

Extract from:

Anywhere but Here by Ella West

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Chapter One
(Pages 9-12)

We're in America. The United States of America. California. Los Angeles.

We've escaped.

I've never been to the United States before. Well, not that I've realised or been told, of course. It's so busy. I just look and look. I can't get enough of it. So many cars and people and streets and buildings and noise.

And no one knows us. All these people, walking past us on the side of the street, and they don't know who we are or what we are or what we can do. And they don't care.

And there is just the five of us. No instructors, no counsellors, no Project.

And we know where we are. In Los Angeles. It's Christmas Eve in Los Angeles. I keep saying it over and over in my head. It bubbles up. I feel like any minute I'm going to lift off the ground and float a couple of feet into the air.

Until Paul grabs me, that is, and pushes me onto a bus. There is hardly anyone on it but I walk down the aisle and find empty seats facing each other near the back. The others follow. Jake takes the seat next to the window with Tina, Shelley and me on the other side. Paul pays for the tickets and then finds us. He stands, holding a pole. Jake still looks terrible. White as. One hand holding his arm, jacket tightly closed. The bus starts with a jolt and jams him into the corner of the seat. He grimaces but doesn't say anything.

Paul keeps bending down to look out the windows. Shelley doesn't take her eyes off her older brother. Tina has her sunglasses on but her head is bowed. I feel like one of those soft toys you stick on car windows with the plastic suction cups on their feet and hands, eyes wide open, watching everything. I mean this is LA! Disneyland, Hollywood, all the movie stars and the Oscars and Silicon Valley. I can see hills in the distance. Will one have the Hollywood sign on it? The sky is all hazy. That must be smog, real LA smog. We're on this huge concrete highway. Over-bridges and under-bridges and so many lanes!

After almost an hour Paul finally signals for us to get off. We all stand on the footpath together as the bus pulls away. There are shops, houses and motels; there are Christmas decorations on the power poles. I spot a sign down the road. It says 'Venice Beach'. I think I can hear the sea. Waves breaking on the shore.

We follow Paul. He turns at a motel which is all pink stucco and archways.

'Wait here,' he tells us in the car park and opens a door marked reception.

A few minutes later he is back with a key. We follow him to one of the motel units. Number seven. There is a palm tree by the door. Inside there's a small kitchen then a living room with sofas and chairs and a TV set. A single bed is against one wall. Jake makes for it, grabs me, uses me to lower himself down onto the covers. He scares me. What have we done? What are we doing?

'We're got to get him to a doctor, Paul,' Shelley says.

'I know.'

'Please, Paul.'

He goes into another room. It must be the bathroom, I can hear water running, then he is back carrying a towel and a wet flannel. He kneels down next to Jake.

'You're not touching me,' Jake says, his eyes still closed.

'Paul?' Shelley is almost crying. I glance over at Tina. She is sitting on a chair, grasping the edges of it next to her legs, her knuckles white.

Paul lays the towel on the bed next to Jake then unzips his jacket and carefully pulls up the blood-soaked T-shirt. One by one he removes the bandages we took from the first aid kit in the company's office then he uses the wet flannel to wash away the blood from the bullet wound.

'Jake, can you just roll over a bit?'

'No.'

'Bit more, yeah, I can see it now. Shit.'

'Paul? What's wrong?'

'It's okay, Shelley,' he says steadily.

'It's not okay. Jake's not okay. We have to get him to a doctor. We have to get him to a doctor now. Please, Paul?'

'We can't.'

Shelley shuts up. Paul wraps the towel around Jake's side and helps him roll over again. He goes into the bathroom, I can hear the water running again. Finally he is back, his hands in his jeans' pockets. Shelley and Tina look at him, waiting.

'We left something behind,' Paul says. 'In that office.'

'Paul? What are you talking about?' Shelley sounds close to losing it.

'The bullet that hit Jake, it glanced off one of his ribs I think, and then, I don't know. It'll be in the floor, or a wall or something. They'll find it, they'll know. They'll check all the doctors and the hospitals.'

'But if the police find it, how will they know about Jake?'

'Tina, the Project will find it. They'll be there before the police.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Shelley, when you went back, who was there? Was Matt there?'

Shelley shakes her head. 'Sol wasn't there either.'

'They were on their way to the office. To try and stop us escaping.'

'But if they find the bullet, how will they know?'

'It'll be a stray bullet that doesn't make sense. They'll DNA test it or something, find Jake's blood.'

'But we have to take him to a doctor.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' Jake interrupts. He opens one eye and looks at her then closes it again.