
Opening Extract from...

Wither:

Book One of the Chemical Garden

Written by Lauren Destefano

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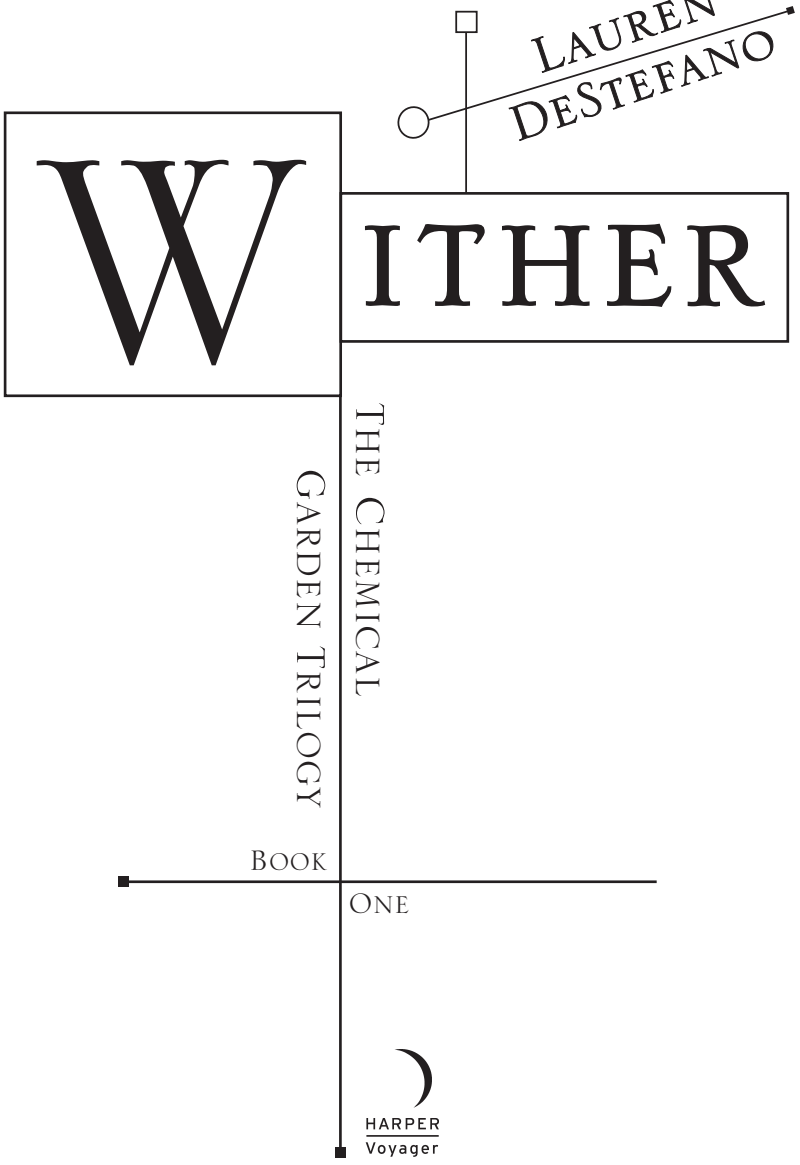
Lauren DeStefano
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The Chemical Garden Trilogy
Book One
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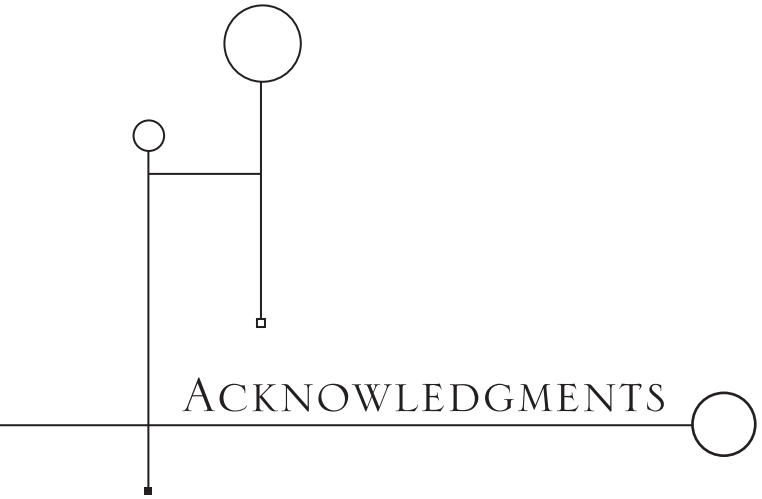
FOR MY DAD,

WHO TURNED TO ME
AND SAID,

"ONE DAY, KID,
YOU'LL DO GREAT THINGS."



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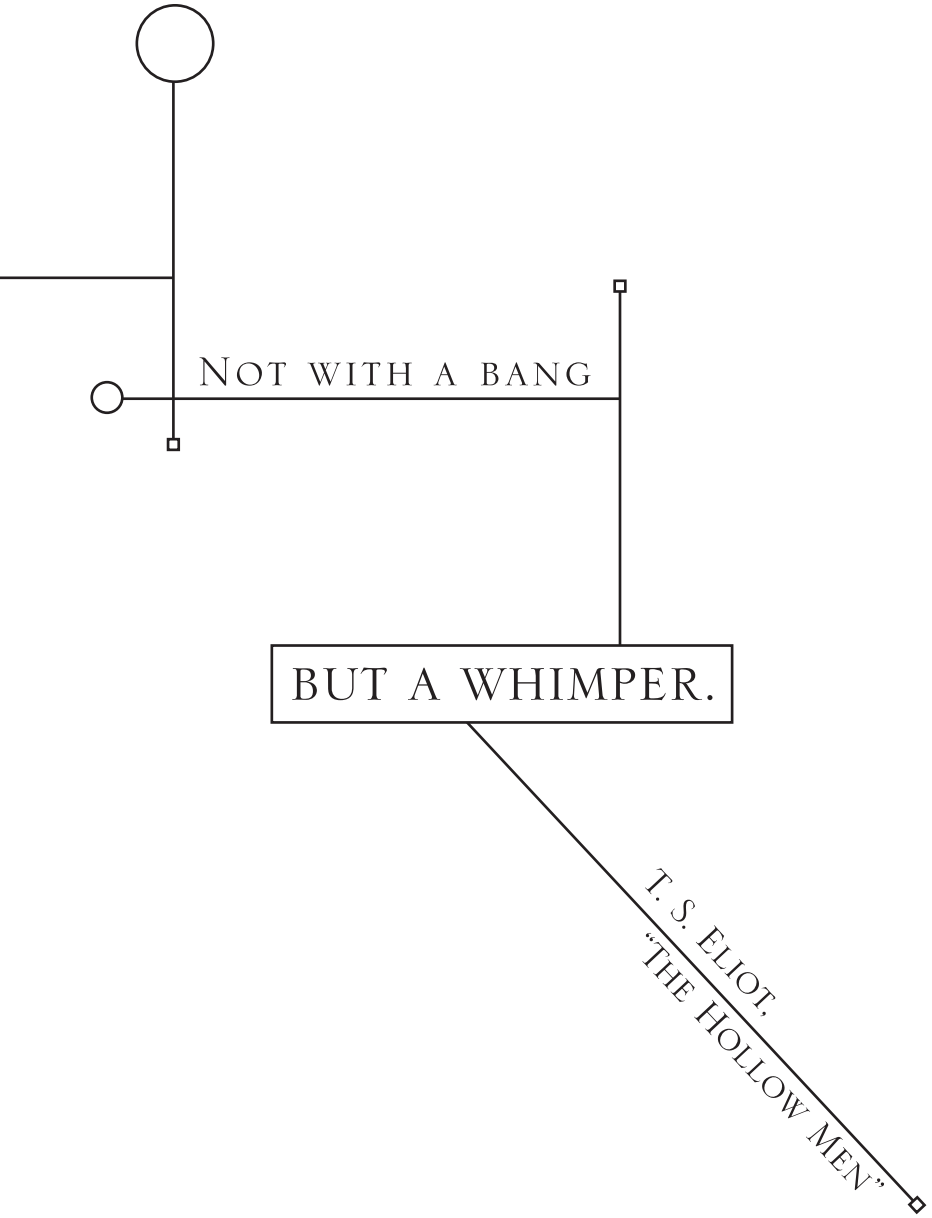
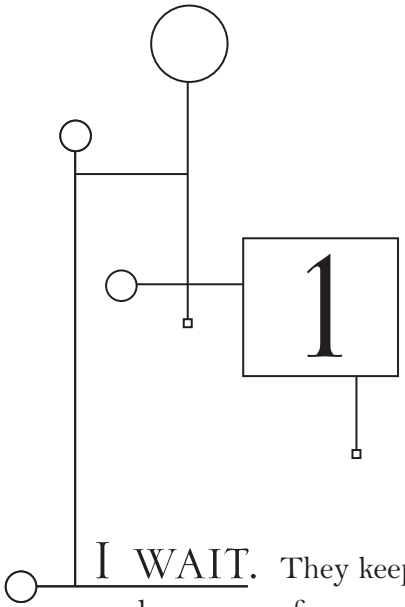
This is the way the world ends


NOT WITH A BANG
BUT A WHIMPER.
T. S. ELIOT,
"THE HOLLOW MEN"



I WAIT. They keep us in the dark for so long that we lose sense of our eyelids. We sleep huddled together like rats, staring out, and dream of our bodies swaying.

I know when one of the girls reaches a wall. She begins to pound and scream—there's metal in the sound—but none of us help her. We've gone too long without speaking, and all we do is bury ourselves more into the dark.

The doors open.

The light is frightening. It's the light of the world through the birth canal, and at once the blinding tunnel that comes with death. I recoil into the blankets with the other girls in horror, not wanting to begin or end.

We stumble when they let us out; we've forgotten how to use our legs. How long has it been—days? Hours? The big open sky waits in its usual place.

I stand in line with the other girls, and men in gray coats study us.

I've heard of this happening. Where I come from, girls have been disappearing for a long time. They disappear from their beds or from the side of the road. It happened to a girl in my neighborhood. Her whole family disappeared after that, moved away, either to find her or because they knew she would never be returned.

Now it's my turn. I know girls disappear, but any number of things could come after that. Will I become a murdered reject? Sold into prostitution? These things have happened. There's only one other option. I could become a bride. I've seen them on television, reluctant yet beautiful teenage brides, on the arm of a wealthy man who is approaching the lethal age of twenty-five.

The other girls never make it to the television screen. Girls who don't pass their inspection are shipped to a brothel in the scarlet districts. Some we have found murdered on the sides of roads, rotting, staring into the searing sun because the Gatherers couldn't be bothered to deal with them. Some girls disappear forever, and all their families can do is wonder.

The girls are taken as young as thirteen, when their bodies are mature enough to bear children, and the virus claims every female of our generation by twenty.

Our hips are measured to determine strength, our lips pried apart so the men can judge our health by our teeth. One of the girls vomits. She may be the girl who screamed. She wipes her mouth, trembling, terrified. I stand firm, determined to be anonymous, unhelpful.

I feel too alive in this row of moribund girls with their eyes half open. I sense that their hearts are barely beating, while mine pounds in my chest. After so much time spent riding in the darkness of the truck, we have all fused together. We are one nameless thing sharing this strange hell. I do not want to stand out. I do not want to stand out.

But it doesn't matter. Someone has noticed me. A man paces before the line of us. He allows us to be prodded by the men in gray coats who examine us. He seems thoughtful and pleased.

His eyes, green, like two exclamation marks, meet mine. He smiles. There's a flash of gold in his teeth, indicating wealth. This is unusual, because he's too young to be losing his teeth. He keeps walking, and I stare at my shoes. *Stupid!* I should never have looked up. The strange color of my eyes is the first thing anyone ever notices.

He says something to the men in gray coats. They look at all of us, and then they seem to be in agreement. The man with gold teeth smiles in my direction again, and then he's taken to another car that shoots up bits of gravel as it backs onto the road and drives away.

The vomit girl is taken back to the truck, and a dozen other girls with her; a man in a gray coat follows them in. There are three of us left, the gap of the other girls still between us. The men speak to one another again, and then to us. "Go," they say, and we oblige. There's nowhere to go but the back of an open limousine parked

on the gravel. We're off the road somewhere, not far from the highway. I can hear the faraway sounds of traffic. I can see the evening city lights beginning to appear in the distant purple haze. It's nowhere I recognize; a road this desolate is far from the crowded streets back home.

Go. The two other chosen girls move before me, and I'm the last to get into the limousine. There's a tinted glass window that separates us from the driver. Just before someone shuts the door, I hear something inside the van where the remaining girls were herded.

It's the first of what I know will be a dozen more gunshots.

I awake in a satin bed, nauseous and pulsating with sweat. My first conscious movement is to push myself to the edge of the mattress, where I lean over and vomit onto the lush red carpet. I'm still spitting and gagging when someone begins cleaning up the mess with a dishrag.

"Everyone handles the sleep gas differently," he says softly.

"Sleep gas?" I splutter, and before I can wipe my mouth on my lacy white sleeve, he hands me a cloth napkin—also lush red.

"It comes out through the vents in the limo," he says. "It's so you won't know where you're going."

I remember the glass window separating us from the front of the car. Airtight, I assume. Vaguely I remember the whooshing of air coming through vents in the walls.

"One of the other girls," the boy says as he sprays white foam onto the spot where I vomited, "she almost threw herself out the bedroom window, she was so disoriented. The window's locked, of course. Shatterproof." Despite the awful things he's saying, his voice is low, possibly even sympathetic.

I look over my shoulder at the window. Closed tight. The world is bright green and blue beyond it, brighter than my home, where there's only dirt and the remnants of my mother's garden that I've failed to revive.

Somewhere down the hall a woman screams. The boy tenses for a moment. Then he resumes scrubbing away the foam.

"I can help," I offer. A moment ago I didn't feel guilty about ruining anything in this place; I know I'm here against my will. But I also know this boy isn't to blame. He can't be one of the Gatherers in gray who brought me here. Maybe he was also brought here against his will. I haven't heard of teenage boys disappearing, but up until fifty years ago, when the virus was discovered, girls were also safe. Everyone was safe.

"No need. It's all done," he says. And when he moves the rag away, there's not so much as a stain. He pulls a handle out of the wall, and a chute opens; he tosses the rags into it, lets go, and the chute clamps shut. He tucks the can of white foam into his apron pocket and returns to what he was doing. He picks up a silver tray from where he'd placed it on the floor, and brings it to my

night table. "If you're feeling better, there's some lunch for you. Nothing that will make you fall asleep again, I promise." He looks like he might smile. Just almost. But he maintains a concentrated gaze as he lifts a metal lid off a bowl of soup and another off a small plate of steaming vegetables and mashed potatoes cradling a lake of gravy. I've been stolen, drugged, locked away in this place, yet I'm being served a gourmet meal. The sentiment is so vile I could almost throw up again.

"That other girl—the one who tried to throw herself out the window—what happened to her?" I ask. I don't dare ask about the woman screaming down the hall. I don't want to know about her.

"She's calmed down some."

"And the other girl?"

"She woke up this morning. I think the House Governor took her to tour the gardens."

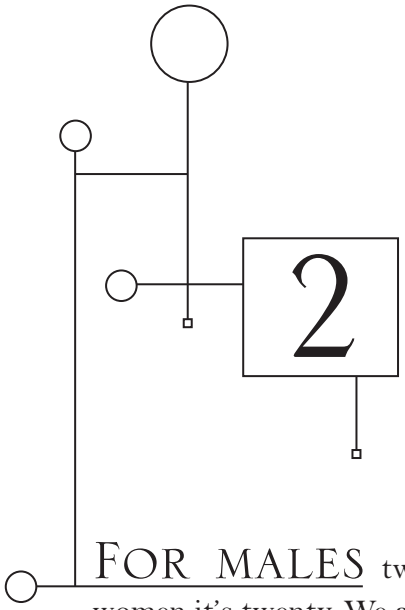
House Governor. I remember my despair and crash against the pillows. House Governors own mansions. They purchase brides from Gatherers, who patrol the streets looking for ideal candidates to kidnap. The merciful ones will sell the rejects into prostitution, but the ones I encountered herded them into the van and shot them all. I heard that first gunshot over and over in my medicated dreams.

"How long have I been here?" I say.

"Two days," the boy says. He hands me a steaming cup, and I'm about to refuse it when I see the tea bag

string dangling over the side, smell the spices. Tea. My brother, Rowan, and I had it with our breakfast each morning, and with dinner each night. The smell is like home. My mother would hum as she waited by the stove for the water to boil.

Blearily I sit up and take the tea. I hold it near my face and breathe the steam in through my nose. It's all I can do not to burst into tears. The boy must sense that the full impact of what has happened is reaching me. He must sense that I'm on the verge of doing something dramatic like crying or trying to fling myself out the window like that other girl, because he's already moving for the door. Quietly, without looking back, he leaves me to my grief. But instead of tears, when I press my face against the pillow, a horrible, primal scream comes out of me. It's unlike anything I thought myself capable of. Rage, unlike anything I've ever known.



2

FOR MALES twenty-five is the fatal age. For women it's twenty. We are all dropping like flies.

Seventy years ago science perfected the art of children. There were complete cures for an epidemic known as cancer, a disease that could affect any part of the body and that used to claim millions of lives. Immune system boosts given to the new-generation children eradicated allergies and seasonal ailments, and even protected against sexually contracted viruses. Flawed natural children ceased to be conceived in favor of this new technology. A generation of perfectly engineered embryos assured a healthy, successful population. Most of that generation is still alive, approaching old age gracefully. They are the fearless first generation, practically immortal.

No one could ever have anticipated the horrible aftermath of such a sturdy generation of children. While the first generation did, and still does, thrive, something

went wrong with their children, and their children's children. We, the new generations, are born healthy and strong, perhaps healthier than our parents, but our life span stops at twenty-five for males and twenty for females. For fifty years the world has been in a panic as its children die. The wealthier households refuse to accept defeat. Gatherers make a living collecting potential brides and selling them off to breed new children. The children born into these marriages are experiments. At least that's what my brother says, and always with disgust in his voice. There was a time when he wanted to learn more about the virus that's killing us; he would pester our parents with questions nobody could answer. But our parents' death broke his sense of wonder. My left-brained brother, who once had dreams of saving the world, now laughs at anyone who tries.

But neither of us ever knew for certain what happens after the initial gathering.

Now, it seems, I will find out.

For hours I pace the bedroom in this lacy nightgown. The room is fully furnished, as though it's been waiting for my arrival. There's a walk-in closet full of clothes, but I'm only in there long enough to check for an attic door, like my parents' closet has, though there isn't one. The dark, polished wood of the dresser matches the dressing table and ottoman; on the wall are generic paintings—a sunset, a beachside picnic. The wallpaper is made up of vertical vines budding roses, and they remind me of the

bars of a prison cell. I avoid my reflection in the dressing table mirror, afraid I'll lose my mind if I see myself in this place.

I try opening the window, but when that proves futile, I take in the view. The sun is just beginning to set in yellows and pinks, and there's a myriad of flowers in the garden. There are trickling fountains. The grass is mowed into strips of green and deeper green. Closer to the house a hedge sections off an area with an inground pool, unnaturally cerulean. This, I think, is the botanical heaven my mother imagined when she planted lilies in the yard. They would grow healthy and vibrant, thriving despite the wasteland of dirt and dust. The only time flowers bloomed in our neighborhood was when she was alive. Other than my mother's flowers, there are those wilting carnations that shopkeepers sell in the city, dyed pink and red for Valentine's Day, along with red roses that always look rubbery or parched in the windows. They, like humanity, are chemical replicas of what they should be.

The boy who brought my lunch mentioned that one of the other girls was taking a walk in the garden, and I wonder if the House Governor is merciful enough to let us go outside freely. I don't know much about them at all except that they're all either younger than twenty-five or approaching seventy—the latter being from the first generation, and they're a rarity. By now, much of the first generation has watched enough of its children

die prematurely, and they are unwilling to experiment on yet another generation. They even join the protest rallies, violent riots that leave irreparable damage.

My brother. He would have known immediately that something was wrong when I didn't come home from work. And I've been gone for three days. No doubt he's beside himself; he warned me about those ominous gray vans that roll slowly through city streets at all hours. But it wasn't one of those vans that took me at all. I could never have seen this coming.

It's the thought of my brother, alone in that empty house, that forces me to stop pitying myself. It's counterproductive. *Think*. There must be *some* way to escape. The window clearly isn't opening. The closet leads to only more clothes. The chute where the boy threw the dirty dishrag is only inches wide. Maybe, if I can win the House Governor's favor, I'll be trusted enough to wander the garden alone. From my window the garden looks endless. But there has to be an end somewhere. Maybe I can find an exit by squeezing through a hedge or scaling a fence. Maybe I'll be one of the public brides, flaunted at televised parties, and there will be an opportunity to slip quietly into the crowd. I have seen so many reluctant brides on television, and I've always wondered why the girls don't run. Maybe the cameras neglect to show the security system that keeps them trapped.

Now, though, I worry that I may never even have a chance to make it to one of those parties. For all I know,

it will take years to earn a House Governor's trust. And in four years, when I turn twenty, I'll be dead.

I try the doorknob, and to my surprise it isn't locked. The door creaks open, revealing the hallway.

Somewhere a clock is ticking. There are a few doors lining the walls, mostly closed, with dead bolts. There's a dead bolt on my door as well, but it's open.

I tread slowly, my bare feet giving me an advantage because on this rich green carpet I'm practically silent. I pass the doors, listening for sound, signs of life. But the only sound comes from the door at the end of the hallway that's slightly ajar. There are moans, gasps.

I freeze where I stand. If the House Governor is with one of his wives trying to impregnate her, it would only make things worse for me if I walked in on it. I don't know what would happen—I'd either be executed or asked to join, probably, and I can't imagine which would be worse.

But no, the sounds are strictly female, and she's alone. Cautiously I peek through the slit in the door, then push the door open.

"Who's there?" the woman murmurs, and this throws her into a rage of coughs.

I step into the room and find that she's alone on a satin bed. But this room is far more decorated than mine, with pictures of children on the walls, and an open window with a billowing curtain. This room looks lived in, comfortable, and nothing like a prison.

On her nightstand there are pills, vials with droppers, empty and near-empty glasses of colored fluids. She props herself on her elbows and stares at me. Her hair is blond, like mine, but its shade is subdued by her sallow skin. Her eyes are wild. "Who are you?"

"Rhine," I give my name quietly, because I'm too unnerved to be anything but honest.

"Such a beautiful place," she says. "Have you seen the pictures?"

She must be delirious, because I don't understand what she's saying. "No," is all I say.

"You didn't bring me my medicine," she says, and drifts gracefully back to her sea of pillows with a sigh.

"No," I say. "Should I get something?" Now it's clear that she is delirious, and if I can make up an excuse to leave, maybe I can return to my room and she'll forget I was even here.

"Stay," she says, and pats the edge of her bed. "I'm so tired of these remedies. Can't they just let me die?"

Is this what my future as a bride will look like? Being so entrapped I'm not even allowed the freedom of death?

I sit beside her, overwhelmed by the smell of medication and decay, and beneath that, something pleasant. Potpourri—perfumed, dehydrated flower petals. That melodic smell is everywhere, surrounding us, making me think of home.

"You're a liar," the woman says. "You didn't come to bring my medicine."

"I never said I did."

"Well, then, who are you?" She reaches her trembling hand and touches my hair. She holds up a lock of it for inspection, and then a horrible pain fills her eyes. "Oh. You're my replacement. How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I say, again startled into honesty. Replacement? Is she one of the House Governor's wives?

She stares at me for a while, and the pain begins to recede into something else. Something almost maternal. "Do you hate it here?" she says.

"Yes," I say.

"Then you should see the verandah." She smiles as she closes her eyes. Her hand falls away from my hair. She coughs, and blood from her mouth splatters my nightgown. I've had nightmares that I'll enter a room where my parents have been murdered and lie in a pool of fresh blood, and in those nightmares I stand in the doorway forever, too frightened to run. Now I feel a similar terror. I want to go, to be anywhere but here, but I can't seem to make my legs move. I can only watch as she coughs and struggles, and my gown becomes redder for it. I feel the warmth of her blood on my hands and face.

I don't know how long this goes on for. Eventually someone comes running, an older woman, a first generation, holding a metal basin that sloshes soapy water. "Oh, Lady Rose, why didn't you press the button if you were in pain?" the basin woman says.

I hurry to my feet, toward the door, but the basin woman doesn't even notice me. She helps the coughing woman sit up in the bed, and she peels off the woman's nightgown and begins to sponge the soapy water over her skin.

"Medicine in the water," the coughing woman moans. "I smell it. Medicine everywhere. Just let me die."

She sounds so horrible and wounded that, despite my own situation, I pity her.

"What are you doing?" a voice whispers harshly behind me. I turn and see the boy who brought my lunch earlier, looking nervous. "How did you get out? Go back to your room. Hurry, go!" This is one thing my nightmares never had, someone forcing me into action. I'm grateful for it. I run back to my open bedroom, though not before crashing into someone standing in my path.

I look up, and I recognize the man who has caught me in his arms. His smile glimmers with bits of gold.

"Why, hello," he says.

I don't know what to make of his smile, whether it's sinister or kind. It takes only a moment longer for him to notice the blood on my face, my gown, and then he pushes past me. He runs into the bedroom where the woman is still in a riot of coughs.

I run into my bedroom. I tear off the nightgown and use the clean parts of it to scrub the blood from my skin, and then I huddle under the comforter of my bed,

holding my hands over my ears, trying to hide from those awful sounds. This whole awful place.

The sound of the doorknob awakens me this time. The boy who brought my lunch earlier is now holding another silver tray. He doesn't meet my eyes; he crosses the room and sets the tray on my nightstand.

"Dinner," he says solemnly.

I watch him from where I'm huddled in my blankets, but he doesn't look at me. He doesn't even raise his head as he picks the sullied nightgown off the floor, splattered with Lady Rose's blood, and disposes of it in the chute. Then he turns to go.

"Wait," I say. "Please."

He freezes, with his back to me.

And I'm not sure what it is about him—that he's close to my own age, that he's so unobtrusive, that he seems no happier to be here than I am—but I want his company. Even if it can only be for a minute or two.

"That woman—," I say, desperate to make conversation before he leaves. "Who is she?"

"That's Lady Rose," he says. "The House Governor's first wife." All Governors take a first wife; the number doesn't refer to the order of marriage, but is an indication of power. The first wives attend all the social events, they appear with their Governors in public, and, apparently, they are entitled to the privilege of an open window. They're the favorites.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Virus," he says, and when he turns to face me, he has a look of genuine curiosity. "You've never seen someone with the virus?"

"Not up close," I say.

"Not even your parents?"

"No." My parents were first generation, well into their fifties when my brother and I were born, but I'm not sure I want to tell him this. Instead I say, "I try really hard not to think about the virus."

"Me too," he says. "She asked for you, after you left. Your name is Rhine?"

He's looking at me now, so I nod, suddenly aware that I'm naked under these blankets. I draw them closer around myself. "What's your name?"

"Gabriel," he says. And there it is again, that almost smile, hindered by the weight of things. I want to ask him what he's doing in this awful place with its beautiful gardens and clear blue pools, symmetrical green hedges. I want to know where he came from, and if he's planning on going back. I even want to tell him about my plan to escape—if I ever formulate a plan, that is. But these thoughts are dangerous. If my brother were here, he'd tell me to trust nobody. And he'd be right.

"Good night," the boy, Gabriel, says. "You might want to eat and get some sleep. Tomorrow's a big day." His tone implies I've just been warned of something awful ahead.

He turns to leave, and I notice a slight limp in his walk that wasn't there this afternoon. Beneath the thin white fabric of his uniform, I can see the shadow of bruises beginning to form. Is it because of me? Was he punished for making my escape down the hallway possible? These are more questions that I don't ask.

Then he's gone. And I hear the click of a lock turning in the door.