

## CHAPTER 1

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IT SEEMED TO Rachel that she had always lived on The Property, though this wasn't true. Her mother, Vivian, said they moved there when she was three years old, but Rachel didn't remember. To her, The Property was home. She felt as comfortable there as she did in her own skin. But she knew that for most people, The Property was too close to the section of the National Border Defense System known as the Line.

The National Border Defense System enclosed the entire Unified States. The section called the Line was only a small part of it, but because of its history it was infamous, at least locally. Strange things were supposed to happen near the Line; dangerous things. Even though there hadn't been a Crossing Storm in over forty years, people still thought of the Line as a bad place to be near. There were whispers about Away—the territory on the other side of the Line. There were whispers about the Others.

Rachel wasn't afraid. After all, she spent a lot of her time in the greenhouse that was all the way at the back of The Property, right next to the Line. Away was clearly visible from the greenhouse windows. Rachel had gazed countless hours out those windows at Away, and she had never seen anything strange over there at all. Just the same meadows and trees that were on the U.S. side of the Line.

Technically, Rachel wasn't supposed to be in the greenhouse. Ms. Elizabeth Moore, the owner of The Property, grew orchids there, which she shipped to the cities to sell. Vivian had always cautioned Rachel to stay away from the greenhouse; she worried that Rachel might be a bother to Ms. Moore, or that she might break something. Rachel tried to do whatever she could to make things easier for her mother, but the greenhouse had seemed magical to her from the first time she saw it—so hushed, so peaceful and beautiful. The air was warm and soft, and a gentle light filtered in through the glass, illuminating the lush emerald hues of the orchids' leaves. Their exotic blooms vied for Rachel's attention, some offering flashes of intense colors in bold shapes; others, pale and delicate, coquettishly inviting a closer inspection.

Rachel couldn't resist. She hid somewhere in the greenhouse almost every day when she was little, happy among the flowers. She was careful to stay out of Ms. Moore's sight, of course. She would have been careful even if she hadn't been warned not to bother her. Ms. Moore was old, and not old in a grandmotherly, "here are some cookies" way; she

was quite forbidding. Rachel was almost scared of her. But being in the greenhouse was worth the risk.

Rachel used to lose herself there in the kind of daydreams that children who grow up in solitude often have. She'd imagine that she was a princess, the greenhouse was her castle, and the whole of The Property was under her rule. Sometimes she would pretend that she was able to talk with the orchids. Each bloom had a different voice; some were quiet and polite, while others were loud and boisterous. Rachel made them her friends.

Rachel's favorite daydreams when she was a little girl were those in which her father, Daniel, was still alive and had come to take her and her mother somewhere fabulous. In those daydreams, the anxious look Vivian always seemed to wear faded, and she smiled a lot more. Daniel was dashing and handsome, and he let Rachel try things that Vivian would have scowled about, things like climbing tall trees and wandering ahead when they went on walks. In real life, Vivian was always saying "Be careful!" or cautioning Rachel not to stray too far. She looked at Rachel sometimes as though she were waiting for her to break, and that her own heart would break at the same time. But in Rachel's daydreams, if her mother started to protest that Rachel was being too reckless, Daniel would pick Vivian up and twirl her around until she laughed and laughed, and forgot her concern. In her dreams, the three of them could spend every day together, doing whatever they wanted, and Rachel never felt worried.

## 4 THE LINE

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In actuality, Vivian was busy much of the time working in Ms. Moore's house, where a child underfoot wasn't welcomed. This left Rachel on her own quite a bit, though not completely unsupervised. Ms. Moore's hired man, Jonathan, had helped keep an eye on Rachel when Vivian couldn't. Judging from his grizzled gray hair and his bonsai fingers, twisted from years of arthritis, Jonathan was even older than Ms. Moore. Yet Rachel never felt nervous around him the way she did around his employer.

One of her earliest memories was of Jonathan; she had tripped on something and fallen, and she was crying hard. Her mom must have been working, because it was Jonathan who had gently righted her. She remembered how softly he had said her name and how she felt instantly better. Jonathan always seemed to know how to make her feel safe. He even put up with her playing in the greenhouse, though Vivian didn't approve, as long as she kept out of Ms. Moore's way.

As Rachel grew older, Vivian scheduled enough chores and homework to keep her out of most kinds of trouble, and Jonathan checked in on her less and less. Of course, she wasn't alone all the time. She spent every evening with her mother, and she often rode with Vivian during her weekly supply trips to Bensen, the nearest town. Trips to Bensen, where the highlight might be a treat from the bakery, were about as exciting as things got in Rachel's life. She hadn't minded that when she was little, but as she got older, she often wished that something—*anything*—would happen to her. She loved her

mother, and her life on The Property wasn't horrible by any means. But it *was* predictable. Nothing ever seemed to change; no one new ever drove down the long driveway from the main road. There were no other kids to play with, and even though Rachel usually did a pretty good job of entertaining herself, she still got restless sometimes.

Away was Rachel's escape from boredom.

It was inevitable, really. Rachel lived right on the Line. Away was next door, and it was the opposite of boring. It was taboo. Perhaps someone with less imagination, or more friends, could have resisted the pull of something so forbidden, so tantalizingly close at hand, but Rachel was not that person.

Away had been around forever—it was even older than Ms. Moore. Yet it was rarely spoken of, at least officially. The streamer news seldom mentioned it; people in other parts of the country seemed to have forgotten it existed. But the people in Bensen hadn't forgotten. And there was quite a collection of questionable literature about it available on the net. Of course, Rachel read everything she could about Away and the Others, every trashy, "true eyewitness account" she could find.

Vivian would have disapproved if she knew. She had always told Rachel that what happened to the Others was a tragedy, caused by government callousness. She wouldn't have liked the way they were described in Rachel's net books—at best as mindless husks, at worst as monsters. Vivian was pretty strict about Rachel's streamer

use anyway; it was reserved mostly for homework assignments. She did let Rachel watch a few stream shows, but only after she had screened them herself.

Vivian wanted Rachel to check out what she called “real books” at the Bensen library when they went to town for supplies. She’d try to talk Rachel into books about art history or girls with pet horses. Rachel thought art history and pet horses were boring and that real books were ancient and smelly. Half of them were falling apart at the seams, and most of the ones she could find about Away were out-dated. The graphics were better on the net, and you could find almost anything you wanted, right from the streamer at home.

Rachel would sneak screen time when she was supposed to be doing schoolwork. All the stories about bizarre happenings and weird animals were thrilling. Some claimed that the Others were cannibals, or that they had super-human strength. One book had outlined the process by which Others could hypnotize a person and enslave them forever, or at least until they wanted to eat them. Even Vivian’s protests that the accounts were probably produced by government writers didn’t dampen her enthusiasm.

Rachel made up stories in her head about how the Others would creep up to the Line and try with all their might to break through. She imagined seeing one of the odd animals she had read about that were supposed to be so common deep in Away territory, things like birds with funny heads or house cats the size of sheep. Sometimes when she was

looking out the greenhouse windows, Rachel *did* see birds on the Away side of the Line, and more than once she had seen deer standing frozen between tree trunks, certain of their own invisibility. But the birds were just regular birds, the same as any bird she'd ever seen, and the deer were just deer.

The Line itself was invisible. There was a barren ribbon of soil running along the meadow as far as the eye could see, where the grass couldn't grow. And Rachel thought she could see a funny sort of haze, but even that was only apparent in certain lights—right before dusk, or early in the morning.

Though the Line was almost imperceptible, it had affected many lives. It affected Rachel's too. In a sense, the Line was the reason Rachel ended up working in the greenhouse, instead of just playing.

Her mom would have said that wasn't true. Rachel could hear the lecture in her head: *It is always a person's own actions that bring about any real change, good or bad.* Vivian would have said a lot more than that if she knew what really happened.

What really happened was that Rachel tried to Cross.

When the U.S. constructed the National Border Defense System, they didn't just ensure that their enemies were kept out. Once the invisible barrier was activated, nobody could leave the country without the government's permission. As far as Rachel could tell, permission was never given to regular citizens; the only people who were allowed to travel out-

side the borders were political officials or military troops. Crossing—the attempt to leave the country without official permission—was punishable by death.

Trying to Cross would have been bad enough. But Rachel not only tried to Cross, she tried to Cross *the Line*. Nobody *ever* Crossed that section of the System. There was no reason to—there was nothing on the other side but *Away*.

Rachel had just finished reading yet another net article about *Away*. In this one, the author described “confirmed” sightings of strange hybrid creatures being commanded by Others, very near the Line. The creatures were supposed to be canine, but as large as horses. The author said they were incredibly beautiful and fierce, and that the Others used them for hunting. The article was dated just two days before. When she saw that, Rachel felt a shiver go down her spine. Two days ago. *Confirmed* sightings. Right in her backyard. Rachel wanted to see those animals. She tried not to think about exactly *what* they might be hunting.

She knew she had to at least *try* to Cross.

She figured there was only a slim chance that she would be able to, since there were only two ways that the System could ever be deactivated. One was a Crossing Storm—a severe electrical storm that was supposed to disarm the System somehow. According to local lore, just such a terrible storm had occurred many years ago, and some Others had managed to Cross somewhere along the Line. Most official records claimed it never happened—the government maintained that there were no verifiable accounts of anything but a ter-

rible weather system that caused some damage. But the local weather reports still called big storms “Crossing Storms.” And whenever something bad happened in Bensen—a murder, a break-in, some random vandalism—people blamed the Others for whatever occurred. They whispered that Others were still secretly living among them.

The only other way the System could be deactivated was by the government, if some dignitary had permission to go to another country, or troops needed to Cross. There was no public record of it ever happening on the Line. None of the Crossing Stations from which sections of the System could be disabled were located on the Line. They were all on other parts of the System, the parts where they had had time to plan the construction better. On the Line, the closest thing to a Crossing Station was a little brick bunker near the edge of The Property. As far as Rachel knew, it had always been unmanned; it was locked up all the time and no soldiers ever came to check it. She thought it must be some sort of maintenance shack.

Even though Crossing was likely impossible—or perhaps *because* it was—Rachel worked herself up enough to plan an attempt. She felt like a kid who’s been dared to go up to the “haunted” house at the end of some long dark road, only the person daring her was herself. In the back of her mind, she was banking on the probability that nothing would happen. Though she didn’t believe most of what she read about the Others in the net books, if even part of it was true, she didn’t think she would want to encounter them. *Actually*

Crossing the Line would be the scariest thing Rachel could imagine happening. But the idea of *trying* was exciting.

The next morning, Rachel made the bed and did the breakfast dishes as she waited for Vivian to leave the guesthouse where they lived to go work at the main house. Then she put a hunk of cheese and some of the breakfast biscuits in a bag and set out for the back of the greenhouse. If she did somehow Cross, she might need some food.

The day was already pleasantly warm, but Rachel had brought a jacket just in case. She moved cautiously, even though there was no one around. Once she passed the greenhouse, she stopped looking over her shoulder. Nobody could see her this far away from the main house. The closer she got to the Line, the faster her heart pounded in her chest. Everything else seemed eerily quiet.

Finally, she was standing right next to the Line. The meadow grass grew long and shaggy all the way up to where the Line was, but then it died. A line of brown earth about four inches wide extended as far as Rachel could see in either direction. It was different seeing that boundary right at her feet than it was looking at it from the safety of the greenhouse. Away was *right there*, inches from her nose. The only thing separating her from it was the Line. All she could hear was her own breathing, and a sort of rushing sound that filled her head.

Rachel looked hard at the space in front of her, squinting her eyes to see if she could detect how the Line worked, as if something like that has a way of working that you

could figure out from staring at it. Her heart thumped so hard it felt like something separate from her.

She forced herself to take a deep breath, then another. The thumping in her chest slowed some. The rushing sound in her head lessened. Finally, she extended her hand tentatively, to see if she could feel the Line, maybe just poke through a little. Her hand was shaking. As she was about to touch the place in midair where she thought it was, there was a shattering sound behind her, so loud it made her jump—*forward*. Into the Line.

It felt sort of like a cloud, or what Rachel imagined a cloud would feel like: soft, but firm against her body, letting her sink into it. But after a moment, it *pushed back*. She was so startled, she fell into the grass. Flat on her back, she gasped for air, while the sky came in and out of focus above her. Then she scrambled up and ran. Her bag of food and jacket forgotten, she fled into the greenhouse, to the safety of its warmth and peace.

Ms. Moore found her there, huddled in a corner crying like a little kid. She had come in to check the orchids and inspect the greenhouse as she did at the start of every day, and soon discovered Rachel's hiding place. Rachel saw Ms. Moore's shoes first; highly polished, brown leather lace-ups of a style that looked like it came from another century. She realized with a growing sense of dread that she was exactly where she had been repeatedly told *not* to be. Ms. Moore, the person who kept food in their bellies, the person Vivian had warned her against upsetting in any way for as long as

she could remember, was not looking too pleased. Rachel met her gaze speechlessly and a fresh round of sobs convulsed her.

“I don’t have the money to finance your nonsense,” said Ms. Moore.

It was the first time Rachel could remember Ms. Moore saying much more than a cursory “Good morning” to her. Rachel didn’t understand what she meant about finances, but she knew it couldn’t be good. She wiped her eyes and tried to figure out what she should do. She was in big trouble. Her mom would probably kill her. They might be thrown off The Property with no place to go; they might end up living on the street in Bensen. They might even get sent to the Pools. And it would all be Rachel’s fault.

Rachel had seen a boy about her age begging for food the last time they went to Bensen. He had on clothes that looked like any other kid’s clothes: a jumpsuit and some cheap plastic moks on his feet. But he was so dirty—his face, his hair, even his socks had rings of dirt where they sagged around his ankles. When Rachel asked Vivian about the boy, she just shuddered and hurried Rachel into the vendor’s.

“He’s still better off than if he was in the Pools,” Vivian whispered, once they were inside. “Hopefully he won’t get picked up. We’re just lucky we found Ms. Moore. At least we have a roof over our heads and the chance of a future.” Vivian bought some bread and an apple and gave them to the boy when they came out of the vendor’s. He grabbed them without even saying thank you and crammed the bread into his mouth, eyeing Vivian warily the whole time.

Rachel remembered thinking that she never wanted to be that hungry.

“You will have to earn the money to replace that window, young lady.”

The words brought Rachel back to the present. Ms. Moore was still looking down at her, shaking her head. The tightly wound bun she always wore—its gray strands so smooth and perfect that they looked more like metal than hair—never moved.

“You can start right now. Get up off your bottom and dry your face. Then go get the hoses from over there.” She tilted her head in the direction of the misting equipment hung on the far wall.

Rachel just sat there, stunned into silence and too scared to move. After a moment Ms. Moore, who had begun moving some flowerpots off the main shelves onto the floor, realized Rachel was still crouched in the corner. “Well,” she barked, “move it!”

That snapped Rachel out of her freeze, and she scurried up and over to the hoses faster than she had ever moved before. She brought them to Ms. Moore, who took one and hooked it up to a faucet.

“Now, you take the rest and go hook them up to the faucets along that wall. I’ll have to go let Jonathan know we’ll need a replacement pane for the window you broke.” Ms. Moore glared at the floor, and for the first time Rachel noticed the shards of glass she had swept into a pile. Somehow, one of the greenhouse panes had broken. That must have been the

shattering sound Rachel heard when she was trying to Cross.

“I didn’t break anything.” Rachel clamped her mouth shut almost immediately. She didn’t want to make Ms. Moore even angrier.

Ms. Moore studied her through narrowed eyes. “Perhaps not. But what you *did* do indicates to me that you need something to fill your time.” She nodded at Rachel’s shocked look. “That’s right. *I saw you*. Messing around out there like you’re playing some child’s game. That”—she pointed toward the Line—“is *not* a game. That is something . . .” Ms. Moore’s voice shook into silence. When she continued, she spoke so quietly that Rachel had trouble understanding her words. “There’s nothing on the other side of that for you, child. Nothing there for any of us. We’ll keep what you did between you and me, but best you don’t repeat such foolishness. You’d better go get your coat before someone else sees it there.”

Rachel mumbled an apology, but Ms. Moore just turned and left. Rachel watched her walk toward the main house. She wondered why just *talking* about *Away* caused Ms. Moore’s voice to shake like that. Rachel knew that all the stories she read about *Away* and the Others were probably not true. But what *was* true?

She picked up one of the hoses, but then put it back down. Before she hooked them up, she had better go get her jacket like Ms. Moore said. On her way out the greenhouse door she looked toward the main house, but Ms. Moore was gone from sight.

Ms. Moore knew *something*, Rachel could tell. She'd lived right next to the Line her whole life, according to Vivian. In all that time, maybe she had found out something about Away, something about the Others. Rachel decided then and there that she was going to find out what.

That evening, Rachel had done all her homework, cleaned the guesthouse, and made dinner. She waited with dread for Vivian to come back from the main house. By the time Vivian walked in the door, one look from her was all it took to make Rachel burst into tears again. She had never done anything to truly disappoint her mom before, and she could see in her eyes that Vivian was disappointed now.

Vivian came over and put her hand on Rachel's head, smoothing her hair. Then she hugged her. "Oh, Rachel. Probably just having to work with Ms. Moore will be punishment enough for you," she said. "She's not always the easiest person to be around. And you're going to be around her a lot for the next three months."

"Three months!" Rachel couldn't fathom what three months of seeing Ms. Moore every day might be like.

"That's how long it will take to earn enough to pay off that window." Vivian gave Rachel a look that clearly conveyed her standard "learn from your mistakes" lecture in one glance. "Mind you do what she tells you and work hard. No matter how gruff she seems. We *cannot* afford to upset her. Jonathan will be there, and that will help."

Despite Vivian's hug and her comforting words, Rachel knew the seriousness of what she had done. If Ms. Moore

had been angry enough to fire Vivian, they might have had no choice but to go back to the city. Rachel knew her mom didn't want to do that. She didn't want to either. Things could be really bad in the cities.

ELIZABETH MOORE ADDED the cost of a new window to the expenditures column of her old-fashioned account book and closed it. It would have to be one of the new plastic windows; they didn't manufacture glass anymore. Elizabeth resented that for no good reason. The plastic ones worked just as well, probably better, but the glass windows had been there so long that they felt like a tradition—not something to be abandoned due to mere obsolescence. She'd had to replace two others last year. The glass just got so old and brittle, it shattered spontaneously. She was sure that was what had happened today as well, but she accused the girl anyway. Because when she saw Rachel by the Line, she knew that it would be best to keep a closer eye on her from now on. One way to do that was to make her work in the greenhouse.

She smoothed the wood grain of the dining table with her hand. Real mahogany. It was at this same table that she had interviewed Ms. Vivian Quillen, Rachel's mother, so many years ago, for the position of housekeeper. Ms. Quillen was in some sort of trouble back then, Elizabeth could tell; she had some experience in that area. The haunted look on Ms. Quillen's face had made Elizabeth want to bid her good day, even though she was the only person who had responded to the

ad. Elizabeth could do without help for the time being. Then Ms. Quillen mentioned the child. That complicated things.

There hadn't been a child on The Property since *Elizabeth* was that child, running in the yard, laughing at the sky. And being reminded daily that children even existed was not something Elizabeth really wanted to endure; it was painful. Yet turning away a grown woman who was capable of finding alternatives was a different thing than turning away a mother and child, who might not have a better option. Elizabeth had not wanted to be responsible for the possible consequences. So she had hired the woman, against her better judgment.

She wondered if she was going to pay for that now. Maybe whatever led the mother to trouble had been passed on to her daughter, causing her to seek out trouble as well. Elizabeth hoped that by keeping Rachel busy working in the greenhouse, she could steer her away from her interest in the Line. And it might solve other problems too. Jonathan had his hands full, and while Elizabeth was sure he would have tried to help, he didn't have the touch. As her father always said, "Orchids aren't potatoes." What he meant, and what Elizabeth had always believed, was that to grow beautiful, healthy orchids, one could not view them as a crop. A part of you had to love them, be in love, to grow them well. Elizabeth had that feeling. She thought Rachel might have that feeling too, judging from how much time the girl had spent in the greenhouse over the years.