

DRAINED

A NOVEL

MARC DANIEL ACRICHE

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NEW YORK CITY 2048

JENNIFER'S
BROWNSTONE

CENTRAL
PARK

CASEY'S
APARTMENT

ROOSEVELT
PREP

ROAD
1

**LIGHT
BORDER**

UNION
SQUARE

MARTIN'S
APARTMENT

TOMPKINS
SQUARE
PARK

EAST
VILLAGE

E. HOUSTON ST

TOOT HILL
ACADEMY

LUOLOW
GARAGE

STATEN ISLAND

CHAPTER ONE | LOST AND FOUND

|

“BAGS OPEN, PEOPLE. Power’s down. We’re doing it the old-fashioned way.”

A collective grumble roiled the line. About forty kids stretched along the New York City, Upper East Side street, waiting to get into school. Casey Parker, stuck about midway, raised her hands in a what-the-fuck gesture to the security guard pacing the line. He smiled at her and shrugged. She had already missed first period, and now she was going to miss Lab. Casey sighed. This was not good. She was failing Chem, her first time ever failing anything. She needed to get inside, she needed to get to lab, and she needed the power to stay on. Lifting her sunglasses, she checked her screen to see if she’d missed any notifications about the outage. There was a curt message from her mom about dinner, but otherwise nothing. She jockeyed to see what was up at the front of the line, but she was too short and the guy’s head in front of her too big. The guy, Jonas, she knew from English Lit. Casey stood on her toes and put a hand on his shoulder. It was damp from sweat.

Jonas turned and looked at her hand, then at her. "I could give you a boost."

Casey stood down, wiping her hand across her tank top. "You calling me short?"

"Never, Parker. You are tall in every way except height."

"Good," she said. "You know I'm sensitive."

Jonas grinned at her, then went back to his business.

The line moved but not fast enough. The blistering hot morning wasn't making things any easier; Casey tugged at her top, hoping for a breeze. It was October, it was well over ninety degrees, and it had been like this for days. Another step, then two, and she was almost at the front of the line. A school guard checked bags behind a folding table. Behind him, a full-body scanner—good for guns, knives, and illicit substances—loomed, lifeless and frustrated.

"Great," Casey said, frustrated as well.

"What's great?"

She turned. Jennifer, her best friend, was standing next to her, smiling. In a sleeveless blouse and ponytail, Jennifer looked fresh, rested even. She looked the exact opposite of how Casey felt; that was usually the case, though. Her best friend had a politician's way of pulling herself together. It ran in the family.

"What's great?" Jennifer repeated.

"The power outage . . . the line . . . one guard checking all of us." Casey waved at the teenagers in line behind them.

"What's the rush? Sirota's got us in assembly anyway."

Casey stepped to the inspection table. "All of us?" she asked, lowering her bag from her shoulder. She flinched when its strap scraped against her sunburnt skin.

"No. Just the seniors."

"Don't tell me it's a fucking Recruiting thing." Casey put her bag on the table.

"I won't . . . but it's a fucking Recruiting thing."

The guard looked at them sideways.

Casey's stomach, already in knots thanks to being late, tightened some more. She was not a fan of Recruiting or the wars it helped fuel.

The guard, after poking around in Casey's bag, slid it back to her. She grabbed it, but he held on. "Is there a problem?" she asked, surprised.

The guard eyed them both. "You two should watch what you say."

"Excuse me," Jennifer said. "Do you know—"

The guard cut her off. "I do know, Ms. Hargrove. But still." He let go of the bag.

"No offense meant," Casey said, grabbing the bag and slinging it over her shoulder. He was right, after all. You never knew who was listening, and speaking poorly of Recruiting could get you in trouble.

The guard ordered her around the table. "Arms out," he said, a metal-detecting wand in his beefy hand.

Casey spread her arms out as directed, and the guard gave her a perfunctory once-over. Wearing shorts and a tank, it wasn't as if she could hide much. The scanner silently agreed, and the guard waved her along. She waited as he checked Jennifer next.

"Where's your stuff?" Casey asked, realizing Jennifer didn't have her bag.

"In my locker." Jennifer held her arms out to the side. "I came back out after first period. I was looking for Martin."

"You mean your boyfriend?"

Jennifer smiled as the guard let her through. She lowered her eyes. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Right. After last night, I'd say he was. You were practically glowing."

In front of them, Jonas had his arm behind him, holding open the door.

"Where were you this morning, anyway?" Jennifer asked.

Casey thanked Jonas, and they followed him inside. "I was up late after I left you guys at the bar. We fought again." She pushed her sunglasses up over her forehead, forcing her dark curly hair to fall in line and away from her face.

"You fought about Bruce?"

Bruce was her mom's new boyfriend, and Casey was having a

hard time accepting that her mom was dating again. That Bruce was a douche didn't help any. "Bruce. My grades. Fake IDs. Same shit."

"Fucking Bruce," Jennifer said.

"Fucking Bruce," Casey agreed.

Climbing a short stack of stairs, Casey watched her footing as her eyes adjusted to the dim interior lighting. Her high-tops squeaked on the polished floor. Once past another set of doors, they were confronted with a bottleneck of students. As Jennifer had said, it was just the seniors, and they were being herded into the auditorium.

Jennifer searched the line forward and back. With about a foot on Casey, she had a mostly unobstructed view.

"Anything?" Casey asked.

"No. It's just not like him. He'd at least message me."

"And you tried him?" The line inched forward. A freshman, judging by his small size, excused himself and slid between them. His sweaty forearm brushed against Casey's.

"Of course. But I'm trying to play it cool. I don't want to seem desperate."

"You? Desperate? Never." Casey wiped her arm on her shorts. "He should be flying a banner letting you know where he is. You're Jennifer fucking Hargrove."

"Stop." Jennifer blushed. "It's different with Martin. He's different."

"You think he joined up?" Casey pointed toward the auditorium doors. "A Recruiting assembly . . . could mean another Recruiting list."

"Never. Not Martin. He would have told me."

Casey shrugged. She didn't know Martin well enough to know what he'd do. The line continued to inch along as her frustration spread like a rash she couldn't scratch. "Who calls an assembly during a blackout?" she huffed.

"It's better than class."

"Not when you're failing."

"You'll be fine. You always are."

The way things were going this semester, she wasn't so sure.

They reached the auditorium. Beyond the double-door entrance, Brian Jasper—who had graduated the year before—was

handing out screens. Brian had been crushing on Casey since junior high. He was sweet, and they used to be friends—or, at least, friendly—but Brian's military allegiance had become too much for her, and they had drifted apart. She nudged Jennifer. “What's he doing here?”

“He works in the Recruiting office. You knew that.”

She guessed she knew that, but she hadn't been expecting to see him now. “I can't . . .”

“Come on. You could do a lot worse. Look at him in that uniform.”

“Stop,” Casey said. Whether guy or girl, good-looking or not, the uniform, and the violence it represented, was the problem.

Brian spotted her, and his face brightened. He smiled, and it was so genuine that Casey didn't know how to react. How could anyone be so enamored with her? She forced a smile in return, hoping it came off as genuine. He was too nice a guy to hurt. She put her hand on Jennifer's back and guided her in first.

“Jennifer Hargrove,” Brian said, handing her a screen.

“Colonel,” Jennifer said, saluting.

“The election's looking good for your father,” he said, ignoring her teasing.

“That's what I hear.”

Jennifer's father was Michael Hargrove, head of the Independent Coalition Party and most likely the city's next mayor.

“Well, the ICP is lucky to have him, and the city will be, too.”

Jennifer turned to Casey. “You hear that, Case? You are lucky to have him.” She took a backward step away, and then another. “As long as you're not black, or Latino,” she continued to rant as she turned and headed down the nearest aisle, “or Asian, or live downtown.”

“She never changes,” Brian said.

“She is pretty consistent.”

He handed Casey a screen. “You should come out to one of the orientations this month.”

She took the screen. “You know that's not me.”

“You'd be surprised.”

No . . . I wouldn't, she thought. The last thing Casey could

imagine doing was signing on the dotted line as an ICP recruit. If the ICP hadn't been hounding her police-officer father with corruption charges—charges he had vehemently denied—then maybe he wouldn't have felt the need to leave. "Sorry, but no," she said, caring a bit less now about being genuine. She took a tentative step toward the aisle and tried to spot Jennifer in the crowd.

"Okay," Brian said. "You know where to find me if you change your mind."

She half-waved and hurried away, agitated by the hard sell. After a few steps, she glanced back. Dude was still smiling. He was so fucking earnest.

Casey weaved down the aisle, dodging students as she went. Jennifer, sitting toward the front and to the side, was talking to Greg. The auditorium was hot, and the kids passing her were even hotter. She kept her arms close to her side to avoid any inadvertent rubbing. Jennifer turned and gestured for her to hurry on up. She pointed at the empty seat next to her.

"Fuckin' Sirota," Casey said, still mad that he'd called this assembly in the first place. She dropped into the saved seat, putting her bag between her feet on the floor.

Jennifer turned. "I blame Recruiting," she said, a bit too loudly, seemingly undeterred by the mild rebuke they'd just received outside. She held up the screen Brian had given her. "You'd think they had enough bodies by now."

There were never enough bodies.

Between the occupation forces along the southern border and the hot wars across the Middle East, the ICP was always in need of recruits. Still, Jennifer needed to keep her voice down. Questioning the ICP could get you in trouble. Glancing around, most of the seniors within earshot were their friends—ones who, for the most part, could be trusted.

"You're extra 'anti' today," Casey said.

Jennifer scowled. "I was fine until Soldier Boy up there. Not to mention the rent-a-cop outside."

"Brian likes your father . . . you can't blame him. He's practically brainwashed to like him."

"Well, my brainwashing wore off a while ago. I don't have to like him."

Casey slid down into her seat until her bare knees touched the row in front. She felt bad for her friend. Jennifer's father was absent for the most part, and when he was present he was indifferent at best. In truth, she felt sorry for herself, too. Whether mentally or physically absent, a lost father was something they both had to deal with.

From the row in front of them, Tanya turned, her hand shading her eyes. "Can't we close them?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the windows behind them.

"The curtains don't work without power," Greg answered. His hair was mussed, and he was in the same T-shirt he'd worn to the bar last night. "We tried."

"Great," Tanya said, turning back.

Greg leaned forward, and waved at Casey. "You made it?"

She rolled her eyes. "Is everyone keeping tabs?"

"Spreadsheets," Greg answered. "We plug in everything you do."

Casey sneered. "Nice T-shirt, by the way," she said. "Is this day two or three?"

Greg looked down. He lowered his nose to his armpit and took a deep, exaggerated breath. "Three," he said. "Just how you like it."

Casey sat back. Boys, she thought, looking to Jennifer for affirmation. But Jennifer wasn't paying attention. She was holding herself up by her seat's armrests, looking around the auditorium. After a moment, she lowered herself back down and leaned toward Casey. "I still don't see him."

"I'm sure he's fine. Martin's a downtowner like me. We're a tough breed."

"It's the downtown part that concerns me. They were scheduled for an outage last night, and he was worried about getting home."

"That's like the third night this week."

"Fourth," Jennifer said. "I don't know how they do it."

Casey scanned the auditorium. It was a full house. Despite the heat, the seniors gabbed, fidgeted, and generally carried on. Brian had made his way to the front of the auditorium and was standing at attention next to the stage. Sitting in the first row were the science

and math geeks Martin usually hung out with. But Jennifer was right; Martin wasn't with them. On the stage, Vice Principal Sirota appeared from the wings, his tie loosened and off-center, his dress shirt stained with perspiration. He had a bullhorn in his hand and was flanked by two uniformed ICP officers. He shuffled to the center of the stage, shoulders slumping. His companions walked tall.

The rowdy crowd finally hushed.

"Thank you, seniors," he said. Sirota's voice was more nasal than usual. He held up the bullhorn, exposing his unsightly pits. "Can everyone hear me all right without this? I really don't want to use it." Hearing no objections, he continued. "You should all have received screens from Recruiting on your way in. Please make sure to fill them out before you leave, and bring them to Recruit Jasper." He pointed to Brian below him. "If you see any of your classmates who aren't here, let them know they must report to Recruiting and fill one out before Thanksgiving break."

Jennifer leaned in. "Glad you're here now?"

"Thrilled," Casey said. And it was true. Any chance to avoid a trip to Recruiting was appreciated.

As Vice Principal Sirota bleated on, Casey tuned him out. She slipped her screen from her bag and made the rounds of her music sites. Domino Falls was playing the Beacon on New Year's Eve. She had seen them a few weeks back and would sacrifice a foot to see them again.

Looking up, Sirota had moved to the side as one of the uniformed men took over. After a well-worn spiel about ICP loyalty, respect, and sacrifice, he began reading the latest Recruiting list. Publicly announcing the names was meant to honor the recruits and their families—an exercise in patriotism—but Casey dreaded the reading. The recruitment process seemed so random and opaque. Kids like Brian would sign up, and that was understandable. But, increasingly, kids she never thought of as ICP material were suddenly joining, and it made no sense. Still, you never questioned the ICP. If you were seventeen, you were eligible, and that's all anyone needed to know.

Today, Jonah Carson led the list of new recruits. Jonah joining up made sense. He was as deep into the hive mind as Brian.

Casey didn't recognize the next two names, but someone behind her gasped after the second one was read. She turned to see who had slipped, but it was no one she knew. The girl, maybe a sister or a girlfriend of the new recruit, had her hand over her mouth and tears in her eyes. Casey felt terrible, but Recruiting was like that—it was random, it was sudden, and, nine times out of ten, it sucked.

Lost in thought, Casey wasn't paying attention when the next name was called. However, she did hear Jennifer gasp. Casey turned to her friend. "Jen . . ." she began to say, then things slowly registered: They had called Martin's name. Jennifer's almost-boyfriend hadn't been late or cutting class; he was gone because he'd been recruited. Casey's casual suggestion had been right. Casey looked to the stage; Sirota was glaring in their direction. Jennifer started to stand. She was about to say something that could not be taken back, and Casey could not let that happen.

Grabbing Jennifer by the arm, Casey forced her to sit back down. Jennifer looked at her, stunned. "Jen, no," Casey said.

Jennifer sat back, shaking off Casey's hand. With her eyes glued to the stage, she whispered, "No way. There is no fucking way."

Casey didn't know if there was a way or not, but that was irrelevant. Her best friend would not take this lightly. But lightly was the only choice they had. Jennifer sat stiffly in her seat, her eyes red and wet. One tear, then another rolled down her cheek. Casey knew she'd have to get her friend out of the auditorium and find a safe place for her to vent. The rest of the school day, if not the week, was shot for sure, and she could kiss her Chemistry grade goodbye.

Strangely enough, she felt relieved, glad for the excuse not to try.

2

"You're not supposed to be here!" Casey yelled. She slammed her bedroom door behind her.