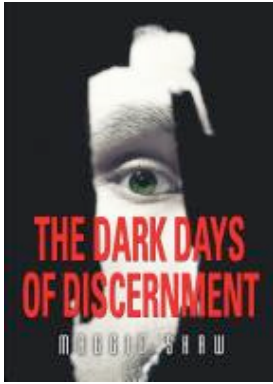




**THE DARK DAYS  
OF DISCERNMENT**

MAGGIE SHAW



*Thrown into a world where she is hunted by an organization bent on capturing her and her newfound friends, Amber is forced to leave her small town behind, and find a way to survive. She discovers a complex underground world that serves as her only haven. When even this series of safe houses fails, Amber must find a way to stop the Hunters, or die trying...*

# The Dark Days of Discernment

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# **The Dark Days of Discernment**

Maggie Shaw

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First Edition

**Dedicated To:  
Mimi Shaw**



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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Green Eyes**

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Serena hissed into Bane’s ear, pressing the gun into his hand. Bane glanced around the corner as the black figures swarmed the room, their flashlight beams bouncing off the dark walls.

“I have to; if we don’t stop him now, he’ll never let us go,” Serena nodded curtly at Bane’s words and motioned to Michael and Jace who were crouched above the opening to the hidden passage. Bane watched his three best friends disappear into the ground and took a deep breath.

Bane waited until he heard the Hunters move into the next room. He kept low to the ground as he maneuvered around the corner and cocked the gun in his hand. Instantly, the wind picked up in the room, reacting to his presence.

“Do you feel that?” A deep voice growled. “The wind boy. He’s close.” Bane’s face lit up with a dim smile. Wind boy? That one was new. His eyes trailed the darkness of the room and tracked the progress of the flashlight beams. Bane just needed to take out one of them. He had never learned the

man's name other than what the runaways called him, the Wolf.

Bane closed his eyes and let his senses guide his gun. There; that was the one. It was in the way he moved, like he owned everything he touched. For a moment, Bane hesitated as he always did. Killing was something Bane hated to do, but the Hunters rarely left a choice. His finger tensed on the trigger. He waited for the perfect moment, so that the shot would hit somewhere where the man would never feel the pain of death. Bane was not without mercy.

The gunshot rang through the air. Instantly everyone in the dark room froze, their flashlights jerking toward the sound and then toward the clatter of a gun hitting the hardwood floor, "Captain!" A voice screamed. Suddenly the room was a flurry of motion, and Bane easily blended into the chaos and moved toward the opening of the secret passage. Just before he disappeared beneath the trap door, Bane caught a last look at the Wolf's haunting eyes, a trail of blood sliding between them.

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Something terrible was going to happen today. Amber wasn't sure why or how she came to that knowledge, but she knew better than to doubt her gut. Her mind couldn't help but remind her of what had happened the last time she had felt this way. No, she couldn't think of that. Not now.

The screech of brakes grabbed her attention and she pivoted on her heels to face the evil creature of a yellow bus behind her. The double doors opened wide and bucked tooth Mrs. Betty scowled down at her, "Well are you coming or not?" With a sigh, Amber trudged up the steps and turned to face the half empty bus.

She sat in the farthest seat back as usual and leaned her temple against the cool surface of the window as the bus groaned to life. "You look tired," Amber's eyes drifted over to Carmen, her neighbor, who sat in the seat opposite to hers.

"It's been a crazy week," They both grabbed the front of their seats in unison as Mrs. Betty yanked the skeleton of the old bus around the sharp mountain curve.

Amber took the opportunity to settle her eyes out the window again, giving Carmen a silent signal that she wanted to be left alone. In fact, her eyes

were drifting over the outlying figures of the mountains when she saw the boy.

He was standing on the side of the road in the distance, his figure tall and dark. As the bus passed him, his green eyes looked up at just the right moment to catch her gaze. Amber watched his calm features contort with alarm and his head turn to watch the bus pass by with an expression she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Amber watched him until he disappeared around the bend of the mountain, his green eyes lingering in her mind. He was a strange looking boy, not the kind of person one would expect to see on the side of a road in a small town like North Ridge. She was still looking out of the window in confusion when someone cleared their throat beside her.

"Amber?" Amber turned at the sound of her best friend Scarlett's voice and hurriedly pulled her backpack into her lap so that Scarlett could sit beside her. "You look like you've seen a ghost." Amber glanced out of the window subconsciously as if the boy might still be standing there looking up from the grass.

Amber shrugged, "I'm just tired."

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Scarlett nodded sympathetically and leaned back in her seat, "You wouldn't believe what happened last night."

"What?" Amber asked jadedly. Scarlett went on to spew a long story about a fight with her mother that Amber easily tuned out. Her thoughts drifted back to the boy she had seen, his face permanently engraved in her mind.

When they finally arrived at school, Scarlett was just finishing off her story, "...and then she just left. Can you believe that?" Amber tossed her backpack over her shoulder and sent Scarlett a dubious expression.

"No, that's ridiculous," Amber offered, not having the slightest idea what Scarlett had been telling her. As the bus came to a halt, the students stood in one motion and began feeding out toward the school's open doors.

The morning air was thick and humid when the two girls stepped out onto the cement. Amber glanced up at the sky where dark clouds were looming above them, "Was it supposed to rain today?"

Scarlett glanced at the clouds, "I didn't think so, but from the look of those clouds I guess the

weather man was wrong. Hey, Amber, how are you feeling? After the funeral this weekend—"

"I'm fine, Scarlett," Amber snapped. Scarlett, for the first time in her life, had nothing else to say. They walked the rest of the way to their homerooms in a tense silence, the discomfort tangible between them.

When Scarlett came to a stop in front of her class, she lingered at the door and offered her friend a weak smile, "See you tonight?"

"Tonight?" Amber could barely bring herself to meet Scarlett's obviously hurt eyes.

"The dance, remember?" The dance; Amber had nearly forgotten. "Look, I know you, Amber, and you could use a little fun. Come on, you have to come." Amber offered her friend a weak smile. If this would make Scarlett stop looking at her like an injured puppy, then it was worth it.

"Alright, I'll be there," Scarlett disappeared into the classroom at Amber's words. Alone, Amber turned down the hallway that led to her homeroom, her mind on the dance. The theme was interesting this year, and she already had a dress in mind. A masquerade; there was something about not having the same old winter wonderland

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dance that was intriguing. Not to mention, with a mask on no one would be able to tell who she was, or rather, who her mother was.

When Amber stepped inside the classroom, her heart nearly jumped out of her chest. There, standing outside the class room window with his hands in his pockets and a hood pulled over his head, was the boy with those two familiar green eyes. His face was cast in shadow so that she could only see the green glaring back at her from within the darkness. Her eyes glanced around the room of students, expecting them to be looking out of the window as well. It was then that she realized something was wrong.

Everyone else in the room was talking loudly to each other as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Even Mrs. Peterson, who had a direct view of the window, was looking rather disinterested as she rearranged her perfectly aligned pencils. Mind writhing with confusion, Amber locked eyes with the boy and watched as he pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and pressed it against the window sill.

**Nod once if you can see me.**

Despite her better judgment, Amber nodded her head slowly up and down. The boy's eyes flashed with surprise and he quickly flipped the paper over to expose the writing on the back.

**Meet me by the buses after you get out.  
There's something you need to know.**

"Amber, what are you doing?" Amber's head jerked over to look at Mrs. Peterson who had apparently just noticed her intense look out of the window.

"Sorry, I was trying to decide when it was going to rain," Amber offered hurriedly, getting the sinking feeling that Mrs. Peterson wouldn't be able to see the boy if she told her the truth. When Amber's eyes bounced back to the window, the boy was gone.

\*\*\*

The rain began somewhere around lunch time, pouring down from the dreary clouds in thick sheets in a steady thrum that still remained now as the last seconds of school ticked by. Amber's eyes moved to look out of the window at the angry storm when the final bell rang. It took her a second to gather her things as the feeling of dread that had originated this morning heightened in her gut.



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Her feet took her along with the flood of students toward the buses, and it was in the moment she stepped out into the rain that she saw him.

The rain itself was so heavy that she could hardly see the yellow figures of the busses down the small hill to the sidewalk. The boy was close enough she could make out his figure a few feet away. He was standing under the small alcove, shying away from the streams of water. For a moment she just stood there, letting the flood of students part around her and the rain soak her clothes. She nearly jumped out of her skin when thunder clapped like a gunshot over her head, the energy enough to get her legs to move those last couple of steps.

The boy only looked up from the ground when she stopped directly in front of him. For the first time, she finally got to see his features. He was extremely handsome in a mysterious kind of way, with charcoal black hair that swished upward in a gentle wave. He had a smooth line of a nose in between his two big green eyes, and a dark tortured look painted across his face. He was tall too, a good four or five inches taller than Amber;

however, he looked to be somewhere around the age of seventeen, only a year or so older than her.

The boy seemed extremely uncomfortable under her scrutinizing gaze and shifted side to side on his feet, "So you can really see me then?" Amber brought her eyebrows together in confusion. The rain was getting torrentially harder now, and thunder grumbled angrily above them.

"Look, I can't stay long. I'm going to miss my bus-"

"No, listen, they're going to come for you if you can see me. You need to be ready," Amber looked into the boy's mysterious green eyes to see if he was kidding. He was dead serious.

She swallowed uncomfortably, "Ready for what?" Why was she playing this odd mind game with this boy? He was probably delusional and dangerous, or was that why she was so pulled toward him anyway?

"Ready for when they come for you. Here," Amber's eyes jerked to her hand when the boy pressed a slip of paper against her palm and closed her fingers over it.

"Wait, what is this?" Amber demanded as she held the paper closed in her fist in an effort to

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protect it from the rain. Her hair by now was sopping wet, sticking in thick dark strands to the side of her face.

"I've already said too much. I can't risk putting you on their radar," And with that cryptic message, the boy ran around the corner and disappeared officially from sight. More confused now than before, Amber looked up and realized that the buses had already begun to pull away. Panic clutched her stomach and she sprinted down the hill, barely making it on her bus before it shut its doors. Her tardiness earned her a deep disapproving look from Mrs. Betty but she didn't care; her mind was too clouded with confusion. Her hands were practically shaking with apprehension as she settled back down in her usual seat and finally let herself study the slip of paper that the boy had given her.

It held what appeared at first glance to be instructions, the ink used to write them slightly smudged from the rain.

***If you are who I think you are then there's only one thing I can do to help you. Go somewhere secluded; your school was too much of an easy target. I can't explain***

***everything to you, not on something like this where they could read it. I'll meet you there.***

Alright, this was just creepy. I'll meet you there? Amber shook her head. This was insane; invisible boys, strange notes... it had gone too far already. If that was true, though, then why did she have such a sense of urgency and a sinking feeling in her gut? Absentmindedly, Amber flipped the paper over to check the other side. It was blank.

\*\*\*

By the time Amber stepped onto the front porch of their ranch house, the rain had weakened to a steady drizzle, "Dad?" Amber tossed her backpack just inside the front door and followed the smell of fajitas to the kitchen. Her father looked up and smiled from his position at the kitchen counter, arranging the food on a platter. "You cooked?"

Her father chuckled, "You know I am actually good for more than stitching up cuts and setting bones. Goodness, it looks like you swam your way home. You have one hour before the dance and all, so hurry up and dry off so that you can put all of that girl mush on your face and still have time to

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eat." Amber rolled her eyes and started toward the stairs.

"Alright, alright. I'll be down in a few," Amber laughed. Once she made it in her room she sat on her bed and looked at the red dress hanging outside of her closet door. She had found the dress in her mother's closet when she had finally built up the nerve to go through her old stuff after the funeral. It had felt right to wear it now, like it was a small piece of her mother that she could bring with her.

Sometime later she had dried her hair and finally finished getting ready. With a sigh, Amber stood in front of her mirror for the final touches. She had curled her dark hair and pulled it into a bun so that little pieces fell down against the sharp edge of her jaw line. Her mother's dress fit perfectly.

Her hand gingerly held a black mask in between her fingers and she was just about to tie it on when two sharp knocks came from the other side of her door, "Amber?"

"Scarlett?" Amber crossed the expanse of her bedroom and quickly opened the door. Sure enough, Scarlett was standing on the other side

looking drop dead gorgeous in her tight blue dress and silver mask. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure that you wouldn't bail out on me. Now come on, we're going to be late. We can drive together, save some time," Amber couldn't help but smile at her friend's words. It was so like Scarlett to do something unexpected like this.

"There you are, I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to—" Her father stopped mid sentence as he turned to see Amber come down the stairs. "You decided to wear your mother's dress."

Amber looked down at herself, blushing, "I'm sorry, if you don't want me to I could just—"

"No, no it's just that you look so beautiful, just like her," Amber smiled and looked longingly at the clock on the wall and then back at the fajitas on the table.

"I don't think I have time to eat, Dad. Sorry," Amber felt guilty, knowing that her father had made them thinking of her.

Her father shrugged, "I'll keep them in fridge in case you're hungry when you get back. Are you still going to take the truck?"

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"I think I'm going to drive with Scarlett if that's alright," Amber turned to look at Scarlett, just remembering she was there.

"It's probably safer that way anyway. Same rules still apply as usual, though. I want you back here by eleven," Amber nodded and then walked over and gave her father a hug.

"See you later tonight," Amber promised, moving toward the back door.

"Drive carefully!" Her father called as they slipped out of the door.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Mr. Mysterious**

Scarlett, being a year older than Amber, had been driving for much longer than her. Even so, Amber was certain she was a much better driver. Scarlett had a certain tendency to careen as close to the edge of the mountain road as possible, just daring the rickety fence protecting them from a hundred foot drop to catch them. By the time they pulled into the parking lot of Old Man's Barn, where most of the school dances were held, Amber was more than ready to leave the car.

"This is going to be so much fun!" Scarlett squealed as she pushed the car into park and turned off the ignition. Amber pushed open the door of Scarlett's old Volvo and stepped out onto the muddy parking lot of the barn.

Just looking at the outside they could tell that the prom committee had outdone themselves once again. Long strands of glittering yellow lights hung along the row of trees leading to the front of the barn and two of the freshman guys were masked and in tuxes at the front door, opening and closing



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it so that the sound of booming music from the inside kept muffling and growing louder.

Amber swallowed heavily, "Scarlett, maybe I shouldn't go. There will be plenty of other dances this year--"

"No, I will not let you miss another event because you're scared people are going to ask you questions or pity you. Get it together girl. You look drop dead gorgeous and I will not rest until you party past that curfew your dad gave you, flirt with at least three cute boys, and crack a smile on that face!" Scarlett grabbed Amber's hand and towed her toward the door, flashing their two tickets at the freshman.

Taking a deep breath, Amber nodded at her best friend's words. Scarlett was right; she deserved this. She deserved a night like this. All thoughts left her mind in shock as the two freshman pulled open the double doors and they both slid into the barn. Rather, they slid into what had once been the barn. Now it was as if they had been transported back into a time of masks and large dresses, despite the booming hit songs that would have them believe otherwise.

"Woah," Scarlett couldn't have described it better.

"Amber, you came!" Amber's eyes widened; how could Carmen have recognized her? That's when she realized that she had left her mask in the car.

"Oh, Scarlett, I forgot my mask. I'll be right back," Amber waved quickly at Carmen and then practically sprinted out the double doors. Scarlett's blue Volvo in sight, Amber paid no attention to the steps leading down to the car and missed the last one. She nearly fell face first into the dirt, and probably would have if a hand hadn't shot out to catch her before she could fall. Panting, Amber looked up into two hauntingly familiar green eyes.

"You, you're the one that's been stalking me all day!" Amber hissed, ripping her arm from the boy's grasp.

"Oh, no need to thank me for saving you from falling flat on your face, really," The boy replied sarcastically. "Did you read my note? You were supposed to go somewhere secluded, not a *party*."

Narrowing her eyes, Amber turned away from the boy and stalked toward the car, yanking open the door that she wasn't surprised to find unlocked.

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Scarlett had been operating under a “if someone steals my car maybe my Dad will buy me a better one” policy ever since she inherited her grandmother’s old Volvo. “Look, I don’t know what your deal is but I really don’t need anything else crazy in my life right now.”

When Amber grabbed the mask from the car seat and slammed the door, the boy was still standing there, arms crossed over his chest, “So you think I’m crazy.”

“Yes, I do. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’m missing out on what is supposed to be a really fun night for me and-” Amber tried to step around the boy but he stepped in front of her.

“Give me ten minutes, that’s all I’m asking,” The boy pleaded, giving her puppy dog eyes. Groaning, Amber eyed the opening and closing party doors. Why was there something about this boy that made her so... intrigued?

She couldn’t believe she was doing this, “Fine. You have five minutes, but we’re sitting on that bench right there and then I’m going back in the party before someone realizes I haven’t come back yet.” Amber wasn’t sure if the relief on the boy’s face made her feel bad for saying what she said

before or worried about what he was so serious about asking her about.

The two of them walked over to the bench a few feet to the left of the barn door. The sun was setting in the distance, and she was happy with the dropping light that the bench was beneath a string of bulbs. Whatever he was about to tell her, the boy was nervous about it; she could tell by the way that he was ringing his hands in his lap.

"Your time's ticking," Amber warned, growing impatient.

The boy took a deep breath, "Okay, well I guess we could start with the basics. My name is Bane. And you are?" That was really not what Amber had been hoping for.

"Amber. Look, if you're just going to waste my time--"

"No, no Amber, you don't understand. Like I said, there are people coming for you, people that will hurt you if you don't listen to what I'm trying to say," Bane looked nervously over his shoulder, leaning in closer to her as if he were about to tell her the most interesting secret in the world. "You've noticed that other people can't see me, haven't you?" Yes, yes she had noticed.

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"Why is that?" Amber tried not to sound too interested but it was hard to hold back her surge in curiosity.

Bane took another deep breath, "Well, it's because I'm not letting them. There is so much that you couldn't possibly understand as you are right now, so I need you to trust me. Do you think you can do that?" The way he said those last words reminded her hauntingly of her mother. Amber crossed her legs and closed her eyes; what in the world had she gotten herself into?

"Just say it already," Amber groaned and a charming smile caressed Bane's nervous features.

"Alright, here it goes. Have you noticed anything odd happening to you lately, like, I don't know, special abilities?" Oh God, he really is crazy.

"Amber! There you are, I was starting to worry that you had-" Amber looked over her shoulder at Scarlett who had been making her way out the door but had frozen a few feet away from them.

Amber suddenly realized she must look as if she were talking to herself, "No, Scarlett, it's not what you think. I was just-"

"Oh, well, sorry to interrupt. I'll just leave you two alone," Scarlett seemed much too happy with

herself and turned back toward the barn. You two? Amber lifted her eyebrows in surprise. Scarlett could see the boy.

"Actually, I was just leaving," Amber lifted her mask out of her lap and placed it over her eyes.

Bane's eyes widened and he jumped to his feet, "Please, Amber. Give me a chance to explain-" Amber looked over her shoulder as Scarlett disappeared back into the party and then took a step toward Bane.

"Look, I don't know what's wrong in that head of yours but like I said before, I don't need any more crazy in my life right now. Supposedly no one can see you, and now suddenly Scarlett can, I just... can't. Now, if you would excuse me-"

"They'll kill you, Amber, don't you get that?" Bane hissed.

"Who, Bane? Who is going to kill me?" Amber was growing annoyed, even Bane could tell that. She found herself studying those pleading, enchanting green eyes and the way they glittered under the smooth glaze of a golden glow coming from the string of lights above them. The sun had

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set behind the distant mountains, and the world around them had melted away into mere shadows.

Bane bit his lip, "Let's just say that there is an organization out there that looks for people like you and me. Your friend could see me because I let my guard down. Like invisibility, okay? I know you're like me, Amber, or you wouldn't have been able to see me today when I did have it up. If you don't believe me... you leave me no choice." Suddenly, Bane pulled what looked like a watch out of his pocket and slapped it on her wrist. "Just press the middle button of that watch if you get yourself into any trouble, and I'll find you." Amber yanked her arm away and attempted to take the watch off to no avail; it was locked in place.

"You know what, I really don't need your little GPS device. Take it off," Amber's eyes flashed with annoyance but Bane merely shook his head.

"I promise, if by this time tomorrow no one has come for you, you can toss that watch off the side of the mountain for all I care. I've set it for a twelve hour lock, at which time it will simply come right off. If you are still safe by that time, then I was wrong and I swear you will never see me again," why couldn't this boy recognize when his

little ploy had gone wrong? She had to give him points for perseverance, though, and she could lose the watch when she got home, maybe use some of her dad's tools to break it.

"Fine. Whatever," Bane's face lifted with relief as Amber turned back toward the barn. When she got to the door and looked over her shoulder to see if the boy was still there, he was gone.

\*\*\*

"Well there's my little flirt!" Scarlett exclaimed when Amber managed to find her among the pulsing crowd of students. Her best friend elbowed Amber in the ribs. "I told you that tonight would be fun. We haven't even been here an hour and you already got yourself a new boy toy."

"For one, Scarlett, I don't want anything you would call a *boy toy* and whoever that guy was, he's long gone," Amber leaned over to the food table and grabbed a handful of pretzels. She was absolutely famished. Scarlett only smiled as Amber shoved another handful of snack food into her mouth and grabbed a cup of punch. How cliché, Amber couldn't help but notice; she was standing at the high school dance all dressed up, arguing



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about some boy she just met, and drinking the less than appealing school punch.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur of dancing, music, and flashing lights. If Amber had been troubled by the strange Bane before, by the time she stumbled outside to head to the bathroom with Scarlett a few hours later, she had forgotten all of her worries. Getting so mixed up in her mother's death had managed to make Amber forget how to be a stupid teenager. Now, giggling about some dumb joke Scarlett had told her and feeling her heart beat quicken with its exuberance, she was reminded of all that she had allowed herself to miss.

"I'll wait here," Amber managed in between laughs, watching Scarlett slide into the women's restroom with a sarcastic wink. Leaning her head against the rough brick of the barn's back wall, Amber took a deep breath. Tonight had gone better than she could have ever imagined. She let her eyes trail down to the odd watch that Bane had given her and caught the time. Midnight? Her heart nearly stopped in her chest. Her dad was going to kill her!

Amber stuck her head into the bathroom door, "I'll pull the car around, Scarlett. We have to go." Rather than wait for the angry reply she knew she would receive, Amber walked as fast as her heels would allow back to Scarlett's car and slid into the driver's seat. Remembering how Scarlett had driven down the mountain in day light, Amber was happy that she would be the one driving home.

Scarlett was waiting begrudgingly outside of the girl's bathroom when she arrived and trudged her way over to the passenger side door, "It's barely midnight, Amber. Stop freaking out."

"My Dad is probably the one freaking out right now, so get in before I drive off without you," Amber couldn't hold back the feeling that Scarlett had known that they were much past the time that Amber was supposed to be home and had purposely hidden the fact from her.

Groaning as loudly as possible, Scarlett slid into the seat, shut the door, and slammed down her seat belt, "Fine. Have it your way goody two shoes." Amber shook her head and drove the car out of the parking lot, avoiding one or two couples that were making their way to their cars.

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"You'll be thanking me tomorrow when you have to get up for school," Normally, they didn't hold school dances on school nights, especially Monday nights, but this time of year the owner of the barn, Old Man Barry, was getting less lenient about renting times. Plus, the winter dance wasn't necessarily a school function any longer, now that the party committee had kept any mention of North Ridge High School as far away as possible. Last year the parties went a bit out of control and the high school had basically said that they would be banned forever. And so the party committee was born; Amber chuckled at the thought.

"What, are you thinking about, Mr. Mysterious again?" Scarlett poked Amber playfully in the arm.

"Mr. Mysterious? Oh, you mean... no I was not. You're never going to let me forget about that, are you?" Amber moaned.

Scarlett's face lit up with a grin, "Your favorite best friend in the world would never let you forget about such an important part of your life!"

Amber turned to Scarlett with daggers, "One conversation with a boy. You would think that I had-"

“Watch out!” Amber whipped back around toward the road and slammed down on the breaks, yanking the steering wheel to the side. Their car skidded on the pavement, and Amber attempted to correct the skid and barely got them straightened out before they came to a teetering stop millimeters from the edge of the cliff. One second later on her reaction and they would have fallen down the side of the mountain.

“Oh my God,” Scarlett breathed. “That van, it was coming right for us.” They both looked over their shoulder at the black van that was backing up the road toward them.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Scarlett,” Amber bit her lip, turned off the car’s ignition, and stepped out onto the road. The black van screeched to a stop and Amber felt her heart nearly stop right along with it.

When a woman stepped out of the front, Amber nearly laughed in relief before growing serious again, “What do you think you’re doing? You could have killed us back there!”

“I’m sorry,” The woman didn’t sound sorry at all, more intrigued really.

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"Well, I'll let you go but next time I'm going to call the police," Amber turned around to open the car door but froze when she heard a dull click. It was the sound of someone pulling the safety off their gun.

"Now, I want you to slowly step away from your car and turn toward me with your hands in the air," The woman's steady voice commanded and Amber locked eyes with Scarlett, mouthing *call 911*. "Now!" Amber stepped away from her car and lifted her hands in the air, but not before pressing the button on the watch the boy had given her. Who would have thought that she would have ever actually used it?

Scarlett had pulled herself into the driver seat of the car and was typing 911 into her cell phone, "Look, neither of us have any money, but if you want the car--"

"I'm not here to rob you!" The woman cracked up laughing but her gun hand remained incredibly steady.

Amber's eyebrows drew together, "Then what do you want?" The woman gathered her composure but the humor was still splayed across her features.

"Right now I want you to tell your friend to roll down the car window," When Amber didn't move, the woman's face contorted with fury. "Don't test my patience!" Amber jumped into action and tapped on the car window. Getting the message, Scarlett rolled it down, hiding her cell phone beneath her leg.

"What does she want?" Scarlett looked terrified and Amber was trying to be strong but her hands were shaking at her sides.

Amber turned to the woman who was now walking forward, "What are your names?"

"I'm Amber and this is my friend Scarlett," Amber breathed, hiding her shaking hands behind her back.

The woman motioned with her head at Scarlett, "Scarlett, you are going to drive that car down this road and keep driving until you run out of gas. You have already called the police, I'll forgive you for that and not kill both of you right here if you do exactly as I say. Understand?" Scarlett's eyes were brimming with tears but she nodded her head.

"Amber, get in the car," Scarlett's voice shook.

"Oh, no, Amber stays with me. Don't test my patience, kid. Drive," The woman turned around

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and pointed the barrel in between Scarlett's eyes. "Or I could just kill you right now--"

"Go, Scarlett; it's okay. I'll be fine," Amber wiped away the tear that dripped down her face.

Scarlett shook her head, "No, I'm not leaving you h--"

The crazy woman shrugged, "Well, if you insist I kill you--"

"Scarlett, go! Please just go. I'll be fine, I promise," Amber cried. Scarlett let out a sob.

"Amber, I--"

"You've got one more chance to drive away or--"

"Scarlett!" Amber reached over, and turned on the ignition.

"Last warning!"

"Amber, I'll get help, okay? Everything's going to be--"

"You've given me no choice!" The woman moved the gun in a hard arch to the left toward Scarlett's head. Scarlett screamed as she threw the car in gear and skidded down the mountain road. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Amber watched the car disappear around the mountain bend. She was alone.

The sound of a car door opening caught her by surprise and Amber looked over her shoulder to see that the woman had gone back to her van and pulled open the back door, "Get in."

Amber shook her head, "No way."

The woman frowned, "I'm sorry, let me rephrase that. Get in, or I'll shoot you." Amber glanced around for a path of escape; this was the worst possible place this could have happened. They were on Simon Road, a road that twisted for a good mile through the national forest, meaning that the only sign of civilization would be back at the party which was a half mile around to the other side of the mountain.

"What do you want from me?" Amber was buying time, glancing down at her watch. Where was Bane? As strange as he was, it would be really nice if invisible boy managed to show up right about now.

"Do you have a death wish?" The woman was growing dangerously annoyed, especially considering the fact that she still had a gun pointed in Amber's general direction.

Amber took a step backwards, feeling more and more like cornered prey, "If this is some sort of



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kidnapping ploy, my Dad doesn't have the money you're looking for." The gunshot sent a shockwave through Amber's body and she lifted her hand up to her ear where the bullet had just nicked the edge. Her fingers came back sticky with blood.

"That was the warning shot. Now, get in the car because next time I won't miss," Defeated, Amber took her time walking down the road toward the van.

"Amber!" Amber had never felt happier to hear invisible boy's voice. She glanced over her shoulder where Bane was running down the road.

The hand was on her shoulder impossibly fast and the gun pressed against her temple, "Bane, I should have known you would find a way to mess up another one of my missions."

"Vicky, let her go. She's my friend and you know how angry I get when you mess with my friends," Bane set his jaw and ran his fingers through his dark hair.

"You know who she is, don't you? What she'll mean for the rest of us?" Amber looked at Bane with all the fear in her heart and confusion in her mind as Vicky spoke.

Bane took a step forward, "It's going to be okay, Amber. I promise." Even though Amber doubted he could do anything to save her, she felt better at least that he said it. Bane turned toward the woman behind her. "She's like me, isn't she?"

"Didn't you already know? I figured your little clan of delinquents would have attempted to locate the rest of the five before me. But Earth, that's quite impressive. Does she even know who I am? Who you are?" When neither of them answered her, Vicky let out a rather cliché evil laugh. "Of course she doesn't. Well, *Amber*, I will be happy to give you a quick education--"

"She doesn't need to find this out now, Vicky. I'm giving you one last chance," They all looked up as a huge crack of thunder went instantaneously with a blinding flash of lightning. Where did all of these storms keep coming from?

Vicky's hand tightened so hard on Amber's shoulder that she winced, "Please. Let me go."

"Shut up," Vicky hissed and Amber could feel the panic in her voice. What could Bane do that made her so terrified? Bane in the mean time had continued walking toward them and now he was nearly a foot or so away from them. Even he

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looked scared; oh God, Amber didn't want to die. The wind was gradually picking up with the speed of her heart and Amber glanced up at the night sky. In moments, the starry black had been consumed by thick blankets of clouds that crackled and sparked with lightning.

Amber felt the gun against her temple begin to shake, "Stop the storm right now, or I swear I will put a bullet in your girlfriend's head." Amber almost protested that she was *not* his girlfriend but she thought better of it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bane said in a way that told them both that he knew *exactly* what Vicky was talking about. Stop the storm? How was invisible boy supposed to stop the storm? This was all just too much.

Amber let her eyes trail over to the black van; the engine was still running. If she could just make it to the car... suddenly an idea occurred to her. Her eyes found Bane's and once he was looking at her she flicked them over to the van. A small nod told her that he got the message. She couldn't believe she was about to do this. Sticking her hand out to the side where Vicky wouldn't see, Amber stuck out three fingers. Three, two, one. Amber

dropped to the asphalt and kicked her leg at Vicky's shins. Bane was suddenly at her side and hoisted Amber to her feet as Vicky hit the ground. Instantaneously, they both leapt into the van, Bane in the driver's seat.

"Go!" Amber screamed as Bane threw the car in gear and slammed down on the gas pedal.

"Get down!" Amber bent over at Bane's frantic command and covered her head as the window to her right shattered with the rain of bullets Vicky was letting down on the car. Bane looked over his shoulder and flicked his hand to the side. Looking up, Amber watched as Vicky went flying as if hit by an invisible force and slammed into the road a good ten feet behind them.

Amber's jaw dropped to her lap, "Did you just--"

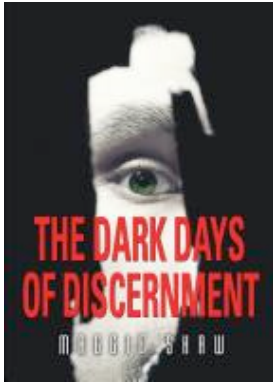
"There's a lot you don't understand, remember? Now I need you to open the glove compartment and tell me what's inside," It sounded like an odd request, but Bane did just save her life so Amber opened the glove compartment. Her heart nearly stopped.

"Oh my God," Amber lifted up the bloody hat in shock.

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“What?” Bane glanced over at her as she turned the hat gingerly in her hands.

Amber swallowed a sob, “It’s my Dad’s.”



*Thrown into a world where she is hunted by an organization bent on capturing her and her newfound friends, Amber is forced to leave her small town behind, and find a way to survive. She discovers a complex underground world that serves as her only haven. When even this series of safe houses fails, Amber must find a way to stop the Hunters, or die trying...*

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