chagrined.

Drew popped up next to him and clasped a hand onto his shoulder. "No harm done." *Except to the bed. The fire is probably still going.*

Morris took the opportunity to heal the burns on Drew's hands and torso. Drew paid little attention to the process. His focus was on comforting Harrison, who seemed to view starting fires in his sleep as the pyrokinetic equivalent of bed-wetting. *Pathetic and embarrassing.* Their thoughts gave color commentary as they talked.

Apparently, Harrison accidentally set fires in his sleep a lot, so no one but Drew would room with him. Drew's fierce, bearish protectiveness toward his younger brother extended to the other sparks and felt almost tribal. Pyrokinetics weren't treated well by the other G-positives here at Ganzfield, at least in Drew's opinion.

It was odd—I didn't feel guilty reading other people's minds, at least at first. Then I remembered how invasive Dr. Williamson's intrusions into my thoughts had seemed yesterday. I guessed others might feel the same way about me. But what could I do? There was no way to cover my mental ears. If I drew my attention away from the thoughts of one person, someone else's immediately filled the void.

In the room directly above me, a girl named Rachel thought, *I wish Sean would ask me out*, and daydreamed about kissing him.

The damn sparks are going to burn this whole place to ashes someday. Morris's thoughts were sour as he stowed some medical equipment.

Someone had a song stuck in their head, much to our mutual annoyance, since now I kept hearing, *It's raining men! Hallelujah, it's raining men! Amen!*

I tried to shut out their minds, their thoughts, their feelings, but it wasn't like closing my eyes to block what I could see or covering

my ears to block what I could hear. There was no way to block out the incoming thoughts.

This could be a problem.

Dr. Williamson looked at me. *I'll show you a few things that will help.* He'd recovered from Harrison and Drew's pain. I was still a bit shaky.

Harrison stood up, fully healed. Drew looked at me, his friendly smile wide across his face. "See you at breakfast?"

Dr. Williamson answered him before I could. "Maddie needs a few more tests before she starts training."

Her name's Maddie. Drew made a mental note.

"Oh, okay. See ya, Maddie." He grabbed Harrison in a brotherly headlock as they left the building.

Dr. Williamson turned back to me. *Are you hungry?*

No.

Then let's get started.

The tests were laughably easy. They began with Zener cards—Morris looked at a plus sign, a circle, or some wavy lines, and I had to say aloud what he saw. We started face-to-face, then a room apart, and finally Morris was outside. I found that as Morris got farther from me, his mental voice faded, as well. Most of his thoughts centered on the fact that he was missing breakfast. I might not be hungry, but Morris was and his annoyance and hunger increased as the testing progressed. I felt a bit guilty about that, but Dr. Williamson seemed to think that Morris was a bit of a complainer.

After nearly two hours, Dr. Williamson released Morris to seek out the remnants of breakfast. We sat across from each other at the infirmary desk and Dr. Williamson bounced thoughts off of my

mind. I didn't need to answer aloud—he could hear what I was experiencing. It was exhilarating. Communication was so fast—so efficient—with almost no misunderstanding. I revved up to the challenge. It felt like taking a test that I knew I was going to ace. *No problem.* This was cool. Freakish, but cool. After several minutes, Dr. Williamson sat back with a sigh.

Wow.

How did I do? I waited for his response but I already knew. He'd never seen anyone become such a clear telepath so quickly. I felt a slight smugness at that; I love to be the best.

Welcome to Ganzfield.

I smiled. *Thanks.* If everything stayed this easy, this was going to be a great experience.

Of course thoughts like that only jinx the person thinking them.

CHAPTER 5

Once Dr. Williamson finished testing me, he called Rachel—the girl who had a crush on Sean—to be my guide for the day. I said nothing about the crush, of course, even though I didn't know anything else about her. I had a feeling I was going to be in on lots of secrets from now on. I might not be able to keep out of other people's heads, but at least I could be discreet about what I saw there.

Rachel Fontaine had at least six inches on me, but she held herself hesitantly so she didn't seem as tall. Pretty and blonde, she shared Drew's concern that I might be a charm. *What is it with the charms?* I was getting an ominous feeling about them. My memories of Cecelia, bored and disdainful in the police station, didn't help. Were they all like her? Why was everyone so wimpy about standing up to them? It didn't seem that hard to resist their ability.

Our first stop was the dorm room directly above the infirmary. It was her room, and now it was also mine. There was another bed

as well, so we probably had a third roommate. I grabbed a quick shower before dressing in jeans and a navy sweatshirt.

Looking in through the glass-paned French doors of the three rooms on the ground floor, I saw small classes of other teenagers. I suddenly realized this was a school. *Duh*. I felt stupid for not realizing it earlier.

One class discussed international relations. Yikes. Way more advanced than my AP history class. Some students concentrated and tried to keep up. The others drifted in their own sex fantasies, frenemy-dramas, or fears of charms. Many had the same intimidated feelings that Rachel and Drew had. What was wrong with this place? Why was Dr. Williamson allowing this bullying to continue?

The next class worked on memorizing different types of tanks and ordnance. The minds of the eight students in the class felt stupored by the material. I hoped I wouldn't be taking this class with them.

The third class worked on some kind of advanced physics. We heard some of the lecture: thermodynamics. *Ugh*. I recognized Drew and Harrison among the other students. Drew saw me in the doorway and gave me a smile. More than half of the class looked like they must be Drew and Harrison's close relatives. They all had the same red hair, bear-like build, and blotchy freckles. Another half dozen of the students were African-American—all similarly slender with prominent cheekbones.

Only one student looked different from the two main types—a tall, lanky guy with straight, dark-brown hair hanging too long over his eyes. As I looked through the door, the girl in front of him dropped her pencil. The guy with the dark-brown hair reached out, picked up the pencil, and put it back on the girl's desk.

But my eyes were on him and he hadn't actually moved.

Huh?

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I did a mental double-take. What had just happened? My eyes had been drawn to him; I'd been watching him the whole time. His body had remained behind the too-small desk in the relaxed sprawl of a guy who has recently finished a growth spurt. But I'd felt his thoughts. He'd seen the pencil fall and he'd reached out and picked it up. The pencil had moved up to the desk.

Who was this guy? How had he done that?

This place was getting weirder and weirder. Rachel led me past the infirmary and out of the building. The leaves glowed brilliant shades of red and orange in the crisp, cool air. I took in my surroundings, smiling as the babble of minds became less noticeable the further we got from the building.

In the daylight, the big, red barn between the two white farmhouses looked faded and run down. Its wide doors sagged on their hinges. Behind the barn, a huge, sloping field ended at a picturesque lake right out of a New Hampshire vacation brochure. Several squat, grey buildings clustered near the water's edge, lessening the postcard view. Power lines radiated among them from a central post, like the spindly legs of an enormous spider. The field and lake formed the bottom of a shallow valley. Low hills rose in a bowl around them, their dark trees already beginning to turn vivid orange in places. Several wind turbines topped the hill behind the lake. The distant mountain peaks blued with the haze of distance; the tallest of them already had snow.

A quick movement at the barn door caught my eye. A brindled, brown cat wiggled through one of the gaps and trotted into the field. I had a subtle, quiet image of mice hiding in the grass and a small pang of hunger. Hey! Could I read the minds of cats, too?

Next to me, Rachel daydreamed about Sean again. I noticed an invisible, shining line connecting her back to the building we had just left. I opened and closed my eyes a few times, wondering how I was seeing something that was invisible. *Weird*. Rachel had a clear picture in her head of the physics class, particularly of one of the red-haired guys who seemed to be enveloped in a pale glow. *That must be Sean*. The shimmering line she traced from him shifted and followed her as we walked. I figured the line must have something to do with her ability, whatever that was.

Rachel seemed to have little interest in conversation with me. No, it was more—*fear*. She was wary of me, trying not to draw attention to herself.

We stepped onto the large porch of the main building where Rachel continued her silent tour. Talking was largely unnecessary. Even if I hadn't been able to read her mind, I could figure out that the room on the second floor with all the books was the library and what the row of laundry machines in the basement was for. Rachel avoided the third floor; apparently that was off-limits to students.

We ended the silent tour in a large dining room. Ten narrow tables lined the walls; each looked to seat about eight. That probably meant that there were no more than eighty students, give or take. As people started filtering in, I followed Rachel's lead as she picked up a tray, chose a sandwich and soda, and then sat down at the table in the farthest corner. There was no cashier; I guessed we didn't have to pay.

I started to get a sense of the same high school hierarchy that I loathed at home. As my mind filled with dozens of people's thoughts, I began to pick out common threads. Sex was on the brain of a large chunk of them, and everyone who wasn't a charm seemed to be trying to avoid their notice.

A group of sparks came in together. Their laughter faded as several charms looked their way. The golden thread from Rachel's mind changed position, ending in a shimmer around the beloved Sean. A quick glance into Sean's mind showed he wasn't aware of Rachel's adoration. He was thinking about something called Fireball.

Fireball? That sounded interesting.

How rude was it for me to be looking into everyone's private thoughts? It was like I couldn't stop bumping into people in a crowded room, although no one noticed that I was doing it.

As students picked up their food and sat down, I felt the seating pattern become apparent. The tables along the wall with the windows were for the charms. The fear and the "be invisible" thoughts came from the side where Rachel had led me, which was now filling up as people sat with their friends. It was directional, like listening to their voices. The combination of the verbal and mental babble made the room seem doubly-full.

For a moment, I became lost in my new ability, pushing out with it and trying to zero in on the minds of specific individuals, figuring out which voices came from which people. I could easily keep more than one train of thought straight at a time. It was easier, at least, than trying to listen to two different people talk over each other. However, the constant, prattling input was beginning to wear at me. I couldn't shut out the thoughts pressing into my head.

A few people noticed me. It felt like catching sight of my own reflection in an unexpected place or hearing someone call my name—I couldn't ignore it. A few of the charms saw me, as well. The table across the center aisle from ours was now filled with them. Three girls discussed my appearance with catty superiority—apparently my sweatshirt wasn't fashionable enough for them.

I rolled my eyes. I was used to being persona non grata with the fashion police.

Two of the guys at the same table began to have fairly obscene thoughts about me. I felt myself blush as one mentally undressed me. The other one pictured me doing something perverted and humiliating. Anger washed over me in a wave of steel-grey energy. I could actually “see” it building around my skin. Cold clenched at my gut—twisting it—replacing the sickly pink heat of embarrassment. I put down my sandwich as I glared at the boys. Rachel saw my attention shift and she seemed to shrink into her chair.

The boys noticed my gaze as well. The tall, black-haired one might have been good-looking without the cruel smugness that seemed permanently etched into his features. “Hey, new girl.”

The people around me had gone quiet. Most of the thoughts around me were of the *uh, oh* and *oh, crap. Michael* variety. I gathered this was Michael and he was feared. Rachel had an intense, sickened feeling at the sight of him—like she wanted to cry. As I focused on his mind, I suddenly saw why. In a second or two, he was planning to use his charm ability to force me to feed him his lunch like a Roman slave girl. Later, he imagined getting me away from the group for a lap dance and other things—things that were much worse. Cold fury boiled within me, churning my gut into a lump of rock. I felt my jaw tighten.

“Come over here,” Michael said, his voice heavy with the resonance I’d heard once before in the police station—when Cecelia had told me to forget. I noticed Cecelia sitting at the next table, watching this exchange with cool interest and casual disapproval. I felt a small pull of obedience to Michael’s voice, but it wasn’t very strong. I brushed it away easily.

I met Michael's gaze. "Go to hell." I was amazed at how hard my voice had become; there wasn't even a quiver of fear. This wasn't like in the van. I was no longer powerless.

There were audible gasps from the people around us. The rest of the conversations in the dining room died down. People stared at me in shock. Some seemed amazed that I would dare be so rude in my refusal. A few others had grasped that I hadn't moved. Apparently, when Michael used his ability, people obeyed.

Michael's face and mind both flushed red. "I said, COME HERE!" He truly planned to humiliate me now; his status among the charms was at stake.

I could feel the power flowing through me, fueled by my steel-cold anger. I hadn't even been at Ganzfield a full day and I could see the inequality, cruelty, and just plain wrongness of how things were here. I was *not* going to be treated that way!

"I SAID NO!" Energy shot from me with each word.

Michael fell backward off of the bench, clutching his temples. I wasn't sure what I was doing or how I was doing it, but I could feel the power blasting into Michael like a taser to his brain.

What the hell am I doing?

As soon as I gained control I stopped, as surprised at myself as everyone else was. The echo of Michael's agony hit me as well and I winced, although it wasn't as painful as Harrison's burns had been. Was that because I was the source of his pain?

Except for Michael writhing on the floor, everyone in the room was staring, silent, and slack-jawed.

Staring at me.

On the floor, Michael's thrashing slowed and then stopped. *Oh, God—did I kill him, too?* Was this like the boys in the van? No, I could still feel emotions coming from him. Michael was terrified; he was in

pain; he felt weak and humiliated; he hated me. I guess that meant he was going to live. That was probably a good thing.

Probably.

This didn't feel like the attack in the van. I'd overloaded Michael's mind with my mental voice. "I SAID NO," reverberated through his head—slowly fading. He'd had no way to block the excruciating blast.

I felt slightly guilty I didn't feel more upset about hurting him, but I'd been justified. Would there be fallout from this? At the very least I'd made an enemy and, from what I could see, he was the kind who held a grudge.

Well, no one had promised me a fun-filled camping experience where I'd make best friends for life. And so far, it still beat being in New Jersey.

Only a few seconds had passed, although it felt as if time had slowed. From somewhere above me—I guessed the third floor—I heard the now-familiar mental voice of Dr. Williamson. *What is going on down there?* In the continuing silence of the dining hall, his rapid footfalls on the wooden staircase sounded ominously loud.

Okay, there was a distinct chance I was in trouble. My first thought was to run out, but I quickly threw that one aside. I really didn't know where I was or where I might go. Besides, I *had* been justified. I simply stood up straighter and turned toward the door. As Dr. Williamson entered the room, a sudden, cold realization hit me: he might be able to do to me what I'd done to Michael.

Dr. Williamson took in the scene quickly. I suspected he was already up-to-speed from hearing our thoughts. Still, several of the charms from Michael's table started thinking *she attacked him for no reason* at him.

The four of them all had facial expressions of wide-eyed innocence and shock. I looked in their minds and saw that they'd done this before. It was standard operating procedure to cover up the charms' worst behavior. Clearly, they didn't know how well telepaths could read their deceit. It showed plainly, as if they were holding up written signs that said, "We're lying."

Dr. Williamson ignored them and looked at me. *What happened?*

I showed him my thoughts by simply replaying my memory in my head, including what I'd seen in Michael's mind. I finished up and asked indignantly, *You allow this sort of thing here?*

No, if he'd actually done what he intended, he'd have been expelled from the program.

So what? You would have turned him loose out in the world? Let him hurt women that way? Do you know what kind of pain... what kind of damage that would cause? My eyes filled, blurring my vision. I told myself the tears were from anger and I wiped them away.

No. He'd have been confined until his most recent dose of dodecamine left his system before he'd be allowed to leave the compound.

It was only as I received this reassurance I realized that the entire dining hall was still silent. Everyone sat watching Dr. Williamson and me staring at each other. It didn't seem silent, though, as their thoughts filled my mind.

New minder on the loose!

She's more dangerous than the sparks!

Ooh, she's a telepath like Dr. Williamson.

What's her name?

I don't care if she's dangerous. I'd still do her.

Where are they going to put her? She can't stay with us!

I hope she fried Michael. Maybe they'll finally cut him off and kick him out.

I held Dr. Williamson's gaze. *Check his mind—he's been hurting the other students. It seems like everyone here is scared of the charms.*

Dr. Williamson looked at me sadly. *Unfortunately, the charms need to practice their abilities. If they cross the line, they get kicked out.*

If that's not over the line, then the line needs to be redrawn. I glared back, a little shocked at my forwardness. Wait, was I allowed to talk to him like this?

Dr. Williamson smiled. *Part of your training here is learning how to use your ability to redraw the lines. Go for it.*

Okay, I hadn't expected that. What was this place? Had I just been made sheriff of some supernatural, Lord-of-the-Flies high school? What the hell?

He heard that train of thought and chuckled aloud. *Here are the rules. You cannot kill. You cannot maim or cause other permanent damage. You cannot compel someone to have sex. You cannot use your abilities on instructors. If you break the rules, you'll stop receiving dodecamine and you'll revert to a regular person with occasional flashes of insight. Then you will leave and never return.*

I swallowed hard. Dr. Williamson wasn't as nice as he looked.

Ganzfield is a training facility for people with extraordinary abilities. Normal rules are unenforceable, at least in normal ways. And we have enemies—enemies in the real world who don't play by the rules. We need to toughen up the people in this program... to prepare them for what they'll face when they leave here.

That threw me.

Enemies? It sounded as if we were being trained as soldiers in a secret war.

It's not quite that bad anymore, but it could come to that again. The Sons of Adam know about this place now. Maddie, when the dodecamine reaches full effectiveness in you, you'll probably be very powerful. I hope

you'll use your ability to do great things. We have very few telepaths, and most of us can't stand to be around other people very much. There was a pang in Dr. Williamson's thoughts as he said this—a sense of loss that I couldn't quite pinpoint.

I can see why. It's exhausting hearing everyone's thoughts all the time. How do you shut them out?

Dr. Williamson shook his head. *You can't. You can only get used to them... or get away from them. When I return, I'll arrange for a cabin for you away from the other buildings so you'll have a place to escape.*

When you return? You're leaving? I felt a flutter of panic. I was being thrown to the wolves of a sociopathic high school—sociopathic, adolescent wolves. Yikes!

If you need anything, Seth will be in charge. With that, Dr. Williamson turned and left. My jaw hung open as I stared at where his back had been. I had no idea who Seth was or what he'd be in charge of if there were no rules to enforce. At least I wasn't going to be punished for incapacitating Michael, who'd managed to sit up and now regarded me with sullen, wary hatred as he rubbed the back of his neck.

The phrase *hell of a way to run a railroad* passed through my mind and I wondered if it had originated in my own head or someone else's. I couldn't place the source. With Dr. Williamson's departure, the conversations around me restarted, although they were hushed.

I avoided looking at anyone as I sat back down and deliberately finished my sandwich. I took small bites so the lump in my throat wouldn't choke me when I forced myself to swallow. As I chewed, I sampled the thoughts around me.

No wonder I couldn't charm her; she's defective. That came from Cecelia.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head slightly. *Nice.*

Pretty much everyone seemed afraid of me. At least that had a silver lining; the charms weren't going to bother me for a while. No... wait. Two of the guys at Cecelia's table quietly considered getting a group to work together. Would their combined abilities be enough to force me to do something?

"An ambush, with overwhelming force."

"She won't be able to retaliate against everyone."

I pulled their names out of each other's minds. Alex. Josh. I'd need to know my adversaries.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Two tables away, I felt someone think, *She's brave, but I bet she was really scared.* It seemed somehow... warmer... more pleasant than the other mental contacts I'd experienced so far. I searched out the source and my eyes met those of the lanky, dark-haired guy who'd picked up the pencil without moving. After a second he smiled—a grin that lifted into his brown eyes. *Hi, telepath. If you can hear me, welcome to Ganzfield. I have a feeling you're going to make things very interesting around here.*

I felt myself smiling back and I dropped my gaze as I flushed pink. Wow. I couldn't believe I was reacting like some gooey, crush-struck teenager—not with all of the other things I had to deal with right now. But there was something that drew me to this guy. He was different somehow.

Special.

People gradually relaxed and returned to their normal lunch routines. Rachel stood up to leave, and I followed her back to the other building, listening to her unspoken freak-out as we went. *What did she do to Michael? Is she dangerous? Should I be afraid of her?*

We sat down in one of the empty classrooms. I gathered that one of the afternoon classes would start here soon and that Rachel and I

were supposed to be in it. Several people came to the door, saw me, and then kept walking. *I know I'm supposed to show her around today, but is there a way I can leave without pissing her off? I don't want to be rude to the dangerous telepath.*

Finally, I turned to her with an exasperated sigh and said, "You know what he was going to make me do, right?"

Rachel startled as if I'd snarled at her. I rolled my eyes, annoyed at this timidity. "Geez, I'm not out to get you or anything. What's wrong with this place?"

Rachel looked at me, her thoughts a confused jumble. *Should I tell her what it's really like here? How the charms run the place like they're the Varsity Hypnotizing Team, treating everyone else like A.V. club nerds?*

I took a risk and let her see what I could do. "Varsity Hypnotizing Team?"

Rachel went very pale. She moved her mouth silently for a few seconds, trying to make something coherent come out.

I smiled in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. I wanted to make friends here—or at least allies. "Yeah, I guess I'm a mind reader."

The smile helped. Rachel smiled back, warming to me. *The charms avoid her, so maybe she's the lesser of two evils.* It was faint praise, but I could work with that.

"So, what's the deal with this place?"

"Ganzfield?"

"Yeah. How did it start?"

"My Uncle Charlie was one of the founders back in the late 1990s."

Cool. She was an expert.

"He and Dr. Williamson were part of a government project that tried to use extrasensory perception to spy on the Russians."

“The Star Gate Program?” Dr. Williamson had mentioned something about it.

“Yeah. It’s declassified now. You can Google it. Uncle Charlie’s an RV, like me.”

“RV?”

“Remote Viewer. For, like, twenty years, Project Star Gate tried to enhance people’s ability to locate people or objects wherever they were. It was like, ‘the missiles are hidden in this valley in Hungary,’ or, ‘there’s a battalion of tanks stationed at this Soviet base.’ That sort of thing.”

The golden thread to Sean I’d seen in her mind must be part of this RV ability. I didn’t want to embarrass her by bringing it up, though. There was something brittle and fragile about her that didn’t want to get too close to others.

“So...” Rachel continued. “Then the Cold War ended and the U.S. government didn’t need to keep up with Russia’s psychic spy program. Around the same time, the genetic sequence common to all G-positives was discovered. That led to dodecamine—a drug that activated the genes the same way growth hormones cause a growth spurt.

“Dr. Williamson and Uncle Charlie were some of the first people to get the treatment. It worked better in them than it did in most subjects. Uncle Charlie said that Dr. Williamson and one of the first charms convinced several senators and congressmen to kill and discredit the program. The G-positives were then able to start again in the private sector. Dr. Williamson handled the funding.” Rachel didn’t say, *...by going down to Wall Street and reading the minds of investment bankers for inside information*, but the thought bounced through her mind with the savory tang of a secret.

“Where’s your Uncle Charlie now? Does he live here, too?”

Rachel shook her head, unfocused her eyes, and concentrated. In her mind, I saw golden threads shoot out in all directions from her, like a tiny sun. Several of them faded after a few seconds, then more and more, until only one direction remained. She seemed to travel along that line as though flying—the world blurring around her—until an image filled her head. In her mind, I could see a gorgeous beach with a pudgy, sunburned man in a lounge chair in the center of the mental picture. After a moment, she smiled. “Looks like he’s back in Cancun.”

“Cancun?”

“Yeah. He’s on the beach. It’s sunny. He’s wearing a bathing suit and his favorite fishing hat is down over his face. I think he’s taking a nap.”

I didn’t mention that I could see it, too. I gathered that Uncle Charlie was somehow retired from all of this.

“That’s a neat trick.”

Rachel pinked with pleasure at the compliment.

“Why do you think you can do that and I can read minds? Why do we have different abilities?”

“Uncle Charlie said we all work with energy... that we all basically do the same thing in different ways. Like... if you and I both catch a cold, I might have a stuffy nose and a sore throat. You might notice the sore throat more and maybe have a cough. Or like that mental illness where people have to wash their hands fifty times a day, or count the cracks in the sidewalk, or check that their stove is off every two minutes?”

“Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?”

“Yeah. The symptoms show up in different ways, but the underlying cause is the same.”

“I saw a guy. He was tall and had dark brown hair. He picked up a pencil... sort of without touching it.”

Rachel smiled. “That must’ve been Trevor Laurence. He’s really nice. Trevor’s the only telekinetic here.”

“Telekinetic? He moves things with his mind? How is that possible?” Despite having seen it, I was still confused. From his thoughts, it felt as though he’d simply picked it up with his hand. I was still trying to process the sensory disconnect between what my eyes and my mind had experienced. It was like looking at that picture of a vase that suddenly became two faces in profile.

And he smiled at me in the dining hall...

“No clue how it works. They run a lot of tests on him. Trevor’s friends mostly with the sparks.” I noticed her thoughts turn back to Sean as she mentioned the sparks. Rachel was about to say more, but a bell rang, and reluctant students trickled into the classroom followed by an instructor who noticed me only as the “new girl.”

We sat through traditional high school classes for two hours: English composition and Calculus. The Ganzfield program had classes for sophomores, juniors, and seniors, although the upper grade classes were larger since most G-positives came here for about two years. These courses were simply to keep us at the right grade level while we learned how to use our abilities.

After calculus we had a short break. Most people hurried over to the dining hall to grab a soda or a snack. As she packed up her books, the calculus instructor—a middle-aged woman whose name I forgot within a few seconds of hearing it—said I should, “Go find Seth for your practical,” and gave me curt directions to a cabin halfway around the lake.

Before I could ask her who Seth was or what a “practical” was, she bustled out of the classroom and left the building. A quick glance into her mind showed she was already thinking about what she would make for dinner and whether the cat needed to go to the vet. There was nothing about this Seth person.

I considered getting a snack or something to drink, but the idea of going back to the dining hall made my appetite vanish. Perhaps I’d discovered a new form of weight loss: the humiliation-avoidance diet. As I went outside, I heard the distant strains of singing coming from the main building. It sounded like a small choir or singing group practice—except I could hear the charm resonance in their voices.

Siren song. Great, just great.

I headed toward the lake, trying to remember the directions to find Seth. Was this the same Seth who Dr. Williamson said would be in charge? Was he a minder, too?

Several people gathered in a cleared area near the water’s edge. A huge, whooshing burst of flame jumped up from the center of the group, mushrooming into a ball of fire about three feet wide and hovering about twenty feet in the air above them.

Whoa.

I stopped stock-still, watching with my mouth hanging open. The flaming ball seemed to quiver in place, and then move in jerking bursts back and forth several times until it broke free and soared, still airborne, away from the group. Three people ran with it—two guys and a girl—their hands upraised toward the ball of flame, pushing at the air and jostling one another. Several others fanned out to take positions on what I realized was a playing field. I remembered Sean’s thoughts about something called Fireball. This must be it.

The group headed toward the goalie, a dark-skinned girl with high cheekbones and many braids that she wore tied back from her face. She protected a large, oblong watering trough, the kind used for farm animals. As the ball of fire approached, the goalie lifted her hands and braced herself, as though physically pressing against the incoming ball of flame. I saw flickers of light reflected in the beads of sweat on the players' faces and arms. They seemed to push the ball back and forth; it wavered in the air in front of the trough several times. Suddenly, the goalie called out, "Mel!" and the fireball flew directly at a red-haired girl near the sidelines. Mel raised her hands to a point where they nearly touched the flames. It slowed slightly then shot upward and over her like a comet, launching toward the trough at the other end of the playing field.

As I moved cautiously closer, I could pick out thoughts of strategy and gameplay from the players' minds. It seemed pretty simple: ignite a light framework of wire and cloth then try to dunk the fireball into the opposing team's water trough. I found that most of their thoughts focused on the game, and it was clearer and less chaotic than hearing thoughts on many different themes simultaneously. Their exhilaration—their joy at playing, using their abilities, and being part of a team—filled me. I found myself getting caught up in the game. The sparks' awareness of the fire seemed to hum through their bodies and sing in their blood. They could actually feel it—like it was an extension of themselves. There was no fear of fire in any of them; on the contrary, they loved it.

Another of the red-headed boys played goalie for the other team. He attempted to block the incoming fireball, but it came in too fast. He flinched out of the way as it singed his hair and plunged into the water trough behind him with a hiss of sizzling steam.

A high-pitched cheer went up from several of the players, and a chorus of female voices shouted, “Goodness Gracious, Great Balls Of Fire!” I suddenly realized they were playing girls versus guys. The scorer jogged back to the center of the field; two of her teammates patted her on the back.

The red-headed goalie for the boys’ team made a running jump into the lake to cool the burns on his face and arms. As he slogged back out of the water, dripping and smoke-streaked, Matilda, the healer from the infirmary, stood up from a metal bench along the sidelines. While another player headed out from the bench to cover the goal, Matilda’s healing pins-and-needles spun through the goalie’s face and arm. *Gah—I can’t believe I let her score! I should’ve—ow—should’ve been able to block that one. I’m better than that.* The goalie barely noticed the pain of his blistered skin. In his experience, burns were more common than letting goals in.

I watched for several more minutes, although no one scored again. It was a lot like soccer, although this soccer ball was three feet wide, flying, and on fire. Finally, I forced myself away to find this Seth person.

I saw the cabin under a stand of trees about halfway around the lake. It took me nearly twenty minutes to walk the meandering trail that loosely followed the water’s edge.

Too loud! The single thought filled my head. I stopped where I was. *New minder?*

I understood what he meant. Distantly, I could feel my thoughts in his mind, bouncing in like the bass from an unwelcome car stereo. It wasn’t so distant to him—it was loud and brash and he felt annoyed. No, it was stronger than that. He felt—assaulted by my presence, even though I was still out of his sight. I guessed that two telepaths could converse by reading each other’s minds, even

without purposefully sending out thoughts. I had a brief flash of confusion. While I could hear his mind more strongly than other people's, Dr. Williamson hadn't had this response to my thoughts. I also hadn't had this reaction with other minders.

Well, good for you. Seth's thoughts dripped sarcasm. I tried to quiet my mind, but I wasn't really sure how to do that.

It won't help. Just go away.

I tried not to be offended.

Please go.

That made it a little better.

I turned around and made my way back along the path. I hadn't gotten within fifty feet of Seth, but I'd made his acquaintance. Apparently, I was not going to get a "practical," which I now assumed must be a lesson in using our special abilities.

At least not today.

Too bad. I had a lot of questions about how telepathy worked. Why could some of us project thoughts and others only hear them? Why was I too loud to Seth but he wasn't too loud to me? And what had happened in the van? How had I killed those boys? Could anyone else do that—kill people by overloading their minds? Should I be worried? Well... more worried?

I considered going back to see the rest of the Fireball game, but then I noticed thoughts softly bombarding me from the surrounding trees. I stopped, closed my eyes, and focused. The mental flutter came from birds, squirrels, and a few other creatures. They were mostly thinking about food. It was all images, smells, and a few sounds—there were no words. I opened my mind wide, attending to as much as I could, suddenly deciding I would make my own practical lesson. A bird took flight from a tree branch above me and I flowed into its mind, feeling the sensation of beating against the air

with wings, of moving swiftly with the land falling away beneath me.

Flying!

A lightness filled me, as though I was also in the air. The feeling grew fainter and then died out as the bird flew out of my range. I took a long, slow breath, feeling the cool autumn air fill my lungs. I was away from people out here. I took another breath, cleansing my soul with the quietness, the smell of fallen leaves, and the dampness of live trees and earth. The only thoughts were from the animals; they were gentle, like a pattern on wallpaper. If I concentrated on them, I could notice the details. Otherwise, they just faded into the background like the sound of crickets on a summer night.

A second trail broke away from the one I'd been on. I followed it away from the lake, noting the direction so I could find my way back. A couple of anxious deer sheltered under the orange canopy of leaves, wordlessly wanting me to go away. I walked on, hearing the quiet thoughts of animals, the rustle of an occasional breeze through the trees, the crunching thuds of my footfalls on leaves, twigs, and dirt. After a few minutes, another building caught my eye. It seemed to glow faintly in the golden afternoon light. The path opened into a clearing where a white, steeple-topped church overshadowed an old graveyard. Granite stones tilted in their rows like crooked teeth. I went closer—graveyards had never bothered me. The cemetery at home was the only place I'd been able to visit with my father. I used to go and sit by his grave. When I was younger, I'd even had conversations with him, although I'd been the one doing all the talking. I frowned. I hadn't done that in a long time.

This cemetery dated from the early 1800s. The most recent stones I could find were those of a husband and wife who'd died within a

few months of each other in the 1970s. I did some quick math on the dates; they had both been in their nineties. Most of the names on the stones had Eaton or Blake as a surname or middle name. A few had both in combination. They were probably all related; generations who had lived and died here until that last couple. I wondered about them. Had they been the last of their line? Or had their children moved away and made new lives for themselves, away from their old family home?

I smiled. The minds of the dead didn't intrude on my thoughts.

Peaceful.

The church was a little run down and it looked unused. The black door wore so many layers of paint that the details carved into the wood were now merely lumps—like ancient, eroded foothills. Another path led away from this side of the clearing, back into the woods. If my internal map was correct, it went toward the main building.

The door was unlocked, so I pushed it open. I didn't hear anyone's thoughts—no one was here. The small room just inside the door was dark and my eyes took a few moments to adjust. The low ceiling ran the front width of the building, and the windowless space was just wide enough to buffer the inner areas from the cold of a New Hampshire winter. Empty bars hung at eye level along each of the side walls. Had they once been coat racks? I pushed through the inner doors and into a single, large, high-ceilinged room. It was plain white and the old wooden floor had central paths worn into it from generations of pious feet. Shutters covered most of the tall, narrow windows and slivers of light entered between the slats. A single, missing shutter allowed a rectangle of golden afternoon light to fall toward the front of the space, illuminating the raised dais and its short railing. There were no pews, but the remains of

an ancient coal stove squatted in one corner. Half a dozen cots had been pushed against the back wall, along with a pile of blankets, pillows, and other bedding. This must be for housing overflow if they ran out of space in the dorm buildings, or perhaps these were extra beds. I remembered Drew thinking that Harrison's bedding had been set on fire. Maybe he'd take one of these back to wherever he slept.

I stood silently for minute, feeling reverent, although I wasn't a very religious person. I thought about these special abilities we all had. Were they part of a divine plan? In earlier centuries, we might've been thought of as witches. Were our abilities inherently good or evil—part of something greater than this program? Were they natural? Supernatural?

I liked this place. I felt a sense of peace here that I couldn't find around other people. I walked slowly back, taking the path from the front door. I was right; it led back to the main building. I noted the entrance into the woods as I stepped back into the world. I could come back to this church when Ganzfield got too intense.

I thought again about Seth and how I'd been "too loud" for him. I wasn't at my full abilities at this point, but would other people become too loud to me as well? Would I find it necessary to live away from them—alone and isolated?

Why had Dr. Williamson left him in charge? I suddenly realized I probably knew the answer. Minders must be immune to the charms. We could tell when they were using their abilities. Other G-positives—even other charms—might not be able to do that. I'd have to ask Dr. Williamson when he returned.

I grabbed some food from the dining hall and ate outside on an old granite bench. The sunset over the lake was pretty enough, but the cold stone seeped up painfully through my jeans. I returned

to my new dorm room. Blake House was blissfully empty of other minds, although the mental babble from the dining hall echoed faintly in my head.

A stack of books and a course schedule rested on the end of my bed, so I changed into a t-shirt and PJ pants and settled down to read. If I was going to take part in this program, I was going to master it.

An Introduction to Psychology. That made sense; I was going to be spending a lot of time in other people's heads. What else? More books on neurology and psychology... and a manual on FBI interrogation techniques. What the hell did they want me to do with that? I had another queasy twist in my gut. What kind of program was this? I put the manual face down under the bed then picked up *Introduction to Psychology* and skimmed the first few chapters.

The thoughts of other students returning to the building after dinner hit my mind before their voices hit my ears. They buzzed with a jumble of intense emotions, concerns, dramas, fears, and joys as their footfalls creaked up the wooden stairs. I was getting better at locating each mind. Most of the charms climbed up to the attic. The entire top floor was a large common room with couches and a large television.

Some of the charms felt intimidated by the others. Huh. I hadn't noticed that earlier. But now, I was able to flit from mind to mind with my own personal window into the drama that filled everyone's heads.

—glad I wasn't the one Victor had licking the bottoms of his shoes—
—want to be alone with him. But if we go back to my room and start kissing and stuff, can I charm him to stop before he can charm me to take off my—
—pathetic loser can't even keep from being—

—if she looks this way, I'll charm her to leave me alone before she can —
—still called "brown nose" after being charmed to kiss his a—
—hate him, hate him, hate him, hate him, want him dead—
—three days since she told me to shut up and no one's taken it off. I may never talk again and no one cares—

Yikes. Charms could charm each other. No wonder they were scared. For them, every social interaction carried the threat of mind control. And I'd thought high school in New Jersey had been full of games. Wow...

A sudden flash of icy fear grabbed my attention. Rachel and another girl stood in the doorway. The girl stared at me, wide-eyed. Her memory of Michael, the charm, falling to the floor of the dining hall hit me like a brick to the head.

Rachel's eyes darted between us. "Uh... Hannah... this is Maddie. She's new." *What's wrong? Am I missing something? Something dangerous?*

"Hi," I said, sitting up.

Hannah was a fair-skinned African-American girl—tiny and bird-delicate. A small, gold cross hung around her neck. Her horror flavored my mind with sour tension. *Now there's one in my room? I don't want to stay here anymore. I just want to go home where people are nice.*

Crap.

What was I supposed to do about this? My new roommate found the dog-eat-dog environment of Ganzfield overwhelming, and she looked at me as though I was the newest pit bull in the kennel.

I shrugged and tried to go back to my book, but it was hard to concentrate with Hannah's incoming thoughts. The other mental voices filling the building didn't help, either. They were louder

now—much louder than they'd been this morning. How bad were they going to get?

Rachel looked from me to Hannah, trying to figure out what was going on. She waited until Hannah went down the hall to the bathroom before asking me about it.

"She saw what happened in the dining hall today and she doesn't want to have anything to do with me. In fact, she just wants to go home," I explained.

Rachel silently processed this for a few seconds. She knew what Michael was capable of, and she was sure I must've been defending myself. Apparently, Hannah didn't have the same experience.

"Why don't the charms pick on Hannah?"

Rachel's surprise only lasted a second. *Oh, that's right—minder.* "Hannah's a healer."

"And the charms don't pick on healers?"

"They might need them. They don't have much respect for the RVs or the sparks, though. They know the RVs can't hurt them and the sparks will be expelled if they light up in a building or attack another student. Also, we're not the ones being trained for the most valuable positions. Charms are placed in the most important government and diplomatic jobs."

"Why? What's the plan?" I'd wondered what the big picture was.

"Well, we need to have G-positive people in positions of power and influence. There are groups out there who think people like us should be removed from society. Isolated. Sterilized."

Killed.

I grew cold and my gut clenched as images of concentration camps and witch burnings filled my head. "What groups?"

"One calls themselves the Sons of Adam. They started when the Star Gate Program went public. They think we're dangerous

mutants. They keep a pretty low profile. Most people think they're nuts." *And there was the man who wanted to kill us all, just like he killed Aunt Lucy.*

"Aunt Lucy?"

The color drained out of Rachel's face and she shook her head. Flashes crossed her memory from when she must have been about seven years old, listening behind a closed door as adults discussed what had happened to Lucy. *Torture. Vivisection.*

I covered my mouth with my hands. I felt like I might throw up. *Oh, God.*

"I'm so sorry," I said.

Hannah stood in the doorway. "What's going on?" She looked at me accusingly. *What is she doing to Rachel?*

I felt the now-familiar heat of anger wash through me. "I'm not doing anything to her! We were just talking." The rage pushed me on. "And another thing... you're a healer, so you don't know all of the crap that the charms put the RVs and the sparks through here. Michael has been... a bully." I would've said he was torturing people, but the images of actual torture conjured by Rachel's memories gave me a little perspective. "If you paid a little more attention to what everyone else was going through here instead of just being homesick and wallowing in self-pity, you'd understand why I did what I did in the dining hall today."

I then put my nose back into my book and pointedly ignored Hannah. I forced myself not to smile as she considered what I'd just said. I'd hit the right nerves—now hot, sickly-sweet guilt flavored her thoughts. She stared at her laptop screen without seeing it.

Hannah was no longer afraid of me. Now she twisted with shame. *I've been so selfish... so un-Christian.* I didn't leave her suffering her own self-recriminations for long.

The sound of my voice made her jump. “Look, let’s start over. I’m Maddie.” I gave my best apology face.

Score!

Maybe I didn’t need this psychology book I was reading. Hannah sighed and gave me a tentative smile. “Hannah.”

“Where’re you from?”

“California... near Los Angeles.”

“You miss it.”

She tightened her lips and looked out the window for a moment, as though she could see all the way home. She nodded.

“How’d you end up here?”

“Dr. Williamson knew my grandmother from Project Star Gate. He tracked us down last year and did DNA cheek swabs on us. My little brothers are both twelve. We’re all G-positives.” *And in a couple of years, they’ll have to come to this place, too.*

“The worst part is not being able to tell my friends why I had to leave.” I saw two girls vividly in her thoughts; the three of them had been best friends since kindergarten. Hannah felt cast adrift without them.

“Why didn’t your parents come here with you? Aren’t they G-positives, too? Isn’t that where you got it?”

“Some of the parents are; some are just carriers. It’s a recessive genetic trait. But we’re here because the dodecamine treatment works best on immature brains.”

Rachel gave a quick, hesitant laugh. “We’re immature?”

“Yeah. We’ve been discussing it in anatomy class. The dodecamine causes the basal nuclei in the brain to go into overdrive, building connections throughout the brain. Fully adult brains are less adaptable. The changes have to take effect while we’re still undergoing a lot of myelination, and the last big burst is during

adolescence. Most G-positives who get dodecamine for the first time as adults don't get very strong abilities."

I'd been wondering why there wasn't a wider age range here, and I could see why they wouldn't give such abilities to younger children. A six-year-old with the power to force people to do his will? Yikes.

We shut off our reading lights when a thunder of footfalls came from the attic stairs. The boys were all leaving the building and going to their dorm—wherever that was. Apparently, we all went to sleep by 11 p.m. here at Ganzfield. Once Hannah closed her laptop, the darkness in our room was complete.

I thought about my mom. I hadn't emailed her or anything. Ah hell. Now I felt deflated by my own insensitivity. My laptop was still in my bag—I'd seen it when I'd grabbed my nightclothes. I couldn't call—the surrounding mountains cut off cell phone reception. My phone's battery was probably dead anyway—it never held a charge for very long. I still needed to finish unpacking to see if I even had my charger. I made a silent promise to email my mom in the morning.

All around me, the minds of my roommates and the girls in the surrounding rooms settled, and then drifted into silence. *Sleep!* I couldn't hear people when they were asleep! I might be able to get some rest here, after all.

Oh, it's you. The girl who's too loud. The thought came from outside the building.

Seth?

This is bed check. Go to sleep. You're too loud. I can't hear the others clearly.

Sorry. Okay... going to sleep—now.

I could actually feel him rolling his eyes. Listening to his mind didn't seem to distract him the way my own thoughts did, though, so I followed Seth's check as he counted us. Thirty-one charms, twenty sparks, eleven RVs, four healers, three—no, four—minders, and one telekinetic. Of these, eighteen girls were assigned to this building.

Seth seemed to be a stronger telepath than me. He could hear and identify minds, even when they were asleep. Once he identified we were all female and accounted for, Seth silently faded out of my range.

CHAPTER 6

Mike grabbed me and pulled me into the van. He punched me in the jaw. Del held me by the arm then ripped my shirt down the front.

Help!

I bolted upright, jerked awake by the sound of screaming. The light from the moon cast a blue-grey glow on one side of Rachel's face. She sat up as well, wide-eyed and breathing fast, clutching the front of her nightshirt to her. In Rachel's mind, I saw Del's drunken face as it had loomed over her.

No!

In the moonlight, Hannah absentmindedly rubbed her jaw. She still felt the phantom sting of the punch to the face.

Oh my God.

I could feel thoughts from other rooms in the house—four other girls in Blake House were suddenly awake, shaken by the same nightmare.

My nightmare.

I watched as Rachel and Hannah both settled back to sleep. *Just a bad dream.* They hadn't noticed each other's reactions. My heart raced and I felt my hands trembling, although I couldn't see them. I hugged my arms tightly around myself, pressing my chin to my chest and squeezing hard to make the shaking stop.

I'd sent them my dream. I must be able to send thoughts as well as receive them, like Dr. Williamson did. That would be a cool thing if I could control which thoughts I sent. The horror of having my every private thought broadcast to the world filled me with dread. No wonder Seth lived alone in a cabin in the middle of nowhere.

I needed my own cabin, and I needed it soon.

Now.

The sudden thought of the empty church had me on my feet and looking for my shoes. There were even beds there; it'd be perfect. No one would have to share my nightmares if I slept there. It was getting colder and I was just wearing a t-shirt and PJ pants, so I wrapped the blue and green quilt from my bed around my shoulders. Stepping lightly on the stairs, I tried not to make any noise as I left the building.

I remembered where to find the path and the moon was bright enough for me to see where I was going. The white church glowed faintly to my dark-adjusted eyes. I pushed open the inner doors to the sanctuary.

My sanctuary.

It was darker inside, but the glimmer of moonlight that fell through the broken shutter was enough for me to see the outlines of the empty beds against the wall next to me. I grabbed a sleeping bag from the pile and unrolled it on the nearest cot. The pillow had a musty, camping smell, but I could live with it. The silence enveloped me and I felt the tension drain out of my body. With the gentle touch

of a few nocturnal animals fluttering against my consciousness, I fell asleep.

Mike forced me down on the floor of the van. He punched me in the face. Del grabbed my shirt and yanked. Mike reached for the front of my jeans.

The van door squealed open. Mike suddenly flew backward through the air, slamming hard against the far wall of the garage. Shovels and rakes clattered to the cement floor. Del flipped end-over-end, tumbling against the closed garage door. The impact of his shoulder cracked the wooden panel. Carl, still huddled in the corner, emitted a painful “oof” sound as something unseen pinned him back.

Trevor stood in the doorway of the van, looking at Carl.

Trevor?

What was Trevor doing here? His normally kind, brown eyes glared at my attackers. They softened with concern as they focused on me. “Are you alright?”

A wave of conflicting thoughts filled me as my worlds collided in strange, surreal ways. I no longer felt the terror of the attack.

A dream.

Oh, this was just a dream. Trevor was here and I was safe. I didn’t like the idea of being a damsel in distress, but having a white knight come to my rescue kinda worked for me right now.

Trevor tried to gauge my reaction. I exhaled a shaky breath and nodded. He extended his hand to me. I held my torn shirt closed with my other hand as I stood.

Behind him in the garage, Del got to his feet. He grabbed one of the fallen shovels from the floor and rushed Trevor.

“Look out!” I cried.

Mike stopped mid-stride—like he’d hit an invisible wall. After a quick moment, he flew backward and slammed against the garage wall with a sickening thud.

A splintering clatter pulled me out of my subconscious. I had only a second to look into Trevor’s eyes as the dream-world disintegrated, leaving me breathing hard in a swirl of fading images.

Something in the church rolled through the blackness with a hollow, wooden sound, and the dream—*my* dream—floated half-remembered in someone else’s mind.

Trevor.

Someone’s in here. I could feel the tingle of trepidation flow through him.

“I am,” I said aloud, hearing my voice echo slightly. “I’m here.”

“Maddie?” The threads of the dream revived slightly in his head as he tried to figure out what was real. For my part, I had a sudden rush of warmth as I realized that Trevor knew my name, but it died as soon as I realized now he also knew my nightmare.

A flashlight clicked on in the middle of the large room. The beam swung over to hit me in the face and I flinched at the sudden brightness.

“Maddie?” Trevor asked again, sliding the light down so I was no longer blinded. “What are you doing here?”

I felt my cheeks flush. I seemed to be blushing a lot around Trevor. At least it probably wasn’t obvious in the dim light. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you. I didn’t know anyone else was here.”

“You didn’t wake me. I had a... dream.” He was suddenly embarrassed; the warm, sick feeling flowed off him in waves. “You shouldn’t be in here. It’s dangerous.” *I’m dangerous.*

I felt a sudden, strong desire to comfort him. “How are you dangerous? That was *my* dream!”

Confusion. “What?”

I stood up, wrapping the quilt around my shoulders again and checking that the front of my shirt was still intact. I walked over to where Trevor sat up on a solitary mattress on the floor in the center of the room. “I came out here because...” it spilled out of me in a confessional rush. “Apparently, I’m the kind of telepath who can broadcast thoughts as well as hear them and I woke everyone up in the dorm with my nightmare tonight.” I felt like crying.

Trevor might not be a telepath, but he picked up on my distress easily enough. “Hey, it’s okay.” He set the flashlight next to him on the floor so that it pointed straight up, creating a small fountain of light. It dimly reflected off the white ceiling and revealed a constellation of dust motes that swirled in the air above us. Still in his sleeping bag, Trevor pulled his legs to the side and gestured for me to have a seat on the mattress.

I hesitated for a second—I’d never been on a guy’s bed before. No, it was okay. Trevor was... nice. There was a warmth to his thoughts, like hot chocolate after a day out in the snow. A gentle strength pulled me in and made me feel safe. If only everyone’s thoughts felt this good. I tucked my legs under me and pulled the quilt tighter as I sat.

“That was *your* dream? Are you okay?”

I smiled at him. “I am now. You kind of came to my rescue. Thanks.” *Man of my dreams* flitted through my thoughts and I rolled my eyes at myself. What kind of sappy fantasy was I weaving about Trevor? *Yeesh.* I wasn’t that kind of person. “You were very brave.” I meant it, but I winced as soon as it left my mouth.

I sounded so stupid!

I had no right to start crushing on Trevor. Someone so kind and decent wouldn't want to be with someone like me. I was dangerous.

A killer.

I'm not brave. "You're the brave one. You stood up to Michael today." Fearless... Vibrant... Beautiful.

I dodged the spoken and unspoken compliments and jumped at his first thought. "Why don't you think you're brave? You just took on those three guys in my dream." Inside, I felt my gut do an electric flip-flop. *He thinks I'm beautiful?* Asking about that one would have to wait—it was too much to process right now.

Trevor again flushed warm with embarrassment. "That was just a dream. It wasn't real. People are getting hurt here. The charms have taken things too far and we haven't stood up to them. You got here, and on your first day you took down one of the worst."

"It's just... I think I'm immune to them. Maybe it's because I can hear their thoughts. It cancels out their ability or something." A rush of cold flashed through me as I realized what would happen if Trevor took on the charms. I could see the plan start to form in his mind. "No! Don't try it. You can't expect to save a drowning person if you can't swim, right?"

Trevor nodded, guiltily relieved by my logic. "Yeah, I think that's why Dr. Williamson always puts another minder in charge when he leaves. You guys are the only ones who wouldn't be... forced to do things. But what did you do to Michael? How did you, um, hurt him?"

I felt my heart plunge. If I told Trevor what I was capable of, he'd stop liking me. I could avoid answering, or I could lie, but I felt... protective of him. He should know the truth. He shouldn't be duped into being with someone like me. He was amazing and kind and I—

I'm a monster who can kill with my thoughts.

That's not what someone like him looked for in a girl. I felt the silence draw out. I was still trying to put into words what I wanted to say. The dim light revealed the planes of Trevor's face in pale greys and shadows. His hair fell slightly askew over one side of his face. I smothered the impulse to brush it back from his forehead. The reflected light from the flashlight danced in his warm, brown eyes. I'd had passing crushes before, but I was already beyond that feeling with Trevor. How crazy was that?

Maybe dodecamine was an aphrodisiac.

He waited for me to speak, and so, with a sigh, I ripped off the band-aid. "I kind of... blasted his brain—like yelling into a stethoscope or something. I overloaded him. I'm not even sure how I did it. This is all really new, you know?" I gave him a quick smile, but I was deflating inside.

Maddie, the dangerous freak.

I felt my eyes welling up with sudden tears and I started to scowl at myself for being so weak. Then I felt Trevor's touch—but he was still at the other end of the mattress.

"Hey. It's okay." The gathering embrace was a strange sensation. Gentle. Unlike when people touched me unexpectedly, this connection didn't startle me. I was simply surrounded by his presence. It was comforting.

Safe.

He searched my face then slid over and put one of his arms around my back, squeezing my shoulder gently. He was warm, even through the quilt on my shoulders. I leaned against him tentatively. He smelled woody—a masculine scent.

Trevor actually wanted to be closer to me? I tried to force the tremor out of my voice. "You're not freaked out by me?" It came out higher pitched and more pathetic than I'd hoped.

He laughed, which was a great sound. *Note to self: make Trevor laugh more.* His laugh was a rumble, low and gentle in his chest. It rolled off him in warm ripples. "I'm actually amazed that *you* aren't freaked out by *me*."

"Are you kidding?" I felt my energy return as a giddy rush of amber light. I turned and met his eyes. "You're so nice!"

Nice. That's the kiss of death. Girls don't want nice guys.

My jaw actually dropped. "I'm a mind-reader, remember? I'll take nice thoughts anytime. Your mind is so incredibly... well... nice is a high compliment from a minder."

Trevor suddenly wanted to kiss me. We were facing each other in the dim light, only inches apart. I wanted to kiss him, too, but a sudden, scary flashback of the attack in the van made me pull away.

Too soon.

"Nice," he said with less distaste than he'd felt in his earlier thoughts. "I'm not nice. I'm out here, alone, every night because... because I hurt people." He lowered his eyes as shame twisted in his gut. He felt unworthy. Lonely. Unwanted.

"No." I couldn't believe it, although the pain of his admission pressed at me from his mind. "You wouldn't."

"Not on purpose. Do you know what sleep paralysis is?"

"I read about it in my psych book. It's when you're dreaming, right? The connection from your brain to your body shuts off so you don't act out your dream? But sometimes it doesn't work completely... like the little paw kicks a dog makes when it's sleeping."

Trevor smiled sadly. "Yeah, that's right. My problem is that I move stuff with my mind—"

"—and that doesn't get shut off by sleep paralysis." I suddenly got it. "So that crash that woke us..."

Trevor swung the flashlight around the church. Part of the front railing lay askew across the choir bench. Several of the upright dowels had been pulled loose, leaving the remaining ones angled off to the side.

Whoa.

I looked back at Trevor, now nearly hidden in the dark. "How strong are you?"

Trevor's voice sounded small. "I lifted a set at four-eighty-two yesterday."

"Four hundred eighty two *pounds*?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yeah. That's my one of my practicals. I go to the gym and move the machines or free weights. They also have me practice the small stuff like typing and lock-picking." He flashed the light from the splintered wood along the length of the floor to his mattress. "I thought that railing was out of range." Moving the light along the walls, I could hear him guesstimating the size of the building. *I might end up homeless this winter.*

"Homeless?"

He smiled. It didn't bother him that I picked up his thoughts. He kind of liked that I understood him so easily.

"Yeah. This room is the largest open space on Ganzfield. I need a clear area so I don't throw things around." *Or break down walls... Or cave in the ceiling.* I suddenly saw a boy lying unconscious, crumpled on the floor. Guilt colored the image in his memory.

"You threw that boy in your sleep?"

"Yeah. I had a dream that someone was attacking me. I fought back. Reed was my roommate."

"What happened to him? Is he okay?"

"He's okay now, but..."

"It's not your fault."

"I know." I could sense his remorse and pain.

"Trevor, it's not like you killed anyone." Something in my tone let him know it wasn't an idle comment.

"Did you?" His voice was nearly a whisper.

"You met them tonight," I said with more calm than I felt. A flashback of Del ripping my shirt hit me like a punch to the gut. I caught my breath; it sounded almost like a sob.

His moment of confusion turned to horror. "That was a *memory*?" he asked, appalled. "That wasn't just a bad dream?"

I couldn't speak for a moment. I could feel turbulence within him, writhing in his mind. Was he disgusted by me? Afraid of me? Trevor's jaw shook, the quivering outline clear against the lighter wall behind him.

Maybe I should just go.

Suddenly, his thoughts crystallized. He wanted to hurt them... badly. He wanted to hurt the people who'd hurt me. He wanted to hurt them more than he'd ever wanted to hurt anyone. His own intensity shocked him.

I didn't know what to say. A few minutes around me and this gentle person, who'd been filled with kindness, wanted to hurt people.

I really am a monster.

"I'm sorry," I said, nearly crying at what I'd brought into his life. That shook him. "You're sorry?"

I nodded. "I should never have put this on you. I don't know how I'm doing it. I don't know how you ended up in my dream rather than just seeing the images. That's even worse." I choked up. "I'm so sorry." It was inadequate for the pain I'd caused him. I felt as though I'd rather burn alive than cause him pain.

A second later, I was gathered in his invisible embrace again. "It's okay. They can't hurt you now."

I felt so selfish that I had put this on him. "You're not... disgusted by me?"

He turned me so I faced him and looked me in the eyes. His mind, so close, drew me in. He wanted to help me—to make it all better.

"After what they did to you, it's understandable."

"Before."

"What?"

"Before. They didn't..." I paused, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. "In the dream, just about the time you saved me. If you hadn't, then..." I was rambling, making very little sense. "I just... felt this burst of energy flow out of me, and... then... they were dead. All of them. That's why I'm here at Ganzfield now."

Trevor looked deeper into my eyes, which intensified my ability to read his thoughts. Part of him was relieved that I hadn't experienced that horror. Another part was astonished. "You did that before you'd ever had dodecamine?"

I nodded.

"Wow."

"So please understand that, when you say you're dangerous, I kind of... well... I don't really see it that way," I finished lamely.

We still faced each other, looking into each other's eyes. My heart beat faster and Trevor's giddy relief mixed with my own. Together.

Safe.

My lips parted slightly as I took rapid little breaths and drank in his eyes. This was the strongest telepathic connection I'd ever experienced. Trevor's every thought poured into me as words, pictures, and feelings.

I hope she doesn't have a boyfriend. Her eyes are beautiful. There are flecks of gold in the green. I hope she meant it when she said she wasn't freaked out by me. She's even braver than I thought. I want to know her better. I want to keep her safe. I want to kiss her. I want to do more than kiss her.

He dropped my gaze and pinked up. *And you just heard all of that, didn't you?* In the light from the flashlight, I saw the blush creep all the way up to his hairline. We both looked away and tried to calm the matching, rabbit-fast beats of our hearts.

"No, I don't have a boyfriend," I said when I trusted myself to speak.

Trevor grinned. *Want one?*

I grinned back. *I might. Are you offering?* I froze at the expression of shock on Trevor's face. It took me a second to realize what had shocked him. "Oh! I've never done that with a non-telepath before," I said when I realized I'd just thought my answer into his head rather than speaking. "I didn't know I could. Sorry."

"That was wild." His voice was a little unsteady. "I've never heard someone in my head before." *Can you do it again?*

Can you hear this? It was easy—as natural to me as speaking aloud.

He grinned and nodded. His eyes stayed locked with mine and I felt my pulse quicken again. Trevor was the most amazing guy. I didn't think there were many people out there who could take this sort of thing in stride.

So, tell me about yourself. He leaned back onto his elbows with affected nonchalance.

Can you guess where I'm from? I tried to imagine the nastiest stretch of the Jersey Turnpike at him, the part near Newark airport where the factory smokestacks spewed foul-smelling plumes, some of which were on fire.

He grimaced. *Where is that? Hell?*

I snorted. *Close—New Jersey. Can you see it?*

I think I can even smell it. He wrinkled his nose.

Sorry! Let me try to show you something nicer. Home? I showed him my mom in the kitchen. She was at her happiest when she was cooking. After a moment, I added the scent of her incredibly addictive chocolate cookies baking in the oven. I could send him images, words, and smells simultaneously.

Cool.

What else could I show him? *Have you ever felt what it's like to fly?* I sent him the memory of the bird in flight.

His face lit up. "You like to fly?" he asked aloud, slithering out of his sleeping bag and jumping up. I let out a little shriek of delight as the mattress I sat on rose into the air, moving in a large circle around the perimeter of the church. It was like a flying carpet out of Arabian Nights. Trevor pivoted as he guided me, slowly and deliberately, though the dark, making two rotations around the open space then setting me down in the same place in the center. The surprise on my face sent happy little tendrils of green energy through him.

I laughed out loud and couldn't stop smiling.

What are you thinking? he asked.

How lucky I am to have met you.

He grinned because he was thinking the same thing about me. We sat there, gazing into each other's eyes, just digging on each

other. Threads of desire wove between us, pulling us closer. It felt like... magic.

Minder, the first book of the *Ganzfield* series, comes out in both paper and electronic formats in June 2010.

Pre-order at
Amazon.com or
BarnesandNoble.com.

For more information, please visit
www.Ganzfield.com.

ISBN 978-0-9845311-0-3 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-9845311-1-0 (e-book)