

A woman with long dark hair is running away from the camera down a brightly lit hallway. The hallway has a greenish-yellow glow. In the foreground, a large, semi-transparent clock face is overlaid, showing the numbers 2 and 3. The woman is wearing a light-colored jacket and dark pants. The overall mood is urgent and suspenseful.

MADISON LAWSON

THE
REGISTRATION

A NOVEL

EVERYONE SHE KNOWS COULD BE HER KILLER.
ANY DAY COULD BE HER LAST.

THE
REGISTRATION

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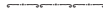
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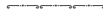
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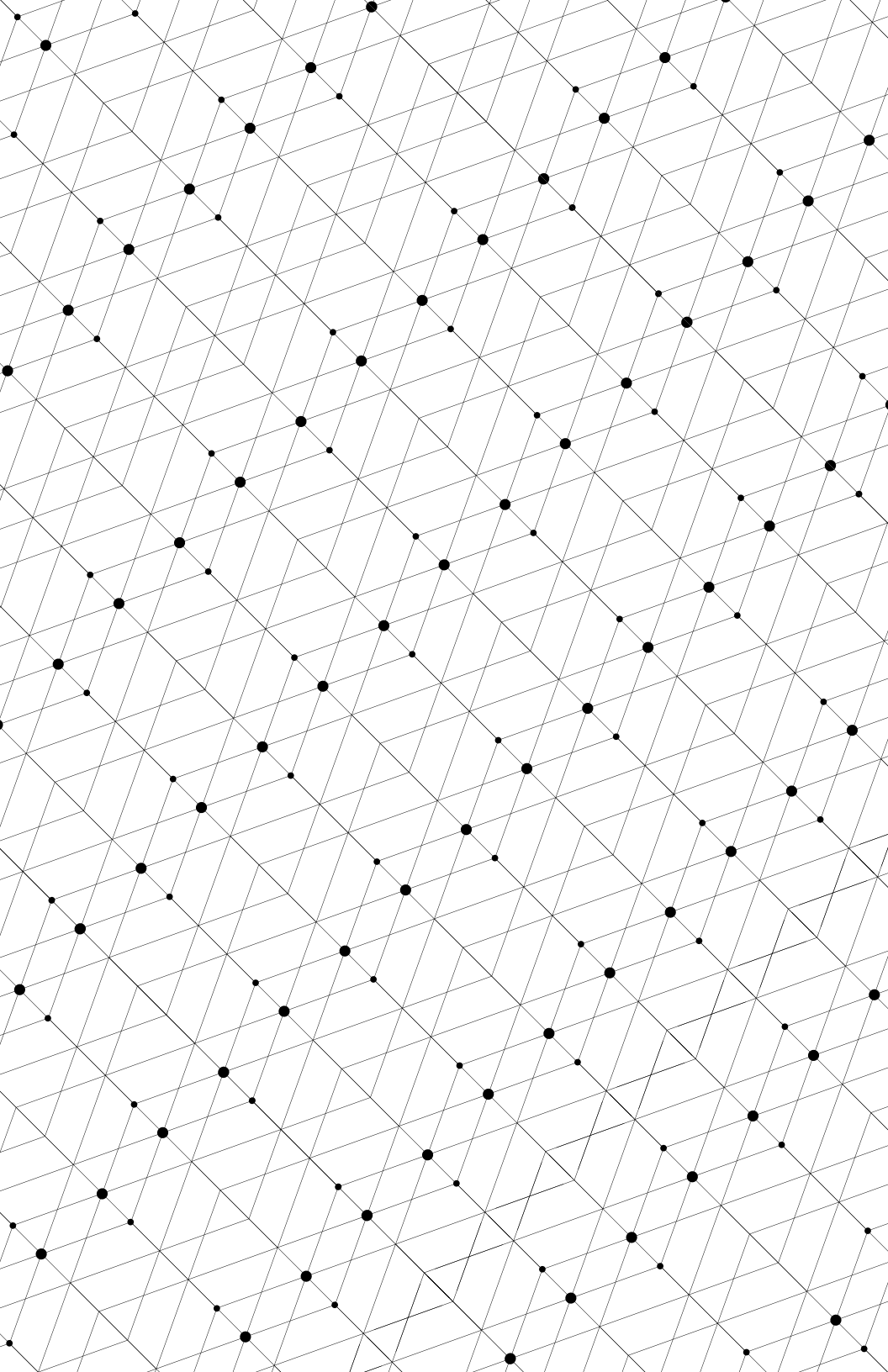
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*For my dad, a miracle, superman, and proof that
good men and fantastic fathers exist.
I'll love you forever and I'll miss you always. Thank you.*





DAY 1 ---

Lynell feels the sun cutting into her skin, a harsh reminder of her own mortality. She rolls forward onto her toes and holds her hand up against the sun. The motion puts an old scar on her forearm in her direct line of sight. Her stomach clenches and she steps back into the shade.

Dallas is busier today than on a usual Thursday. The first Thursday of the quarter, April 4th, brings promises of vengeance, clarity, relief, justice, and love.

It's Registration Day.

Lynell rests against the wall of the building and leans her head back. She flattens her palms against the hot stones, listening to the city's symphony. Hundreds of feet pound the pavement, and the streets are congested with honking cars and people on the phone.

Across the street, an old man walks out of the large glass door Lynell has been staring at for two hours. He folds a piece of paper and slides it into his back pocket. She wonders whom he just Registered. The odds suggest a wife or loved one in chronic pain, as mercy is the most common reason for using the Registration. But perhaps this man seeks justice. Lynell's high school history teacher used his Registration on a man who assaulted his daughter and got away with it. No jail time or community service.

But with the Registration, he found justice anyway.

A gunshot brutally pulls her out of her rumination. A young girl screams, and a few older kids jump or duck. Lynell, like most of the adults

walking the streets, only flinches at the sound. While public Registrations aren't common, the first day is always the most violent.

She looks up to see a middle-aged man lying in a pool of his own blood and a woman, the same age, standing over him holding a small, smoking gun. Instantly, a pair of Elysian Regulators rush to her side. Lynell can't hear what they're saying, but after the woman holds up a piece of paper and the officers dig in the man's coat, they nod. A lengthy phone call later, the Regulators leave. If the Registration had been completed anywhere else, officers probably would have arrived first. But since she's right outside a Registration office, there are plenty of Regulators around to check the legitimacy of the completed Registration.

The woman kneels next to the man's side, back straight as she reaches toward his pocket. Two men a few feet away pull out their phones and start snapping photos before running off. Perhaps they're nothing more than curious bystanders, but the deep frowns on their faces tell a different story. Lynell would bet her own Registration that they're rebel vultures collecting gruesome images of any deaths they stumble across. Whatever remains of the revolutionists will flood the internet with photos of the worst completed Registrations to sway others to their cause. What they won't show are the grateful faces of those who will be Registered so they won't have to spend another day on a ventilator or suffering through chemo. They won't show the heartbroken women Registering the unnamed fetuses they carry with debilitating illnesses, or the poor teens ending a pregnancy they could never afford. They won't show people the government failed, like Lynell's old teacher or Lynell herself, who now must seek justice themselves.

With the Sanitary Crew yet to be dispatched, no one touches or moves the body. Pedestrians simply avoid stepping in the blood, continuing with their day.

Lynell turns away from the sight and stares at the tall glass doors again.

She takes a deep breath. Not for the first time, she considers going home and taking advantage of her day off. She has most of her life to Register. After all, she's always been told: "Never Register before you turn thirty.

Chances are, you'll need that Registration when you're fifty more than you think you need it when you're twenty."

But Lynell is twenty-four and she's been wanting to Register the same person for nearly two decades. She doesn't think she'll ever have a better use for this gift. And now, with the news that he's getting married at the end of the year to a woman with three daughters, Lynell knows time is running out. She needs to do it soon, if not for her own sanity, then for the safety of those girls.

She could still wait until next quarter's Registration, though.

Lynell looks at the scar on her arm. One of the oldest decorations to the canvas that is her body.

She pushes off the wall and walks across the street toward the glass doors. She's thankful Eric Elysian requested measures to make picketing and protesting outside Registration offices illegal, and grateful the government enforces them. She's not sure she would have been able to walk past a crowd of ignorant jerks calling her a murderer. Without the Registration, chaos, violence, and homelessness would have consumed their world. Without it, they would never know true love or have anything to test it with. It's the only thing that saved them after the devastating civil war that seemed to have no end. The entire country owes a lifelong debt to the Elysians for saving them. Lynell knows that.

The Registration is a product of the Elysians' private business, but they work so closely with the government that it's virtually an inalienable right. Well, an inalienable right that must be paid for. It's protected by both the Elysian corporation and, when necessary, the government's law enforcement. Eric Elysian, the current owner of the Registration, is practically one of the oligarchs himself.

In the past, before Lynell's time, the rulers of the United States were supposedly elected by the people. But really, they conned their way there. It wasn't a true democracy. Citizens fought back, demanding that their voices be heard. They wanted real power over their lives, laws, and money. They wanted to implement change. A civil war followed: brother fighting brother,

sister denouncing sister, mothers, daughters, fathers, sons at each other's throats. In ninth grade, her school made all students watch a documentary about the war. It was bloody chaos with far too many points of contention between the two warring sides to find compromises.

Then Gideon Elysian showed up and proposed his idea to the few leaders still holding power on both sides of the war. The Registration would give individuals power over life and death while the government retained the authority to create laws and enforce them. For example, the death penalty would be abolished, which is what half the country wanted. But the other half, individuals who wished to sentence a felon to death, could use the Registration to execute their idea of rightful punishment. The war came to an end and, tired of fighting, the country settled into a precarious peace. The rest, as they say, is history. The country has since been ruled by oligarchs with the aid of the Elysians and their Registration. They keep the peace, ensure commerce, and everyone is happy because citizens have access to true justice and mercy with the Registration. No need for corrupt democracy or oppressive tyranny.

At first, when Gideon Elysian proposed and created the Registration almost seventy years ago, everyone—regardless of age, origin, color, title, or class—had the option to pay the fee to get one Registration. The Elysians worked closely with the oligarchs, ensuring laws were set in place to support it. The Registration entitles citizens to kill the person they Registered, no questions asked.

But there's a catch: you have to end that person's life within two weeks or your immunity is forfeited, as is your chance for another Registration. If you kill your Registree at any time other than the two weeks after Registering, you will be charged with murder.

After a few years of madness, the government added another law. Parents must pay the fee for their newborn, or that child will never be allowed to legally Register anyone.

That's why you need to know for certain. That's why you have to be sure that this is the person you want to Register. You can't waste such a gift.

THE REGISTRATION

Lynell has held onto her gift her entire life. Her mom didn't have that gift. If she did, their life would have been different. Her childhood would have been better. And Lynell wouldn't be using her own Registration right now.

Lynell looks at the scar again, thinks of those three young girls, takes a deep breath, and pulls open the large, glass door.

"Wait, please. Give her three more months. She may wake up!" A young girl, maybe twelve, yells at a boy only a few years older than her at the other end of the crowded room. They're easily the youngest people here, and Lynell's heart aches at what must have happened to them to cause the boy to use his Registration so early.

Most people in line are older, though there is a woman who looks close to Lynell's age holding two babies in her arms. A man halfway down the line leans on a cane, his legs shaking and his glasses balancing precariously on the edge of his nose.

It's a large room, probably twenty to twenty-five yards wide. The walls, floors and ceilings are white marble. There's no way to look outside or in. The only windows in the room are the eleven clerk stations where lines form to Register. Above each window are two letters. The first, on the far-left side, says A-B. The next says C-D. And so on. Some, such as X-Z, have much shorter lines. Lynell knows what to do: stand in the line coordinating with the last name of the person you intend to Register. She's walked inside the building and stood in line twice before, always chickening out at the last minute.

There are hundreds of people dispersed throughout the room. The young girl and boy stand behind a short, Black woman wearing a thin blue shawl in the U-W line.

With a deep breath, Lynell steps into the M-N line. There are probably thirty people ahead of her. Thirty people Registering. Thirty people being

Registered. Thirty deaths in the next fourteen days. Thirty moments when some lives end and others mark the new beginning they so desperately crave.

Lynell looks at her watch. It's almost 3:30 p.m., which means everyone in this time zone only has an hour and a half to Register before they must wait for July.

Lynell lowers her arm and sees a small scar peeking out from under the watch strap. Her stomach churning and heart palpating as if her own name were about to be Registered, she pulls down her sleeves. The unrelenting summer heat is no longer barreling down on her and the air-conditioned building starts cooling the sweat clinging to her skin.

She zips up her hoodie, tucks her fingers under the sleeves and pulls up the hood, as if to shield herself from the world.

She has no reason to hide. The Registration is good, pure, and just. People will not look down on her for Registering Alan.

She knows this, but she prays to remain unseen, nonetheless.

Sounds from the large building assault her ears as she rocks on her feet with her hands hiding in the pockets. Pens scratching on pages. Names spoken with a chilling finality. Crying. Whooping. Rustles of bags as people search for IDs. A cough from a small, frail, old woman clutching to her husband two lines over.

The line Lynell stands in moves forward. She looks at her watch again. 3:30.

Lynell watches the couple make it to their window. She listens as the man says he wants to Register his wife. She stands next to him, leaning on him for support, smiling up to him with so much gratefulness that Lynell wants to sob. That is what selfless love looks like, she thinks. Ending your best friend, your partner, your teammate's life because it is too unbearable to keep living. Because you love them enough to let them go.

The line moves. 3:33.

A small part of her hopes she won't reach the window before the clock strikes five o'clock and each window clangs shut. But when the queue is

more than halfway done and her watch says 4:08, she knows she won't have that escape.

She starts shivering. The air-conditioning is blasting and she's standing directly under a vent. She glances up and a strand of deep brown hair breaks free from her bun. Huffing, she tucks it behind her ear and hunches her shoulders.

They move forward again. 4:11.

"I'd like to Register Michael Nancine," a stocky man with a shaved head says at the front of their line.

"Name?"

Lynell stops listening as the man starts feeding information to the Registration clerk. She wonders what Michael Nancine did. Does he know his days are numbered, that he probably won't live to see May? Does he feel regret for whatever propelled this man to Register him?

She knows Alan feels no regret. And that he's too arrogant to assume someone might waste their Registration on him. He doesn't truly know Lynell. He doesn't understand the effect of what he's done. And he doesn't care.

The line surges forward after Michael Nancine has successfully been Registered. Lynell flexes her fingers and moves her arm forward. As if in slow motion, she feels the friction as she pushes the sleeve back to read the watch again. She can feel every hair on her arm, the pain in her right ankle, the shortness of breath. The world loses focus, and she never notices the time at which she hears six words that make her spine shake with fear.

"I'm here to Register Lynell Mize."



Lynell smells unwashed feet, applesauce, and a sharply sweet peach perfume. But she hears nothing but the cough that comes from the man at the front of the line. She leans to the side so she can see his back, broad and covered in a simple gray T-shirt. It's stained with two small patches of sweat

under his armpits. She sees him place his hands on the counter as he speaks to the woman behind the window. She watches the lady's mouth move as she asks for his name.

"Zachary Price."

Lynell feels her breath punch at her chest, forcing her to keep on living. She watches the back of the man's head as he accepts a form the lady slides under the window.

Confusion clouds her mind. Her hands feel numb. She turns around and stares at the woman in line behind her. She scowls at Lynell and looks down at her phone. The air-conditioning grows louder.

"Registree's date of birth?" Lynell hears the clerk ask.

Lynell hears the man's rumbling voice answer correctly. January 31st. Twenty-four years ago. He knows her birthday. He knows *her*.

Well enough to want to Register her. To waste his Registration on her.

Does she know him? Zachary Price. The name doesn't ring a bell. Who is he? Has she done something to him?

"Fill out this form. Be sure to include your social identification number at the bottom. Sign here, here, here, and here. Write the Reg—" Lynell checks out again, her ears filling with a deafening roar.

She looks down at her hands, sees them shaking, watches bulbs of sweat gather on the back.

She trips when the lady behind her shoves her.

"Make a little space," the lady behind her barks.

Lynell looks up and sees the man who Registered her turning towards the commotion. Before he can see her face and she his, Lynell turns away, breathing hard.

Zachary Price. She has never heard the name in her life. She's sure of it.

"What are—" the lady gasps as Lynell pushes her out of the way and starts for the door.

The world seems to tip as she grasps the handle.

I'm here to Register Lynell Mize.

Lynell shoves the door open and falls into the world outside.

A little boy turns to look at her, smiling wide to reveal two missing front teeth. He stops moving and Lynell trips over the tip of his shoe. She reaches out for a hold on something and the closest thing in her path is his shoulder.

The boy screams. His mom tugs him out of Lynell's grasp and starts yelling at her but the only thing she can hear is Zachary Price's voice.

I'm here to Register Lynell Mize.

The phrase repeats itself over and over in her mind. Screaming, whispering, echoing. Promising death. Making use of the gift of the Registration.

The gift that doesn't feel like a gift when you're on the other side.

I'm here to Register Lynell Mize.

She dares a look back and sees the door open. Without waiting to see who steps out, she takes off running. She pushes a man out of the way and dimly hears him shout at her. Then she stumbles over the legs of a homeless woman and lands hard on her elbows.

Pain shoots up her arms and the world returns to focus, filled with color that she didn't know had drained away. She blinks. Her ears ring and her mind seems to shake, unable to grasp the enormity of the situation she finds herself in. She smells trash and body odor. The homeless woman next to her is ranting about the Registration taking everything from her after her husband had been Registered and that the rebels are right and the Elysians are tyrants.

Lynell grunts and pushes herself up, trying desperately to ignore the pain in her arms. She twists her arm and sees blood dripping. When a drop splashes on the dirty pavement it seems as if her heart has already been claimed by Price. She can feel his fist threatening to crush it.

Lynell stumbles back when someone runs into her. "Get out of the way, bit—" The shout is cut short when Lynell twists and slaps the man who was yelling at her. He blinks and scowls. His hands are curling into fists and his face turns red. Before he gets a chance to yell more or hit back, Lynell starts running.

She runs for six blocks before descending the steps to the subway. Her hands shake as she pulls her card out of her pocket and scans it so the doors

will let her through. As soon as she reaches her train, she checks her watch. The train should arrive in seven minutes, which feels like enough time for Price to kill her three times over.

She glances around, trying to decipher each face to see if one of them could be the man planning to kill her. She looks for a gray T-shirt or recognition in the eyes of the many men crowding the underground train station.

She hides between a bench and a snack dispensary machine behind an exceptionally plump woman and lowers her head, looking at her feet, hoping to remain unnoticed.

As soon as the train arrives, she joins the crowd of people climbing on, not flinching at the skin-to-skin contact and putrid smells. She leans her head against one of the poles and takes several deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

It takes twelve minutes to arrive at her station. She stares at her watch, feeling the small hands mocking her as they tick away the seconds of her life.

“If someone is Registered, it’s for a reason. It’s never simply revenge or anger. The Registration is not subject to the fleeting quality of human emotions,” her father said once. Well, according to her mom, anyway.

What would he say if he were here, watching Lynell run from a man who’d just Registered her? Who’d just promised the system that in fourteen days, Lynell Mize will be dead.

“Washington Station,” the robotic voice shouts through the carriages.

Lynell leaves sweat behind on the pole when she exits the train. She looks both ways, making eye contact with no one. Her heartbeat continues to speed up as she takes the steps three at a time and exits the underground station. Her apartment is still a five-minute walk away, but she runs and makes it in two.

Price probably knows where she lives. He will have done his homework and likely knows everything about Lynell. He must know that her father was Registered twenty years ago. Must know that her mom married Alan a year later. Knows that she . . .

“SHIT!” Lynell shouts, despite her desire to stay unnoticed. Several people look her way and she smiles softly. “Sorry,” she says, fishing her key out of her pocket and sliding it into the lock.

It doesn’t turn. She pulls it out and tries again. Still, it doesn’t turn, and Lynell begins pacing in front of the door. She’s about to try one more time when she realizes the key isn’t turning because the door is already unlocked.

He beat her here. She should leave. Go somewhere else. Go home. Leave the city. Hide for the next two weeks. Or perhaps she could go after Price herself and demand to know *why*. She could Register Alan and be sure to take him with her when she goes. She could write a letter to . . .

She shakes her head, stopping that line of thought. She probably just forgot to lock it after she left this morning. With a deep breath, she pushes the door open and disappears into the darkness of her apartment, only to be stopped by a tall man standing in front of her.

“Lynell.”

She doesn’t scream, but her entire body tenses up and her blood grows cold and her heart stops beating for a moment. She can’t make out the man’s face, but the stature is almost identical to Price.

The voice is familiar.

Too familiar.

“Lynell,” he repeats. And suddenly Lynell wishes it were Price standing before her rather than the man she thought she’d never see again.

“What are you doing here, Daniel?” Lynell’s body doesn’t calm, but she does get enough energy to storm past him and into the apartment. She brushes his arm and feels his fingers graze her skin.

“I came to . . . Lynell, you have to listen to me. You need to leave town,” he says, his voice shaking. Lynell spins around, almost bumping into her tattered green couch. The apartment is small. Lynell doesn’t have much stuff and what she does have is old and worn.

“Why?” she demands, despite agreeing with Daniel.

“I can’t tell you. But you have to trust me.”

Lynell laughs and the sound is filled with so much venom she’s surprised it doesn’t kill her—or him—on the spot. “You promised me you would never say that again. You promised me you’d never come back into my life. Go home, Daniel.”

“Lynell, please.”

“Leave me alone!” she screams. The words bounce off the walls as Daniel blinks and takes a step back. He seems to just have taken in her state. Her damp clothes, tangled hair, and red eyes. She must look crazed.

“Leave me alone, please,” she repeats, quieter this time. Lynell turns her back to Daniel and heads to her bedroom. She sets down her bag and pushes open the door.

She’s digging through the bottom drawer of her dresser when she looks up to see him standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Lynell seethes, her teeth grinding together until her jaw hurts.

A small trickle of her fear instantly evaporates as she picks up the gun from the back of the dresser. She opens the barrel of the gun to find it’s full, which is good since ammo is surprisingly hard to come by. Legally acquiring a gun is a long process and ammo is highly controlled: you have to provide a reason for every single bullet before purchasing them. As a result, very few Registrations are completed by using a gun.

Careful to keep the gun out of Daniel’s vision, she tucks it in the waistband of her pants and stands up. She suddenly wishes she had kept her emergency bag in her bedroom, rather than under her desk at the office. Instead, she grabs a small bag and shoves in a change of clothes, a water bottle, and her wallet. She should probably get more, maybe a first aid kit and some food, but the gun is all she really came here for and now she needs to leave.

“Go home, Daniel,” Lynell says, pushing past him to leave her bedroom. The weight of the gun suddenly disappears, and she whirls around.

“I thought you got rid of this,” he says, holding the gun and examining it, as if the secrets of the Registration are etched into the metal.

“Give it back!” She reaches out, but he yanks it from her reach.

“Promise me you’ll get out of town.”

“Give it back or I’ll call the cops, Daniel.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh? So, this gun is legal?”

Lynell stops trying to reach for the weapon and crosses her arms. “What do you really want?”

“As thick as ever,” he muses, lowering his arm and returning the gun within her reach. “I want you to leave town, Lynell.”

She’s about to tell him to go to hell but then wonders why he’s so insistent on this. Does he know about the Registration? Does he know who Price is? “Where would you like me to go?” she asks.

He takes a deep breath and gives her the gun back. The feel of the cold metal is reassuring. His blue eyes meet her brown ones, and he sighs before saying, “As far away as possible.”

Daniel, always prepared, had brought an extra change of clothes. He insists on following her to the station.

“Are you going to tell me why I should leave town?” Lynell asks, changing in her bedroom while Daniel waits outside. She pulls off her pants and shirt, replacing them with leggings, a T-shirt, black boots, and a deep red shawl tied around her waist while waiting for Daniel to reply. She’s about to repeat her question when his answer comes.

“There’s talk about some anti-Registration protests taking place all over the city. Businesses that support the Elysians will be targeted. You still work at that law firm?”

She does, and the office has been tagged by the rebels before. The firm’s main purpose is to represent civil cases that are connected to the Registration. If someone sues a neighbor for property damage caused while completing their Registration, the defendant will likely hire someone from Lynell’s firm. The lawyers are well-known for getting people off on a

multitude of charges in the name of the Registration. Daniel's reasoning feels shallow. It's been several years since there were enough protests to cause real damage and even if something were to happen, Lynell could simply wait out the worst of it in her apartment.

"Back with the so-called freedom fighters, are you?" Lynell asks, instead of challenging him.

"It just might not be safe in town for a few days," he says, using his lying voice that Lynell would recognize anywhere. He's never been comfortable with dishonesty and all his lies have a truthful core. Maybe he really does want her to be safe. He just refuses to tell her what the danger is.

Or maybe he has no problem with lying to her anymore.

"Why do you care, Daniel?"

Daniel cuts her off with a chuckle. "You've always asked too many questions."

Lynell finishes lacing the boots and stands up, crossing her arms. "I think I'm entitled to a few questions. You show up after three years, demanding I leave town, and expect me to blindly obey? You—" She's about to throw a string of choice words in his direction when the look on his face causes the breath to stop in her throat.

His mouth is set in a tight, straight line. "You seem to have forgotten, Lynell." He turns around and picks up his bag. "You left me."

Lynell blinks, prepared to retaliate when he steps so close she can feel his breath.

Three years of guilt morphing into anger causes her hands to shake. She wants to scream about broken promises and broken hearts, but then he's reaching behind her and gathering up her hair.

"What are you doing?" she asks, trying to shrug him off.

"You'll want all this hair out of your way," he says, looking past her face to avoid making eye contact. His arms are on either side of her head and she feels heat radiating off them. She hisses as he tugs at her hair, pulling it through a hairband. "Sorry," he mutters before stepping back to admire his handiwork.

“I can put up my own damn hair.”

Daniel shrugs, smiling sadly, before turning to the door. “We’ve already been here too long. Let’s go.”

Without further argument, Lynell grabs her small bag, turns off the lights behind her and walks out the door without so much as a backward glance. Daniel follows.

“I feel like we should be running,” she says as they wait at a crosswalk.

“We should be as inconspicuous as possible,” Daniel says, hooking his fingers through the straps of the backpack.

The light changes and they join the crowd of people leaving the city after they’ve finished their Registration. She wonders if there will be any fulfilled Registrations on the train station platform and desperately hopes not. She’s not in the mood to see dead bodies left unattended.

Her body may add to their numbers soon enough.

Lynell speeds up her steps to keep up with Daniel’s long strides. He smiles and nods at an old woman that passes them, always polite even during what may be the last moments of her life. Under the melting sun and surrounded by people, Lynell asks, “What’s the plan here, Daniel? Why—”

He cuts her question short by grabbing her arm and pulling her to the edge of the walkway into the shade of the closest building. Someone bumps into her on the way, and her body freezes until she looks up and sees a man that is too old and short to be Price.

“We’re Mark and Emily,” he starts.

“Who?”

“A few days ago, I got us new IDs complete with working social identification numbers and photos.”

At that, Lynell’s back straightens and she stares at Daniel, his words pulling her lips into a frown.

He got them both IDs days ago? That is far too much preparation for getting out of town to avoid a few protests.

“I had to use an old one of you, but it’ll work,” Daniel continues. “We are Mark and Emily Hunter and we’ve been married for two years.”

“Convenient,” she says, studying him with increased suspicion. Even as her brain tells her that these are too many coincidences, her body feels more relaxed in his presence. Her mind doesn’t trust him and tells her to run. Her gut trusts him more than anyone else and begs her to stay.

Daniel ignores her and glances around them to be sure no one is listening. “I’ve got the IDs in the bag. I’ve also got us two tickets for a train that’s going to leave without us if we don’t start moving, like, now.”

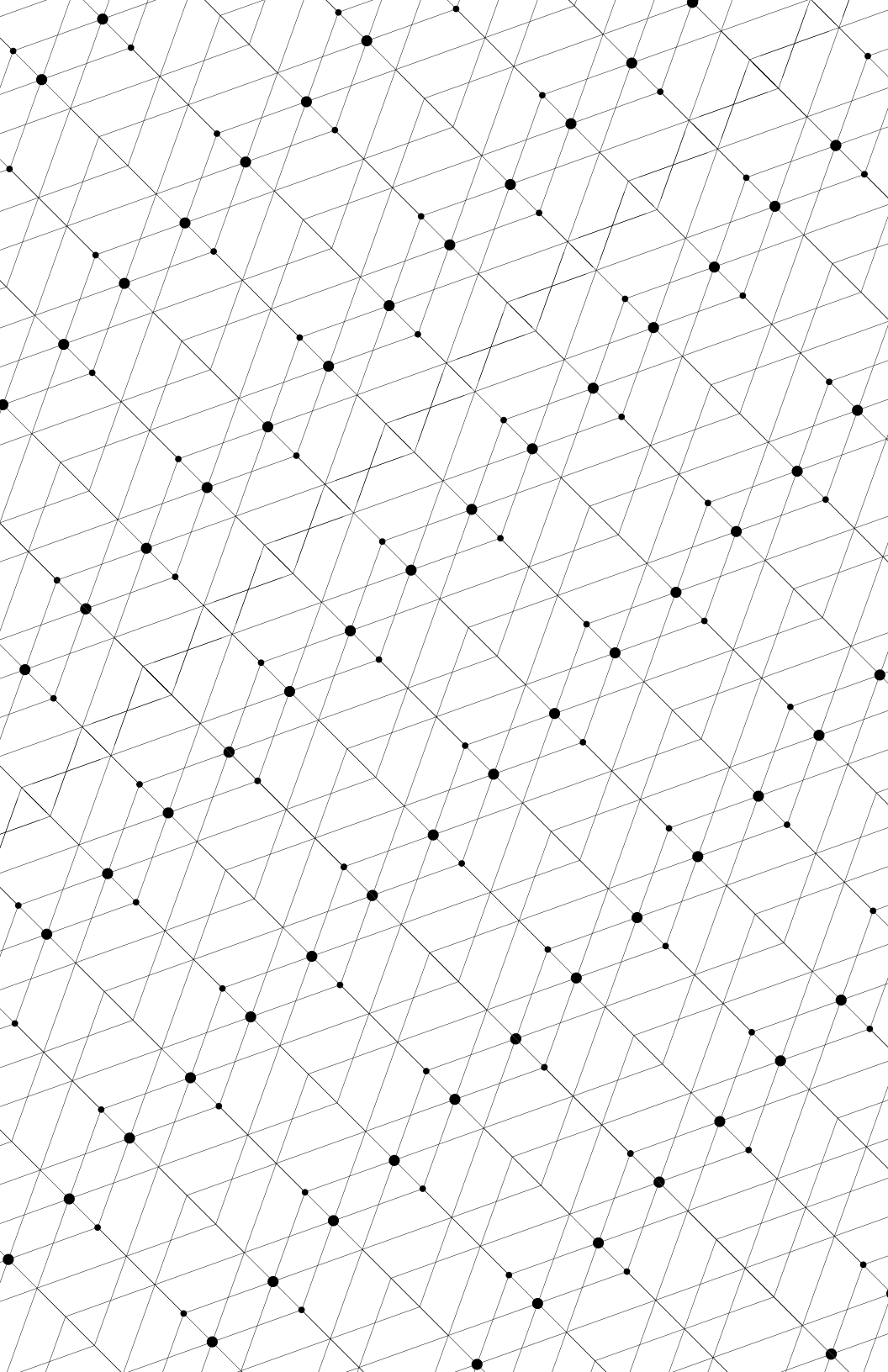
Lynell almost steps out of Daniel’s orbit to flee but instead, she lets her ex pull her back into the flow of traffic. They quicken their pace toward the station, which is a twenty-minute walk away.

“You’re coming with me?” She’s not surprised that he’s been planning to join. He was always good at that, revealing information to her slowly to keep from freaking her out. Maybe he’s using that tactic against her now. Luring her into a trap disguised as safety. “Where are we going?” she asks, watching for any sign of guilt or dubious intentions in his face.

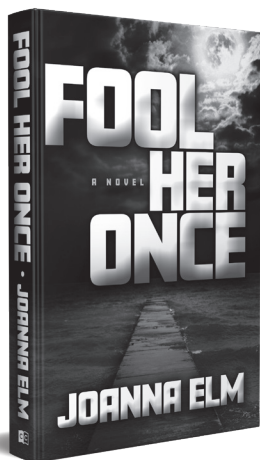
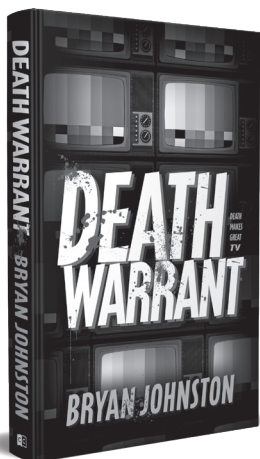
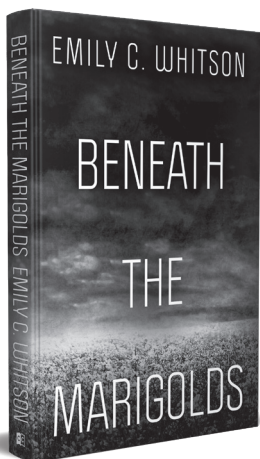
“North, to Chicago.” Seeing her frown, he adds, “Not to my parent’s place. I just wanted to get as far away as possible, and I have somewhere we can stay for a night before we keep moving.”

He sounds sincere and it’s enough to calm Lynell’s suspicion for the moment. She nods, her mind too busy with her last memory of Chicago to properly respond. Her chest aches as she recalls grabbing hold of Daniel’s arm and laying her head on his shoulder. She’d curled her feet up into the airplane seat while he chose an old movie to play, ignoring her protests. The air was cold, and she hadn’t feared her stepfather in two years. Back then she had no idea what was coming, what would cause Daniel to leave her forever just a year later. She let herself stay in that moment, drinking water from a plastic cup and stealing Daniel’s wine when she thought he wasn’t looking. He smirked because of course he saw his twenty-year-old new wife drinking his wine and of course he didn’t care because they might as well have been alone on the large plane. Lynell had felt untouchable.

Daniel’s grip is no longer soothing, yet the touch is familiar enough to keep her from sinking into fear.



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Easier said than done as Lynell soon discovers that multiple strangers have used their Registration on her. Along the way, she reunites with her estranged husband who is determined to dig up a past Lynell prefers to keep buried. With only days left to live, Lynell is determined to uncover the truth and survive a destiny not of her choosing.

*“Stay strong. Stay alive.
Don't think about what's next.”*


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