

Excerpt from TENDERFOOT by Abby Drinen

In this chapter, all the Tenderfoots finally meet for the first time, but not exactly in-person. In this scene, Linnea, Sammy, Logan, and Daisy are trapped in a virtual reality called “The Mentalink,” while their physical bodies lie in hospital beds. Through the Mentalink they can view their own memories and current events as well. Mentalink is like stepping into a 3-D movie.

In the previous scene, Logan and Sammy discover they, the Tenderfoots, are not sleeping but have been given a poison and are fighting for their lives. They also learn a group of teens, called Guardians, have been sent to procure something called, “Black Moss” from the top of a mountain to be made into an anti-dote for them. However, the Guardians have, at this point, failed in their mission. The Black Moss is nowhere to be found, and there isn’t time to try another mountain.

Linnea and Daisy have just “found” Logan and Sammy, in the Mentalink, on the mountain top.

Chapter 13

Daisy

LOGAN is even more spectacularly fine with his eyes open. And I was expecting Sammy to look meaner. Our empty shells in those weird tube-beds in the hospital don’t tell the full story, I guess.

After we introduce ourselves, the four of us go strangely quiet. Even I can’t come up with something to say. Actually, I have too many things to say, too many things to ask them. That’s the problem. I prioritize my thoughts and form a single question.

“What’s up with Club Depression over there?” I point at Zaren and the others.

Logan fills us in on everything they know. He tells us that we aren’t in another Deep Sleep, but have been poisoned. I stop his story there.

“Poison? Are you sure?” I ask

“That’s what they said.” Logan flips his bangs out of his face, just like I imagined he would do.

“It would make more sense from what we saw in the hospital,” Linnea says to me.

“You guys were at the hospital? When?” Sammy asks.

“We just left there,” I say.

“And all of us were still . . .” Sammy trails off.

“Alive? Yeah, everyone was still pink and breathing. But just barely.” I look directly at Logan. I heard something about his kidneys failing before we left.

Logan swallows hard and shakes his head before he continues. He says the Guardians are searching for

something on the rocks up here to make an antidote for the poison. But they can't find any. And they can't call for help because their Chatty is out of juice. And the next place to find the stuff is too far away to get it back to us in time.

"So basically, we're worm food," Logan says. Then he laughs, a loud, forced noise that makes me sick. How can he be that flippant?

Linnea lets out a shocked cry. I put an arm around her and glare at Logan. But my expression only encourages him to be awful.

"Yep, R.I.P. Kick the bucket. Dirt Nap. The Big Sleep. Ha, ha! The Big DEEP Sleep, get it? Get it?" He sneers at her. Why is he being so mean?

Linnea rotates out from under my arm and takes off, choking on her fear. I purse my lips and frown.

"You're a five-year-old," I say to him.

I chase after Linnea and we grab seats on a clump of grass and I take her hand.

"He's just scared," I say. "Like we are."

She bobs her head as tears splash her cheeks. I bite the inside of my lip in an effort to hold it together. I squeeze her hand, and then drop it to wrap both of my arms around her. Linnea stiffens at my touch so I don't hold her too tight. She sobs for a few minutes and then looks up. Her face has transitioned from sad to something else. She has an idea.

"I'm going," she says, in a voice as faint as watercolors.

"No, stay with us. You shouldn't be alone."

"I want my grandfather," she shifts, and then vanishes.

Sammy runs over. "Where did she go?"

"That idiot freaked her out." I stand up and shake my head.

"She's gone to a scene with her grandfather. Not that I blame her." I hug my waist.

"A memory with loved ones sounds good," he tells the clouds. "I might go too."

"Go where, man?" Logan saunters up like we're all just hanging out at the mall on a Saturday afternoon.

I charge him and land my palms in the middle of his chest. Tiny-me actually knocks huge-him backward a little. That's how mad I am.

"Hey, hey there, little girl. Calm down." He's still wearing part of a smile. I might slap it off his face.

"What is wrong with you? Why would you target her like that?" I ask. "Don't you get it? We're all dying, not just you!" I yell and then swear at him for being so rude. He doesn't respond so I keep going and totally cuss him out. I use every filthy put down from Earth World that I can remember. I take it way over-the-top, but I don't care. I unload all of my fear and frustration about this Mentalink and dying from poison onto this beefy guy. He can handle it.

I launch an insult, one about his mother, and his smirk evaporates; his face turns to iron. Seems I've gone too far. He jumps closer and proceeds to cuss me out now. The names he calls me I haven't heard since waking

up in Enova. I really haven't missed being called those names. Especially the female dog one.

He pauses to take a break and a breath and bends down to meet me dead in the eye. Our foreheads touch. I can feel the moisture from his breath. "Now, get your ugly ass outta here before I throw you off the cliff," he says through clenched teeth.

I don't want to admit it, but I'm more scared of him than the poison right now. My thigh muscles contract as I pull back my leg and prepare to knee him in the Charlies. I hope this has the same effect in the Mentalink that it does in the real world. But Logan is yanked away from me before I can attack. He didn't Menta-blink out to another scene, Sammy has him by the collar and is dragging him away. When he lets him go, Logan starts toward me again, but Sammy throws a meaty paw onto his chest and stops the boy in his tracks. Chin tilted to his collarbone, Logan stares at me through narrow, beastly eyes. He's practically snarling. Staring at me like I'm his prey, his next meal. He's looking at me like an animal, like a wolf.

"That's enough Logan! Leave her alone!" Sammy locks his elbow of the arm holding the animal at bay.

"Leave her alone? She came after me first!" he argues.

"Still, you must show respect to a lady," Sammy says.

"Lady? Did you hear some of the words that came outta her? She ain't no lady." He spits in my direction and throws me a familiar hand gesture.

"You better put that finger down boy, or I'll bite it off," I square my shoulders.

"Come and get me, Red!" he growls and crouches to spring forward.

My hackles raise, and my heart pounds. Logan's gone savage. He's going to tear me apart. I ready myself for a brawl with a much larger, stronger opponent when Sammy rescues me again. Sculpted arms loop around Logan's middle and pick him up like he weighs nothing. He carries him an even safer distance away from me, then drops him to the ground. Sammy punches Logan twice in the chest, and once in the jaw.

"Stay away from her," he shouts.

Logan doesn't move, shocked into submission by Sammy's fists. I know they startled me. I halfway expect Sammy to come after me next.

Breathless, I study the ground, counting the pebbles. That Wolf was right about one thing; my behavior wasn't ladylike at all. What would Mama say? Or Ayelet? Both of my mothers, Earther and Enovan, would be ashamed of me. I gnaw the inside of my cheek.

When I look up, Logan is gone and Sammy is walking back over to me.

"Now, where did *he* go?" I swallow.

"I don't know. A memory scene? Are you all right?"

"No." I totally lie.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep." I jut out my chin and stand taller. I'm about to tell him what he did for me wasn't necessary. That I

can fight my own battles in the future.

A future . . . do I still have one of those?

My head droops, and my shoulders fall. This isn't the time to show how hard I am. What good is earning a rep with this guy if I'm going to be dead soon anyway? I want my last hours to be honest.

"Thank you, Sammy." I drop my gaze and blink tears away.

"Anytime, Daisy. I am your friend," he says.

I investigate his chocolate brown eyes. He's telling the truth, and I get the sense that he always does. I go for another slice of his honesty.

"Sammy, so do you think there's really no hope for us?"

He shrugs. My limbs feel too heavy to move. I stand there, like my feet are stuck in cement and let my vision blur.

"It's time to go," someone calls out. I turn to look at the speaker. It's Kimimela. That wickedly pretty girl from the library at the Grand Hall.

"I agree," I say to Sammy. "It is time to go for me, too."

He whips me up into a hug, and I return the affection like we've known each other our whole lives. He holds me this way for several seconds, my feet almost dangling off the ground. After he releases me and steps back, a blush appears on his dark cheeks.

"It was nice meeting you, Daisy of the Philippines," he whispers, his eyes glued to his feet.

"I think we would have been great friends." I pull him down by the elbow and kiss the blush on his face. "Thanks for everything, pal."

I leave him and enter a memory of a party for me in my tiny house in a fishing village in the Philippines. I was given a doll. It's the last time I had a birthday when both my Earth parents were alive.