

Extract of:



Falling Skye

By Lina Frisch

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[...]

I don't notice that I've dropped my phone until Dad bends down to get it. Instead of placing it back in my trembling hands, he leads me to our sofa and waits patiently for me to sit down. He suddenly strikes me as strangely thin in his suit jacket, which he still hasn't taken off. "What does this mean?" The voice coming out of my mouth doesn't sound like my own, and I turn my face away so that Dad doesn't see the tears welling up in my eyes.

Test summons for Skye Anderson. Travel to the Athene Centre will be by train. Report to the Central Station on Saturday. This has to be a mistake. That's the only logical explanation. After all, I'm still under age! They've probably just got me mixed up with someone from the year above.

"We need to talk about what happens now," says my father in a serious voice. My heart sinks.

The administration doesn't make mistakes. My father knows this, and deep down, I know it too.

"But Cara wasn't tested until after her eighteenth birthday," I manage to stammer. How jealous I had been of the older girl from our neighbourhood when she had set off for the test a year ago. Now I just feel like I've been hit by a steam roller. "Everyone gets tested once they're eighteen, after they've finished school. Those are the rules. That's what it says in the regulations!"

"Not anymore," responds my father with a stony countenance. "Your entire year group has been called up."

Now I know why Dad ended his telephone call so abruptly when he came through the door, and why his voice had sounded so incredulous. He hadn't wanted to believe the warning his colleague was trying to give him. He wanted to see his daughter's summons for himself. For a moment, I think I see something that looks like sympathy in his eyes. "The procedure has been in place less than four years, so sudden alterations can happen." Dad places a cool hand on my shoulder. "Listen, Skye. I don't know what led the Council to make this decision, but we have to make the best of it now. Do you understand?"

No. I do not understand, because this isn't the course my life was supposed to take. I'm supposed to spend the next two years getting wound up by Jasmine and taking part in sprinting competitions. I'm

supposed to finally tell Elias how I feel about him. I'm supposed to buy an evening dress for our graduation ball and pick out a matching tie for Elias. I am not ready to become an adult trait-holder! "There is nothing we can do about it." All of a sudden, my father looks frighteningly old, his face wrinkled, his shoulders drooping.

When I pull my patchwork blanket over myself this evening, I just can't bring myself to close my eyes. Lying rigid on my side, I look over at the light coming from the miniature globe in the plug socket next to my desk. It's been there for four years, ever since Dad installed it. It lights up as soon as the sun goes down. Most children are ready to let go of their night light once they turn twelve, but that was when I got mine. Its weak light was the only thing that helped with the nightmares. Dad thinks my night terrors were brought on by Mum's disappearance. I saw it in his face when he found me shaking and drenched in sweat in my bed. He would ask me what I had been dreaming about, but I could never give him an answer to that question.

I hug my pillow and lift my smart phone off my bedside table, but the internet has already been shut off. I hear the scraping of a chair downstairs, followed by the TV being switched off.

The day after tomorrow.

Heavy footsteps thud up the stairs, from the study to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the bedroom. Unable to settle, I throw myself about under my blanket, but I am too warm and there is no chance of me falling asleep, so in the end, I slip out of my bed and walk over to the window. The street below me is dead and the houses are dark. There is only one light on, next door, and it's the light I was hoping to see.

Test summons for Skye Anderson. Travel to the Athene Centre will be by train. Report to the Central Station on Saturday.

This is followed by instructions about luggage limits and a declaration that all available data will be automatically transferred by Serenity High School.

Suddenly, I can no longer fathom how I have managed to tolerate Dad's well-intentioned advice – which was almost worse than his helpless silence – or my own suffocating thoughts for as long as I have. I listen once more for any sounds from within the house, but it has gone silent. Quietly, I slip on my soft sandals and reach for a cardigan before opening my window as wide as it will go, letting the fresh night air stream into my room. I sit on the windowsill and swing my legs over the ledge. Not even the thought of the darkness outside can hold me back.

I find my footing on the smooth surface of the porch roof. It is easier than it was the last time I remember doing this, although I must have grown at least ten centimetres since then. I slide down to the edge of the little roof, then jump and land with both feet on the hard lawn of our front garden.

There is no sound except for the quiet tapping of my footsteps as I run along the pavement. A few moments later, I am pressing myself up against the wooden wall of the house next door. Maybe I'm being reckless, but I don't have a choice. Not since those three horrendously business-like sentences turned my whole life on its head.

"Elias?" It's nothing more than a whisper, but his window is ajar. "Elias!"

When I see his face appear above me, I can breathe again properly for the first time since I read my summons. He casts a furtive glance along the empty street,

"Give me fifteen minutes. Meet me at the tree trunk."

The window closes with a click. Elias hates breaking the rules almost as much as he hates the dark, but this cannot wait until tomorrow. I run along the street I grew up on, doing my best to avoid the

illumination cast by the street lights. I stop, thinking I can hear the sound of footsteps. No, it can't be, I shake my head. The administration wouldn't bother wasting an overseer on maintaining the curfew in Uppelake. They have enough on their hands with the clubs and bars in the inner city, whose owners like to circumvent a few of the more onerous aspects of the regulations.

The pavement at the end of the street is lined with a high hedge that separates it from the no-man's-land surrounding the lake. The people living in the beautifully painted houses opposite don't want to be reminded of the fatal accident several years back that resulted in the paradise of my childhood being closed to the public. After the final street light, I bend a couple of stubborn branches apart and squeeze through the opening.

"Are you sure we can do it?"

"Give me your hand."

I smile as that afternoon pushes its way back into my thoughts. That was when we discovered this secret path. Back then, I didn't have to hold my breath to fit through the gap. We made it through effortlessly. Behind the hedge, an impenetrable darkness envelopes me. The deep black of the night makes my heart start to race and I wish I had my smart phone so I could turn on the torch. But it would have been careless to bring it with me. Its tracking function picks up every single step I take, and the last thing I need is to get in trouble for trespassing in a restricted zone. Slowly, my eyes adjust to the darkness and I can make out the wild bushes that have consumed the paths beneath them. The forest that surrounds the lake has become denser over the years and my cardigan keeps getting caught on thorny branches.

I take a few more steps until I am standing in front of a mighty tree trunk. It is lying across the path that leads to the steep bank. I run my hand over the rotten wood and breathe in the swampy scent of the lake. I climb onto the tree trunk with practised movements and look up through to treetops to the clear sky, feeling the tightness in my chest start to disappear as I take in more and more of the familiar surroundings. *There is nothing to be afraid of.* At least not here.

I listen to the rushing of the river that flows into the lake not far from here, giving the water its treacherous current. Maybe it's a good thing I don't have to wait two more summers to discover the secrets of the test. It's like a plaster: you can peel it off slowly and tortuously or rip it off so quickly that you hardly notice the pain.

The sound of a cracking branch almost makes me fall off the trunk in alarm. For a moment, everything is silent, then I hear something coming closer. Or someone?

"Elias?"

No answer. I would have been surprised if it had been him, because the hasty movements sound panicked rather than careful. Even at the age of eleven, Elias had been aware of the risks of being caught in a restricted zone, and he had always chosen his movements with care. I slide quietly down the other side of the tree trunk and crouch down amid a thicket of trees. A few metres away from where I was just sitting, someone is running past without looking around them. Confused, I stare after the shadow. Anyone who knows what they're doing goes around the lake to the right, through the safety of the forest. After a ten-minute walk, this leads you to the gentle creeks that are safe for swimmers. I narrow my eyes. The path this person has beaten through the undergrowth leads to the left. Whoever they are, they are headed straight for the steep bank!

"Hello?"

Uncertainly, I strain my ears for a response in the darkness. The bank is several metres high and is hidden by trees. One false step is enough... I should go back to the tree trunk and wait for Elias. Who knows, this person who is running through a restricted zone at night might be dangerous. I am starting to turn back when I hear a dull thud. It is followed by a strangled cry that puts all of my senses on high alert. Whoever it is that is scrambling around out there is in danger!

As fast as I can, I run between the trees and, within minutes, I reach the bank. Unlike in our little cove, there is a steep drop down to the lake from here, and there is a reason Elias and I have always avoided the currents in this particular spot. I steady myself, grabbing onto a branch just in time to avoid losing my footing. The full moon casts its glow across the blackness beneath me. A few loose stones make a muffled sound as they roll down the slope. And then I hear it. A gasp, then a beating noise, as if someone is using their arms to row in a desperate attempt to keep their head above water. Holding my breath, I can make out a figure. The figure is being carried along by the undercurrent of the river that runs through the lake, to the spot where the dam turns the water into a death trap for inexperienced swimmers. For a few seconds, I am paralysed by the sight of the body as it bobs up and down beneath the water. **Pensioner drowns at Uppelake. Area of natural beauty declared restricted zone due to lethal currents.** After those headlines, nobody set foot in this area again. Nobody except Elias and me. At least, until today.

The toes of my sandals are jutting out over the precipice. I should get help, but the person's movements are getting weaker and weaker. Before I can change my mind, I leap into the abyss.

The cool water of the lake engulfs my body. I am disorientated for a moment, but then my fingers touch the sandy floor of the lake and I push myself upwards with all my might. Moments later, I break through the water's surface and gulp at the air. Where is he? I crane my neck as the current drags me in the same direction as its first victim. There! I can see his arms, a little way off. My cardigan is heavy with water and is pulling me downward. I didn't think to take it off.

I didn't think at all.

Hang in there, I urge the drowning person inwardly, as I fight doggedly against the current that is pulling me towards the dam. But the rowing arms are being carried farther and farther away from me and I feel strangled by panic. This person is wrestling for his life and if I am going to reach him in time, I need to let the current carry me. With the threatening rush of the dam in my ears, I start swimming with the current. A head surfaces in front of me, blond hair shining in the moonlight, but the boy has stopped fighting. I propel myself forwards until I am finally level with him. I manage to grasp his arm and, with all my strength, pull his motionless body along with me. Panicking, I try to catch my breath as the river continues to carry us along with it. We have to get out of the path of the current! I am swallowing water as I hold the boy by his stomach and lean his head against my shoulder. He is thin, but his weight is too much for me. We start to sink, but I don't let myself give up, although I have long since lost feeling in my legs. *This is just another race*, I try to convince myself.

If only Elias were here!

I frantically try to recall the rescue hold we were taught. With a great deal of effort, I manage to get us both onto our backs and I hold the boy's blond head with one hand. With as much strength as I can muster, I propel us both towards the bank using my legs. I manage to avoid being swept along any farther. Slowly, painfully slowly, I manage to manoeuvre the two of us out of the undercurrent. It feels like hours before I finally manage to grasp onto the tree roots that are protruding into the lake from the bank. My feet find solid ground and I try desperately to calm my breathing as I pull my cargo ashore.

If nothing else, we have been dragged far enough that we now find ourselves on a flat part of the bank. But my relief at that disappears as I look at the chalky white face beneath me in the sand.

“Colin!” I whisper, slapping him across his ice-cold cheeks, as another eddy of water threatens to pull the ground out from beneath my feet. Only slowly do I begin to realise who I’ve just fished out of the forbidden lake. “Damn it, Colin!”

Elias’ best friend is still wearing his Serenity uniform: a light-blue jumper. I think of yesterday evening, how I had watched him from my window. The arrogant Colin, the golden boy of our school, whom I’ve never been able to stand. Trembling with exertion, I tear the thin material of his jumper at the collar and pull it over his head. Then I put my hands on his chest and start thrusting, fitfully. One, two.

“Come on,” I whisper, but Colin doesn’t stir.

An unfamiliar sort of fear comes over me, worse than anything I have ever felt before. Colin might die. He could be dead, all because I wasn’t good enough to save him. I have to concentrate. I have to do this. I have to! I place my hand under his chin and bend over him to give him mouth to mouth. All of a sudden, I sense the control returning to his body. He starts coughing and throws up the water that he had swallowed. Hastily, I turn his head to one side.

“It’s okay, everything’s okay,” I hear myself stutter and I don’t know if I’m talking to him or myself.

Colin’s fingers claw at my shoulders, as though he thinks he is still sinking, and I don’t have the heart to push him away. Slowly, his body realises that air is pouring into his lungs, and Colin lets go of me. His chest rises and sinks at frequent intervals as he gradually starts to come around. “The summons.” Colin’s voice is barely audible, but I read the words on his colourless lips.

Suddenly, a horrifying notion rises up in me. Did Colin throw himself into the lake on purpose? Did the test summons disturb him so much that he wanted to give up his life? No, that can’t be. Colin is the most rational person I know. He has nothing to worry about in terms of the Council’s decision.

But if he’s as rational as you think, what is he doing half drowned on the bank of a forbidden lake?

“Skye?”

The far-off sound of Elias’ worried voice startles me. I look down. My pyjamas are stuck to my legs, which are covered with scratches, and my cardigan and hair are dripping with lake water.

“You know that no-one can ever find out what happened tonight?” At great effort, Colin is trying to pull himself together. “Not even Elias.” His voice still sounds a little raw from the water, but that does nothing to mask his threatening undertone.

“Skye!”

I hear Elias coming closer and closer, and I want to call out his name into the night, so that he can find me and all this can be over.

I stare at Colin. “Did you fall?” I manage.

“What do you mean?” comes the response. “I just wanted to clear my head and I didn’t see the drop. Suicide is for emotional types.”

“Of course.”

Rational types find a solution for everything. Colin would never even think of letting his feelings get the better of him like that.

Then why was he even here?

I sweep my wet hair out of my face.

“Listen to me, Skye. Neither of us should be in a restricted zone. You did something really stupid.” Colin doesn’t seem to have noticed that he’s clutching my arm. His tight grip hurts.

“I did something stupid? I saved you!” Is Colin sometimes condescending towards me? Yes. Does he only notice me when I’m with Elias? Usually. All the same, he has never tried to frighten me. I take a step back.

“They will find out that we acted emotionally.” Colin lowers his voice to a whisper. “If Elias knows, they will find out.”

I feel the same sense of adrenaline flood my veins that allowed me to win out against the current. Colin’s words make sense, but why do I feel like I am in more danger now than I was in the eddies of the lake? I hear urgent steps pressing through the undergrowth.

“Keep left if you don’t want him to see you,” I utter almost soundlessly.

“So, we agree.” He has almost disappeared between the bushes when he turns around again. “Skye? Thank you.”

Our eyes meet. As I watch him disappear silently through the forest, I ask myself whether Colin’s words were more of a warning than a threat. He may have freaked out over the summons, but leaping head first into a lake with deadly currents, like I did, was no less impulsive. A rational type would not have put two lives at risk. They would have gone for help, thought clearly, analysed the situation. Shuddering, I wrap my arms around my chest.

Never in my life have I seriously doubted who I am. Until now.