



HOMICIDAL ALIENS

& OTHER DISAPPOINTMENTS

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«««««(1)»»»»»

After I kill Lord Vertenomous, we load up the trucks, laying the bodies of the dead all together in one truck bed, then drive up a windy mountain road that ends, miles later, at a ski lodge parking lot. The rebels drive their trucks and cars and motorcycles right up to the edge of the thick pine forest, where we all hop out. A few rebels cover the vehicles with tree branches. Some others stay with the bodies. The rest of us follow a wide path into the pines and up the mountain from the lodge. In the lead is Doc, the old, white-haired guy who convinced the other rebels to let me, Lauren, and Catlin join their group. Following close on his heels is the blond guy about my age who didn't want to let us join the rebels. The sky is blue, the air fresh and clean. There's a sweet smell, sweet taste. I close my eyes and try to pretend I'm just a lucky camper taking a walk in the woods.

I start to hear some of my fellow rebels' random thoughts, which pretty much ruin the camper fantasy. The mundane and the terrible whisper all around me.

I wish I had an apple.

I miss my phone.

More dead. More always dead.

Why can't we drive closer to camp?

Need a bath.

That guy in front of me definitely needs a bath.

Dead. We'll all be dead soon.

I'm so afraid.

Then I hear a scream. I crouch and cover my ears. But it's not a real scream; it's a scream inside someone's mind, and it's being projected directly into my mind. I see what they see. I see the face of one of the dead, and I experience losing someone I love, through this other mind, again. I'm alone like they're alone—the way losing someone separates you so completely from everyone else—and I think of my parents and friends and all those I've lost, and I curse under my breath (sorry, Mom) that someone makes me feel that loss again.

I hear more voices, feel more pain as the news spreads. I try to shove that pain back on those who force it at me.

Then the voices do fade. I still hear them, but it's not like before. They're the low mumble of a distant crowd.

I see the path and woods again, feel the sprinkle of sunlight through the leaves.

Off to the right of us, wide paths are cut through the trees, creating slopes for skiers who no longer exist. Then the trees thicken, and I can't see them anymore. We walk for twenty minutes, the path getting steeper so that everyone is panting pretty hard by the time it levels into a slight slope. The woods thicken even more around us, and the patches of sunlight disappear entirely until we come around a bend and stop at a small clearing. Cliffs rise on two sides, and a gurgling stream slips effortlessly between them and rushes down the mountain. Off to the left is a meadow with blue flowers, which makes me think of the aliens and their plantings in Austin: trees with big blue leaves the size of dinner plates. These blue flowers aren't alien, though. They're ours, small with petals like daisies, fragile looking. If we were on vacation, this would be an awesome spot. But we aren't on vacation. We will never be on vacation.

Sometimes a thought like this sets off an avalanche of never-bes. Never be with my family again. Never be in my home. Never be in college. Never be, never be. The never-bes can fill you with all that isn't and can't be if you're not careful. And maybe even if you are.

We enter the camp on the side where the supply cave is. The rebels have raided a lot of stores in Santa Fe and Taos, and they've got camping equipment and all kinds

of things in the supply cave. Lauren, Catlin, and I are all given tents and sleeping bags and some other basics and told to set up camp in Section 4. Lots of tents dot the wooded hillside. We walk past Sections 1, 2, and 3, numbers marked on tree trunks, out to the less crowded Section 4.

As we pass through camp, I'm shocked and pleased to see children and old people among the rebels. Back in Austin there were almost no grandparents or even parents and no little sisters or brothers. We thought they had all been murdered by the aliens.

My hand moves into the pocket of my jeans and feels for the paper calendar there. It was given to me by one of those few older people imprisoned by Lord Vert. Her name was Betty. She kept track of the days since the invasion because she was determined not to let the aliens take time from us even as they took everything else. She gave me the calendar right before she killed herself. I'm the keeper of days now, and I keep them for Betty and myself and because it's one small thing the aliens haven't been able to take. Every small thing we keep matters.

I hear people thinking my name everywhere we walk, which is kind of creepy. And, yeah, maybe a tiny bit cool, too—for about a second. *Jesse, his name is Jesse. He killed an alien lord. They say the spirit fills him.*

"They say." My mother, the English teacher, hated

when someone said “They say.” She wasn’t one to let linguistic imprecision pass. “They who?” she would ask, raising her eyebrows. If the president of the United States had said, “They say,” she would have stopped him cold with her raised eyebrows and said, “And just who is ‘they,’ Mr. President?” He would have answered, too. Nobody ignored my mom. Nobody.

“They” are wrong, I mindspeak. No spirit fills me. I never even had school spirit.

For a second, unexpectedly, I miss my high school. Not just my friends, who I’ve missed a thousand times since the invasion, but the actual building where I was forced to sit through boring lectures and take tests and eat food that was not always clearly identifiable.

We set up camp on a flat section just below a rocky ledge, a spot that Lauren picks for its privacy and levelness. I can see Catlin approves, but I’d rather be farther off, up the hill. Using her class president voice, Lauren directs us to set up our tents in a little triangle around a space where we dig a pit for a fire. We are about to head out to gather firewood when one of our neighbors—a tall, thin woman with a British accent—tells us we can’t light fires because of the alien patrol ships.

“Great,” I say. “That’s just double frickin’ great.”

Everyone, including me, is a little surprised by the anger in my voice.

"I just wanted to roast marshmallows," I say, which, I know, sounds completely ridiculous.

Some part of me, the ridiculous part I guess, thought reaching the rebel camp meant reaching freedom. But the aliens are still here. They're still everywhere. I'm not free.

I feel Catlin understand, hear her understand, and for a second I think she's going to touch me on the shoulder, but she doesn't. Lauren just looks irritated. I don't blame her. I'm being ungrateful. Weak. Still, I'm irritated by her irritation. She reminds me of my mother when she was giving me a failing grade over some behavior. I quickly bury this thought. I'm not the smartest guy when it comes to girls, but I'm smart enough to know that getting caught comparing your girlfriend to your mother is a poor relationship move.

A bell calls us to dinner. We follow a path over to the eating area. Three women and a man ladle stew into plastic bowls, which they serve with two pieces of bread. The rebels eat at picnic tables that circle a small clearing. The tables are painted an earthy brown and are mostly back in the trees, though I worry that some of them, if the aliens fly low enough, could be seen from the air. There are probably two hundred people eating, maybe more. Some white, some Hispanic, some Native American, a few African-American, a few Asian. Rainbow crowd.

And there are little kids being little kids. Complaining. Arguing. Playing. There's a crying baby. A baby! I shouldn't be all that happy to hear the less-than-sweet sound of a crying infant, but I am. I am.

A little blond girl from the next table shyly looks my way and mindspeaks, *Are you here to save us?*

I should tell the truth. After all we've all been through, we deserve the truth. But she's so little, and the truth is so cruel: *I can't save anyone. I don't know why I'm here.* I don't say it.

Instead I mindspeak, *Eat your vegetables.*

She gives me a deserved look of contempt.

"Sorry," I say.

"For what?" Lauren says.

Catlin knows, but Lauren can't hear what's in other minds very well and misses most of what's gone on between the little girl and me. It's like she's deaf almost. I should tell her, but I'm hungry and tired and I just don't feel like it. I tell her the last part about telling the little girl to eat her vegetables.

"You'll make a good father," she says.

Which just about causes me to spit my stew out. Even before the end of the world, I wasn't ready to start thinking of myself as a father, and now . . . now I can't imagine it. I can't imagine anyone having children in this world.



After dinner, Doc invites us to a meeting. I'm so tired, I feel like I could sleep sitting up at the table, so I sure don't want to go to a meeting. But most people are getting up and dutifully heading in the direction Doc pointed us toward.

Lauren and Catlin stand up, and I'm about to give in when I start to choke. It doesn't feel like that. It feels like hands are around my throat, squeezing. Fingers digging in. I fight for breath but stagger helplessly. Then I'm falling. I see Lord Vertenomous. It's like I've traveled back to the plaza in Taos. The brick walkway beneath me; low, crowded stucco buildings all around; the pale-blue sky gone milky. Just like then.

None of this makes any sense, but it seems so real. I hear what I heard back then. The sounds of people dying: calling to each other, screaming, crying, falling.

Then somehow I'm standing up, and I'm in that moment when I found a way to kill Lord Vertenomous and he fell, dead. But now I'm fighting another alien, too—not Lord Vertenomous, not nearly as strong as he was, but an alien all the same and in the same square—and I'm losing. More people are dying.

What is happening to me?

Then, just as quickly, I'm right back on the bench, and Lauren and Catlin are looking at me with concern. I realize then that I've been on the bench this whole time while also in that other place. I'm shaky. I grip

the table, as if holding tight can keep me from slipping away.

“Are you all right?” Lauren says.

“Not really,” I say, but then try to smile. “Fine. I’m fine. Must be the rich food.”

What just happened? Flashback? Some kind of message? Could I have somehow fallen asleep and dreamed? Nothing makes sense so I choose what my mom would have called a typical male reaction: I try to pretend it didn’t really happen.

Catlin, Lauren, and I walk down one of the narrow paths near the supply caves. I realize that I actually like the way the woods feel. I’m a city boy, but these woods, foreign to me before the aliens came, feel less foreign now. And the cities feel more foreign. Like graveyards, empty and haunted.

I notice something as we walk. A faint hum in the trees and bushes. I feel my muscles tense.

“Do you hear that?” I whisper.

Lauren listens and looks at me with something close to that little girl’s look when I told her to eat her vegetables. “Bugs?”

“Oh, right,” I say. But then I realize that bugs mean more than just bugs. Bugs mean everything didn’t die when the aliens conquered us. Score one for the home planet. We have bugs.

“I saw a squirrel earlier,” Catlin says. “I asked

someone if I'd really seen what I thought I'd seen, and they said there were some animals out here. I guess the aliens focused their killing ray on the cities. The damage doesn't seem as complete here."

"Killing ray?" I say, raising my eyebrow in a Spockian way. Or trying anyway. No one could raise a single eyebrow like Spock.

"What would you call it?"

Both Catlin and I like retro science-fiction movies. We've talked about them before. We like the good ones or the ones that are so bad they're good. I quote from one that falls in the latter category: "Death ray."

She thinks about it and smiles. "*Teenagers from Outer Space*."

"Exactly," I say. "A classically bad, really bad, movie."

I see a scene from the movie in her mind. It's when a dog gets zapped into a skeleton by a ray gun. This telepathic power we have is totally weird, but on the plus side, we get to share a truly awful scene from *Teenagers from Outer Space*.

"You shouldn't joke about it," Lauren says, glaring at Catlin, though she manages to save enough of the feeling to give me a quick look of disapproval.

She walks faster so she gets ahead of us. I'm surprised by her reaction. She must know we aren't joking because we think it's funny ha-ha. We're joking because it's too

terrible not to joke. But then I feel bad, like I've laughed at a funeral or something.

"I'm sorry," Catlin says to Lauren.

I apologize, too, but the whole thing makes me realize that Lauren and I don't really know each other all that well. I mean, we have a connection and all. From back at Lord Vertenomous's. And we kissed once in that abandoned grocery store in West Texas when we were traveling here. But things seem different now. Maybe I just need to try harder to understand the way she sees things.

The light is dim, almost gone. Our campsite is only a few hundred yards up from the clearing where the meeting is, but I still worry about finding it in the dark. Funny how a big, horrible worry doesn't wipe out all the little worries. They're like bugs. They survive no matter what.

Bluish lights spread around the edge of the clearing, creating a glow that resembles moonlight. It's just enough to guide me and Lauren and Catlin through the clearing without bumping into anything or anyone. Even in the dim light, I can see that a lot of people are already here. I can feel them, too, even more clearly than I can see them. They feel confused. And suspicious. And hopeful. And scared. Some of these thoughts come from the same people, one right after another like machine-gun fire. Being telepathic doesn't exactly clear up the human psyche. In fact, there's a lot of confusion and contradiction in most people, which is both comforting (at least I'm not the only one) and disturbing (we're totally messed up).

Now that the sun's down, the temperature is falling fast. A fire would be nice. A fire should be our right as human beings. Even cavemen and cavewomen sat around fires and discussed caveman and cavewoman things, like maybe the best size for a club or whether a leopard skin was better than a bear skin on cold winter nights. But here we are back in the forest, this time the hunted and not the hunters, without even a fire to keep us warm.

I hate them, I think. I hate them so much.

"Ouch," Catlin says. "Careful."

Others are looking at me.

"Your anger," she says. "It's like you pinched me."

"You felt that?"

"I didn't feel anything," Lauren says, her earlier disapproval sneaking back into her voice. "Or not much, anyway."

"You don't realize how strong you are," Catlin says. "You have to control your feelings, or block them from us at least."

"Sorry," I say to those sitting closest to me.

"Don't worry about it," one of them says. "You'll learn."

"It was a whisper," Lauren says stubbornly, "if it was anything."

This is hard for Lauren. She is used to being the smartest person in a room. She was going to be valedictorian at her school. But this telepathic kind of mind

power is different from intelligence. If Albert Einstein showed up, he'd still be the smartest person alive, but he might be a telepathic moron. He'd be all, "But I discovered the theory of relativity. Ever heard of $E = mc^2$?" Wouldn't matter. That would be hard on Einstein. It's hard on Lauren.

More people come into the clearing, including Doc and another old guy whose long white hair is tied back in a ponytail and who makes about two Docs in size. They stand on a raised platform backed up against a row of trees. The crowd gathers in front of them, filling up rows of split-log benches that form a semicircle around the platform.

Doc is small and neat, with white hair and one of those pointy white beards, like Colonel Sanders had. His real name is Lorenzo Sergio de Cabeza, so it's not hard to understand why I'm relieved he goes by Doc. He looks like a professor, which makes sense since he was one; his nickname comes from his two PhDs.

"First, I'd like to welcome the newest members of our group to our town meeting," Doc says. "Could the new members please come to the front?"

Lauren, the great joiner, smiles enthusiastically and leads us toward the stage. Catlin has the same pained expression I imagine on my face, but we obediently follow. Two others—a young boy and an older girl who's about our age—step forward from Doc's right.

As I follow Lauren up front, a buzz of inner voices says things like *New bloods* and *Not of the House of Jupiter and Clan of Wind* and *Jesse* and *The Warrior Spirit*. At least I hear a few dissenting voices. Someone thinks, *That can't be the one with the Warrior Spirit in him. No heroic glow.*

The new boy and girl look like they might be siblings. They're both tall and thin, with huge blue eyes and short, uneven blond hair.

Doc says that before we begin we should have a moment of silence for the dead. "There'll be a funeral service tomorrow at dawn," Doc adds. "In the graveyard." And then the silence. It's the noisiest silence I've ever experienced. I hear everyone. I feel what others are feeling, too. It hurts. Losing someone hurts so much. I can't breathe. I can't think. I feel like I'm drowning, like there's no way I'll get back to the surface. It wasn't this way back at Lord Vertenomous's. It was never this strong, never so everywhere at once. More pain comes at me. It's like being stung all over by bees.

Doc touches me on the back, and the voices drop away to a whisper. I think he's done something, and I feel relief and gratitude. I take deep breaths.

You have to shield yourself, or the voices will overwhelm you. They think they're shielded, but they aren't. Not from you. So you're going to have to shield yourself. Watch me, and try to do what I do.

He shows me how to shield. It's sort of like pulling a curtain, an invisible one, around myself, then thickening it to keep out the sounds. It takes me a few tries, and even then my shield's not nearly as strong as his, but it's a definite improvement.

Good, he thinks. It will keep your thoughts hidden, too. You can control what you show and what is shown to you. You see?

"I think so," I say.

As Doc returns to the platform, I turn to Lauren to see if I can help her block out the voices, but she doesn't seem bothered by them.

Doc introduces us to the crowd—the boy and girl are named Zack and Zelda—and says we make fifty-two newcomers. He says it's time we stopped thinking of ourselves as Wind Clan or Thunder Clan of the House of Jupiter or the House of Apollo and started thinking of ourselves as New America.

"It's a new world," he says, "and we are the survivors. It's time we became something new and inclusive. We'll be like America once was to the rest of the world. We will welcome all. New America. What say others?"

Others say a lot—though most of them don't use their mouths. Some think New Bloods (those of us who changed because of contact with the aliens) and people from other houses can't be trusted, shouldn't be trusted.

Some agree with Doc, though, and think all survivors should unite.

Someone mindspeaks, *If the Spirit of the Warrior comes to one from outside the houses and clans, all has changed. We must change.*

If, someone else mindspeaks doubtfully. *If*.

The man beside Doc, the one who makes two of him, raises his massive arms. He has brown, leathery skin and a wide, blunt nose. The voices go silent.

"I'm Running Bird, for those of you who don't know me," he says, looking right at me.

My first thought is *Don't you mean Flying Bird?* But then I remember there is a bird that runs: the roadrunner. Then I hear something strange even in this strange new world. I hear "*Beep beep!*" in my mind—the sound of the roadrunner from the cartoon.

"Also called Sam White. I'm a real, live Navajo, Hispanic, white, African-American American, in case you're wondering. All of you better put aside all your prejudices against New Bloods and other houses and Native American, Hispanic, white, African-American Americans because the aliens are coming for us. I saw in a dream that the House of Vulcan is no more. I saw it, and it is true. If we are to survive, we have to join together."

Voices in the crowd are saying that the House of Vulcan is strong and cannot be destroyed, but we all

know it can. We have been conquered. The conquered know things that the unconquered don't. One of the things the conquered know is that anything can be destroyed.

"Alien hunters track us," Running Bird says. "Doc is right. We need every survivor we can get. We are all New America or we are lost."

"We are the Clan of the Wind of the House of Jupiter," someone says, and I see that someone is the blond guy again. "We are two thousand years old, and we will survive. Running Bird's vision just makes it clearer how. We must hide. I will lead us to the caves in Mexico my grandfather showed me. I will lead the way."

Dylan. I hear his name in the minds of others. And something else: *Doc's son.* I see the physical resemblance, though Dylan is lighter in color than Doc and muscular and has long, straight blond hair. But I had a strong feeling of trust when I met Doc, and I feel just as strongly about Dylan — only the feeling is the opposite.

Running Bird says, "The aliens will track us wherever we go. We cannot hide."

"The caves will protect us," says Dylan. "No one knows about them but me. We can survive in the caves."

Running Bird shakes his head. "And then what?"

"We will build a city below the earth, and we will grow stronger. We will live. And someday we'll return to the surface. Someday it will be safe. But until that day,

we will live under the ground. And in the future they'll tell stories about us and how we saved mankind."

Stories about him. He thinks they'll tell stories about him. I feel his yearning for these stories.

There are a lot of voices then. Most of them agree with Dylan. *Run. Hide. Live.* I get it. I understand. *Run, hide, live* sounds better than *stay, fight, die*. If those are the choices, then I'm with the majority. Are those the choices?

If I remember right, the humans in the Matrix movies hide in caves to escape the machines, but their city is annihilated and they are nearly wiped out. That's an ending I want to avoid. Okay, it's just a movie, but hiding seems wrong to me.

My friends and I thought the aliens were too strong and we had no choice but to be slaves in order to survive. But then Betty walked up to one of the aliens and slapped him. *Crack!* Right across the face. A beautiful sound. He killed her, but for a second she blocked him—actually blocked him. And that's when we knew: the aliens aren't invincible. Awesomely powerful, yes. Invincible, no. It's the kind of difference that makes fighting possible.

They're not too strong to fight.

At first I think someone else says this, but then I realize it's me. Mindspeak. It just slips out. A couple hundred eyes turn toward me. I probably have that deer-caught-in-headlights look, but I know I have to say something.

“My friends and I fought them. We escaped from them. They’re not all-powerful. They can be defeated.” I try to hide my doubt. I don’t think I’m all that successful.

But I know more. A secret. Something that a friendly Sanginian—there is such a thing, if you can believe that—told me and Catlin and Lauren. Something that not even Running Bird or Doc could know. More aliens are coming. Settlers out there in ships are on their way to Earth right now. And if we’re huddled in caves waiting to get strong enough to fight aliens, we’ll most likely never be strong enough because they will fill the planet. I almost say this. Almost. But I stop myself because it feels overwhelming, like telling this crowd about the aliens will be like telling them to give up. Might as well hide in caves and live out the rest of our miserable lives and give up Earth. I can’t accept that. I won’t.

“This meeting isn’t about staying or running,” Doc says. He lets his eyes rest on Dylan a second before going on. “There will be time for that. This meeting is about understanding we’re a new country, all of us. We are New America.”

“Every meeting is about staying or running,” Dylan says.

Father and son glare at each other, the resemblance clearer than ever. Then an image appears in my mind. It’s Dylan and his father in a tent lit by a lamp. Dylan is looking down at his father, who’s on a cot or something.

And Dylan is trying to look sad, but he doesn't *feel* sad. He feels almost . . . happy. He does feel happy.

The image disappears but leaves me feeling confused and a little freaked. It's like that vision of me fighting the alien in Taos. It feels like more than just my admittedly overactive imagination. It feels real. But it can't be. I'm so tired. I need to sleep. Maybe I just need sleep.

"We will vote on the creation of New America," Doc says, ignoring his son.

Some people want more discussion, though, and so they go around and around again for another fifteen or twenty minutes.

At last they vote. New America wins by a narrow majority. I wonder if it was this way when old America, those struggling colonies, decided they were a country. Here in the rebel camp, people celebrate. A few people slap me and Lauren and Catlin on the back, welcoming us into New America. The truth is, I don't feel so much happy as relieved. We don't have to leave.

I'm about to head back to camp with Lauren, Catlin, and the other newbies, Zack and Zelda. But before I manage to work my way out of the crowd, Doc summons me with mindspeak. Now what?

"You guys go on," I say to my friends.

Catlin looks at me funny, like she's worried about me. For just a second I wonder if she saw what I saw, the daydream or whatever it was of Doc and Dylan. But I

know she didn't. Lauren just shrugs, says, "See you back at camp," and leads Zelda and Zack back down the trail. Catlin is the last to go.

I head back over to the platform, where Doc, Running Bird, and another man are waiting for me.

It turns out my shield wasn't quite as effective as I'd hoped, because Doc heard me thinking about what the Sanginian smuggler told us back in Austin.

"How many settlers?" Doc asks.

I don't bother pretending I'm confused by the question. "He said thirty million would be here soon."

"Thirty million," Running Bird says like he's cursing.

"Then all is lost," the third man says. He's fair skinned, but he gets even paler. "We can't fight thirty million."

"He told me—the smuggler," I say when I see their questioning expressions. "This alien smuggler. He said it wasn't, you know, inevitable. The aliens might not settle here if they had a reason not to."

There isn't any big sigh of relief over this minute possibility from Doc, Running Bird, or the third man. No one says, "Well, that changes things, doesn't it?" The third man, who Doc introduces as Robert Penderson, says, "I don't understand. They're already here. What would keep more from coming?"

"I don't know," I admit.

"The Chosen One is right," Running Bird says. "We

cannot fight thirty million, but maybe we can fight however many thousands are here and keep the thirty million from coming. Maybe we can do that. The spirit in the boy speaks from the depths of the prophecy."

Depths of the prophecy? Does anyone ever say stuff like that? Running Bird does, I guess.

"It came from the mouth of an alien, not from the depths of any prophecy," I say.

"But it isn't the alien who delivers this message to us. It is you," Running Bird insists.

"Catlin or Lauren could have told you the same thing," I point out.

"But you told us."

"Because Doc called me back."

"It is written, and what is written will be."

"What's that even mean? Written where? By who?" I know I sound angry and confused, but that's because I'm, well, angry and confused.

"It means everything is written down in the Big Book. All that has happened, is happening, and will happen is already written."

"In the Big Book," I say. "What big book?"

"*The Big Book.*"

"That clears things up. Thanks."

"We have existed, exist, will exist. It's just an illusion that moments come and go, that there is a past separate from the present separate from the future. That people

are born, then live, then die. All of that is going on all the time—past, present, and future. We just can't see it. Clearer?"

Doc and Robert Penderson look like this is not the first time they've heard Running Bird talk like this, but that they wish maybe it was. I wonder what my mother would have said to him. I wish she were here. I wish that a lot.

"Why don't you just take a look in the Big Book, then?" I say. "You'll see I'm not this Chosen One."

"Doesn't work that way. Only the Creator can look at the Big Book. We mortals sometimes, if we're very, very lucky, get glimpses. Even other gods, like the Warrior, don't get much of a look. The Creator is stingy that way."

"Wait," I say, trying to smile dismissively. "Are you saying you think I might be infected with the spirit of a *god*?"

"Not infected," Running Bird says, sounding offended. "Blessed."

I'm saved from having to discuss my infection/blessing further by Robert Penderson, who starts muttering, "Thirty million. Thirty million coming."

"We'll find a way, Robert," Doc says, placing a hand on the guy's shoulder.

"Meanwhile," Doc says to me, "keep this to yourself,

Jesse. People are already panicked enough. We don't want to make them worse."

"Lauren and Catlin know," I remind him.

"Tell them to tell no one."

As I walk up toward our campsite through the thick, dark woods, I think, *All of it is right here and right now—the past, the present, and the future.* All of it? How can that be? My mother would give a clear grammatical explanation for why this shouldn't be allowed. Verbs tell time. End of story. Time can't just ignore grammar. I smile thinking this because I can hear my mother's voice.

Whatever that Big Book of Running Bird's says, I feel one thing. I'm tired of running. I want to fight. No matter what, I want to fight.

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