

THE
ECHO
ROOM

PARKER PEEVYHOUSE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE ECHO ROOM

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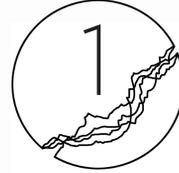
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5:37 A.M.

Someone is calling to me . . .

Rett woke to the cold press of metal beneath him and the knock of pain against the inside of his skull.

He opened his eyes. Metal room, blue with early morning light. The only window a skylight in the high ceiling.

He pushed himself upright. Diagonal yellow stripes banded the walls, constricting the room. The smell of dust and copper made the air heavy.

Where am I?

The place had an industrial feel to it: steel and dust and gloom. Cast in blue, like the prison panel he'd drawn in ball-point pen for *Epidemic X*.

Cheerful.

His head throbbed. His skull was shrinking, or his brain was outgrowing it. He put a shaking hand to where the pain cut worst, and his fingers found the long, raised line of a scar. His stomach turned.

He got to his feet, pressed by the familiar weight of urgency that drove him from bed every morning: *Look out for yourself, watch out.*

He shouldn't be here. He should be lining up for morning

roll call with the other wards of Walling Home, wary of sharp looks cutting his way, sharper blades bristling under mattresses. Only scrap paper and a pen under his own mattress, along with the last remaining issue of his favorite comic.

Whatever this place is, I don't think I want to be here. The room was empty. Stark, barren. But a pricking sense of caution kept him on his guard. He'd known other empty places, knew how quickly they could fill with dread. Like the entryway at Walling Home, where the tick of the clock had beat like a hammer against his heart as he'd watched his mother walk out the door and leave him behind.

His attention snapped back to the present as a sound broke through his thoughts. Someone calling to him?

No—somewhere, someone was singing.

He tensed, unnerved. *What is this place?*

A wave of dizziness hit him. He leaned against the wall, which slanted oddly, tilted back as if the room knew he needed to lie down. He struggled to clear his mind, to look around for some clue as to where he was. Doorway to his left, corridor to his right. Skylight, stripes, metal floor.

A broad luminescent strip running along the wall.

He followed the glowing strip out of the room and down a short corridor to a door with a huge sliding lock.

Bolted shut.

Panic shot through him. He hefted his weight against the lock but it didn't so much as budge. He took a shaky step back to examine it. The lock was jammed, the metal bolt bent at one end. And there—on the floor: a fire extinguisher large enough to have done the damage. Rett tried to ignore the panic that flared again. *There's no way that bolt's ever coming out of its housing.*

An image glowed on the door, reflecting the dim light: overlapping, jagged lines. *Spikes of pain*, Rett thought absently while his head went on throbbing. Set above the spidery graph was a single word: SCATTER. And next to it, the number three inside a circle.

Scatter 3, Rett thought, testing the phrase for familiarity. A metallic taste filled his mouth and sent a fresh twinge of pain through his head. *Scatter 3*. Yes, there was something about those words. It would come back to him in a minute.

Or . . .

He could ask whoever possessed the eerie voice still echoing through the place. The meditative tune pulled at Rett with an almost hypnotic power. He hesitated. Tried not to imagine himself as a doomed figure in one of the comics he had drawn while he huddled in closets or underneath stairwells at the boarding facility he called home. *Boy, sixteen, ladder of bones, seen from behind as he slinks through an abandoned storage room, a warehouse for dust. Caption: He should've known he'd meet disaster . . .*

He shook away the thought.

Whoever's singing might be able to help me.

He stalked over the corridor's gritty floor, past a pair of narrow doors that he'd have to check out later, and then crossed the main room to an open doorway. Angled himself to peer through into a dim, cramped space. More luminescent strips picked up the low light and revealed a figure in a white jumpsuit like a glowing ghost. Rett's foot scraped over the dirty floor, and the singing stopped. The figure turned sharply, peeling away from the shadows. A girl who looked a few years older than he was, with short brown hair tucked behind her ears, gave him a startled stare. She was

thin inside her overlarge jumpsuit, her face hollowed by shadows.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Rett said, his voice hoarse and strange to his own ears. He swallowed against the bolt of pain that shot through his head. His throat was paper-dry, his stomach unsteady. "I just— Can you tell me where I am?"

The girl stood frozen, unblinking, and Rett wondered if she, too, found the rustle of his voice misplaced in their cold-metal surroundings.

"My best guess is abandoned storage room," Rett went on, "but I'm willing to believe something as strange as experimental detention facility if you say it with enough conviction."

The girl winced. A hand went to her head.

She's hurt, same as me. "Let me look," he said. He could usually tell when a gash needed stitches and when it could be left alone—when it would leave a nice scar and when it would just go on bleeding forever. A handy skill born of experience. He'd seen scars on knuckles, good for proving readiness to fight, and gashes on arms and faces, worse for displaying the shame of failure. But head wounds bled forever if you didn't put pressure on them.

The girl hesitated and then pushed her hair aside to reveal a long raised scar above her ear. No blood—an old wound. "It . . . looks okay," Rett said, trying to keep his voice light. A mark like that was the badge of a terrible run-in. *Don't say that to her*, he thought, but he knew the expression on his face must be saying it for him. *My own head can't look much better.* "Do you know what this place is?" he asked, desperate to redirect his thoughts.

The girl shook her head, then swayed as if hit with the same

dizziness that plagued Rett. He put out a hand to steady her, but she flinched away. Rett's skin went hot with embarrassment. *I wasn't going to hurt you.* He dropped his hand to his side. "What's your name?" he asked quietly, trying not to make her nervous.

"Bryn."

"I'm Rett."

Her gaze traveled to his abdomen. Rett looked down. A wide smear of red-brown stained his jumpsuit. *What—?*

"Is that—blood?" Bryn asked in a halting voice.

Rett touched his stomach. He didn't feel any pain. "Not mine," he said. He met her gaze. Alarm flashed in her eyes. He took her fear like a punch to the gut. *I swear I'm not a bad guy,* he wanted to say. Instead he wilted back, gave her some space while confusion and humiliation roiled in his already churning gut.

"I'll go look around," he finally managed to say. "There must be someone else here." He backed out of the room, muscles tight with alarm. Because he couldn't say—he had no idea—how someone else's blood had gotten onto his clothes.

5:46 A.M.

Rett stumbled through the main room, past the slanted walls striped with peeling yellow paint and dust-bathed metal. Down the short corridor that led to the bolted door. He staggered through a doorway to his right, into a narrow room so dark he could only just make out shelves stacked with white jumpsuits. He seized a jumpsuit, shuddering with relief at the sight of it. Peeled off the one he was wearing, yanked on the clean one. Stashed the bloodstained jumpsuit in a bin. Some of

the red-brown had come off on his hands. The sight filled him with horror. He swiped his palms over the edge of a shelf, trying to scrape off the stain.

Blood on my clothes, on my hands. His stomach curled. *What happened? Why can't I remember?*

He tried to feel in his muscles whether he had been forced into a fight with someone. He'd once broken another boy's hand at the government-run facility he'd lived in since age ten. Garrick was taller than him by a head, meaner than him by a full set of knuckles, and the sickening crack of his bones breaking still echoed in Rett's memory.

Rett didn't like to think about that day. Fighting never ended well. *Using your head works better.*

So why is there blood on my hands?

He turned to take inventory of the changing room, as if to prove to himself that he really did know how to use his head. Beneath the shelves, a bin held thick-soled boots. At the back of the closet, a shower head angled above a stall door. Rett felt like jumping into the stall and washing away the last of the blood that stained his skin. Or better yet, the dread that seemed to coat him like the dust that sheathed every surface of this strange place. He went and turned the knob, if only so he could quench his thirst. But even when he wrenched it as hard as he could, no water flowed.

He might have lost himself in disappointment then, except that the boots in the bin reminded him of something: there were boot prints on the floor where he'd woken up. Even though he himself was barefoot, and the slight girl in the other room wouldn't have left prints so large.

Someone else is here.

He touched a hand involuntarily to the spot where blood had stained his jumpsuit.

Someone . . . He wiped his sweaty palms against the suit. Someone I must have hurt.

Where?

He crept out of the changing room, eyes on the floor. There they were: boot prints in the dust, smeared where Rett had walked through them barefoot. The trail led him back to the main room, where he stopped short.

One of the striped walls had been lifted into an overhead slot to reveal a room beyond like a space-age lounge. A low angled couch that had once been white but was now gray with dust ran along three walls, taking up the whole space. *I'm trapped in a creepy metal dollhouse*, Rett thought as he surveyed the cross-sectioned room. *A dollhouse with a lock.*

"Bryn?" he called, his voice creaking with uncertainty. *Did she lift the wall—or did someone else do that?* A ladder set over the couch led to an opening in the ceiling, a square of darkness that pulled at him even while it made his scalp prickle. "Bryn? Are you up there?"

No answer but the ring of his own voice against the metal walls.

Rett's heart beat faster as he stepped onto a ledge at the back of the couch and grabbed the rungs.

He eased his head up into the darkness. For a long, unnerving moment he could only blink against black nothingness. A latch clicked some distance in front of him. And then his eyes adjusted, and he could just make out a set of beds to either side of the room, and the back of Bryn's white jumpsuit against a bank of metal drawers. *What is she doing?*

Rett ducked. *She'll think I'm spying on her. I am spying on her.* He heard her coming toward the ladder, so he scrambled back toward the far end of the couch and tried to look as little as possible like the bloodstained villain she might be imagining him as. He relaxed into an easy slouch, and kept his hands where she could see them.

Bryn jumped from the ladder and snapped her attention toward him. Her hands were shoved deep into the pockets of her jumpsuit. *She took something from the drawer.*

The intensity of her gaze was more than he could bear. "Were you the one who opened the wall to this room?" he asked. "There's someone else here."

Bryn's gaze went to the phantom bloodstain on his abdomen. "Or there *was*," she said.

Rett wanted to tell her he didn't think he could have hurt anyone. But how could he explain what he couldn't remember? *If she's hiding something from me, maybe I'm better off letting her be scared of me.*

"You changed your clothes," Bryn said.

Rett looked down at his jumpsuit. The logo of overlapping lines was the same as the one on the main door, the same as the one on Bryn's jumpsuit. "There's a room full of these." He hadn't stopped thinking of what Bryn might have in her pockets. He pointed at the ladder. "Did you find anything up there?"

"No." A flat, heavy *no* that echoed off the metal walls.

She's lying.

But she moved her hands to cross her arms, and the pockets of her jumpsuit didn't bulge at all. So maybe she really hadn't found anything.

Then again, maybe she had found something and put it in the drawer.

The thought kicked Rett's defenses into gear. Stealing, hiding—he knew how to watch out for those things. He'd had six years of practice at Walling Home.

He looked her over, head to toe, the way *she* kept examining *him*. Narrow frame, squared shoulders, hazel eyes that shone bright enough to startle as she stared back at him in unbearable scrutiny. "You don't remember . . ." He wanted to say *what happened here?* But she tensed defensively, so he said, "how you got here?"

She hesitated. "My best guess is I was drugged. But I'm willing to believe something as strange as *I sleepwalked*. If you say it with enough conviction."

Rett stared at her. *Is she joking? Or does she think I'm bullshitting her?* "The lock on the door is jammed." He didn't know what else to say.

Bryn's gaze went toward the hallway that led to the heavy door. Had she already seen the lock? He imagined her creeping toward the door to examine it while he'd been in the closet sweating out his possible guilt and certain dread.

"Your name's Rett?" Bryn gave him a look that made him feel like a dog in a kennel. She inched back like she thought he might bite. "Last name?"

Rett started to say, then corrected himself. "None, really. Ward."

"As in, ward of the state?"

He gave a small nod. It wasn't a fun thing to admit.

"Walling Home?" Bryn asked.

Rett nodded again, slowly, wondering how she had guessed which facility he belonged to.

"Me too," Bryn said, so quiet he might have imagined it.

He straightened in surprise. Everything about her took

on new meaning: her thin frame, her hard stare, the way she edged along the walls. She was like him—cautious, ready to bolt. He tried to decide if he recognized her. Yes, he'd seen her before, but the too-big jumpsuit made her look different.

He remembered something about her, a rumor . . . But it slipped out of his mind just as soon as he got hold of it.

"What's the last thing you remember?" he asked her.

Bryn's eyes fluttered closed for the briefest of moments before she locked her wary gaze back on Rett. A fine layer of dust coated her skin. Rett rubbed a hand across his own cheek and felt grit. He looked down at his feet; they were black with dirt. *I was outside*, he thought, but he couldn't remember more than the chill on his skin.

"I remember waking up in that office there, looking around," Bryn said, back pressed against the side of the couch.

"Before that?"

"Nothing." Bryn gripped her elbow, and her gaze slid away from him for the first time. "I can remember Walling Home." Her expression darkened. "I wish I couldn't."

Images flashed through Rett's mind: the dull gray of cafeteria tables, the crisscross of wire inside window glass. The other boys—lean, knobby with muscles—surging toward him in a blur of motion. Punishing him for being small, for being around when they were bored or bitter. He felt the weight of too-tight walls around him, stale air in his lungs—his worst moment at Walling, when he'd been trapped in an old firewood box. He could feel the rough lid against his fists even now, the scrape of it over his skin as he pounded . . .

He dragged in a rattling breath, trying to get his bearings. His throat was painfully dry. "I'd kill for some water right now."

Bryn's gaze flickered to his abdomen again.

Rett bit his lip. *Could have found a better way to say that.*

He turned his attention again to the chaotic pattern of heavy boot tread laid out over the floor of the main room—

And a trail of prints that disappeared under the far wall. *Someone else is here,* he thought again.

"What do you think's under that wall?" he asked Bryn as he walked slowly toward it.

"There's no latch to lift it."

Rett bent to look closer. Bryn was right—there was only a rusty plate where a latch used to be.

"I can manage it." Rett kicked at the wall with his heel until the wall bounced back enough that he could stick his foot underneath and pry it up. It lifted with a groan, and more easily than he had thought it would. Something—adrenaline, determination—was making him stronger and sturdier, if racked with pain and thirst.

Despite his newfound strength, the wall stuck halfway up. Rett turned to Bryn, checking to see if she felt any less hesitant than he did to duck blindly into the dim room beyond and find out what awaited them. He caught a flicker in her eyes that said he'd impressed her with his kick-and-lift trick. *Should I tell her how I learned to get out of tight spots?* he thought grimly.

He couldn't very well hang back now and ruin the impression he'd given her, so he steeled himself and ducked under the wall.

Three banks of cabinets greeted him and then all Rett's attention went to the floor.

"There's a bunch of supplies in here," he called.

Nylon ropes and tinted goggles and compasses spilled out

of overturned bins. Rett crouched to examine a tangle of nylon backpacks. All empty. He wondered what he should be looking for. *Anything, anything.* He grabbed at the nearest bin, suddenly seized with a familiar fear. *Just grab anything!* But this wasn't Walling Home, and he and Bryn weren't going to have to fight over the last pair of donated shoes, the last spare blanket.

No, it's worse, he thought. *Or it might be.* Trapped, and this was all they had.

The bin held ponchos folded into their hoods. Useless, unless it was going to suddenly start raining inside. Which he actually wouldn't mind, given how all he could think about was water. Rett pulled down a larger bin already sticking out from a cabinet. It held mysterious green tubes that he couldn't puzzle out. And empty water bottles—a cruel joke.

He opened another bin and cried out in surprise. The words DRINKING WATER were printed across a Mylar bag that he now realized was flat—empty. His spirits fell. He picked up the bag and was surprised to find it was wet.

Someone just emptied this bag.

Rett whirled around, half expecting to find another person crouching somewhere in the room with him.

He was alone. Bryn hadn't even followed him in.

In fact, her muffled voice came from behind the half-lifted wall.

Is she . . .

. . . talking to someone?

"Bryn?" he called.

She went silent.

Rett ducked back into the main room. Bryn wasn't there.

The light coming through the glass dome far overhead was

brightening. He looked into the room where he'd first found Bryn. Only a desk with a pull-out stool, and an open door that gave a view of a toilet. No Bryn.

She's hiding from me, he decided, and something hard dropped into his stomach. Then he remembered the boot prints on the floor. *Should I be hiding, too?*

He ducked back into the supply room and looked over the jumbled bins, the cabinet tops marked with boot prints . . .

A ladder set over a bank of cabinets caught his eye. It led to a dark recess. Rett's nerves tingled. *Someone climbed up there*, he thought, eyeing the boot prints at the ladder's base. The darkness grew sentient, watchful.

Rett grabbed the rungs with stiff fingers and forced himself to climb. He held his breath and eased his head through the opening in the ceiling, his heart pounding . . .

Total darkness. The smell of old dust. A distant sound of . . . something sliding nearer? He froze, strained to hear better. His skin prickled.

"Hello?" he said into the darkness, barely more than a whisper. He pulled himself up with shaking muscles and edged along the frame of a bed. "Is anyone here?" He wondered if the sound he'd heard before had been only the rasp of his own breathing.

Would I be able to sense it? If someone were crouched in an inky corner, or unconscious on the floor—would he know? He jabbed a foot into the darkness, testing for any hidden forms.

It touched something.

The something gave.

Rett yanked his foot back. His heartbeat thundered in his head.

"Hello?" he croaked.

He crept forward, reaching into the darkness.

It was just another bed, a plastic mattress on a low frame.
There's no one here.

No sooner had he thought it than the squeal of metal on metal rent the air.

Someone was sliding a panel shut from below. The square of light that was the opening over the ladder disappeared.

Rett's heart flew into his throat. "Hey!" he called, his voice choked. He dropped to his knees and tugged on a metal handle attached to the sliding panel. The panel didn't budge. "Hey!"

He heaved at the handle. He was trapped inside a disused firewood box crawling with spiders. Pleading with the boy who'd shut him inside. "Hey, let me out!" He shrank back, caught in the cramped darkness, fearful of wasting the air he had left . . .

Stop, he told himself, his breath coming in shuddering gasps. He made his muscles go loose, slowed his breathing. Then he tried the handle again, jerking it side-to-side, wriggling the panel free from whatever held it. He marveled again at the strength he seemed to have awakened within this strange place. At Walling, he was the skinny kid with more desperation than muscle, but here—one more wrenching tug, and he forced the panel open. Something clattered to the floor.

Rett dropped onto the cabinet top and sucked in cool, dusty air. The thing that had been wedged against the panel lay on the floor: a long metal pole with a leather loop—a walking stick.

Someone tried to trap me.

Rett's heart fluttered. He jumped down from the cabinet. Bent to pick up the metal pole—then froze with his hand locked around it. A smudge of green paint glowed on the metal.

Glowing green paint. Rett's gaze traveled to the bin of plastic tubes full of green liquid. *Glow tubes?* He picked one up and bent it until it cracked and its contents glowed.

He imagined the tube breaking open, the liquid spilling, staining a pair of hands glowing green, like the branding of a comic-book villain.

A thought sparked in Rett's mind. It burned so hot he forgot to worry about who might lurk on the other side of the wall he now ducked under.

At the end of the short hallway, the fire extinguisher still lay on the floor. Rett crouched to inspect what he had seen before but hadn't registered: the extinguisher's crown was covered in smudged green handprints. With Rett huddled over it, blocking most of the light, the handprints glowed.

Rett stood and inspected the heavy bolt on the door. Red paint from the extinguisher marked its wrenched end.

His pulse throbbed in his parched throat. Whoever had tried to trap him in the upper room had also jammed the only exit. Locked him in, as good as shutting a lid and clamping it down. But with no one to let him out when the air got stale.

Or when the water ran out.

He turned slowly, his mind buzzing.

Then—a flash of white jumpsuit. Bryn darted across the main room and slipped through the open doorway at the far end of the place.

Rett's heart drummed. *What is she doing?*

He looked back at the jammed lock on the heavy door behind him. *What has she done?*

A new sound drifted out from the open doorway Bryn had gone through: the clatter of wood on metal, mixed with Bryn's grunts of effort. Rett crept slowly toward it, drawn this time

not by the hypnotic fascination he'd felt at the sound of her singing, but by dark curiosity.

"Bryn," he whispered, as if he were only saying it to himself, testing the idea that she might be the one who had trapped them in this strange prison. And then louder, "Bryn?"

She appeared in the doorway, spectral in the white jumpsuit lit by the morning light.

Rett's heart stopped.

At her sides, Bryn's hands glowed green.

Rett tried to swallow the lump rising in his throat, but his mouth was too dry. His mind raced. *Why would she jam the door—why trap herself in here?*

"Did you—" Rett faltered. What had that clattering been? The sound of a door being forced open? "Did you find another way out?"

Bryn slowly shook her head. "Another room."

Framed in the doorway, she seemed so slight, hardly large enough to fill out her jumpsuit. Rett remembered how startled she'd been when he'd first seen her, how ghostly and timid.

She's just scared, he told himself. That's why she trapped me in that room. She's not going to hurt me.

But a long string of evidence from life in a boarding facility told him otherwise. Everyone in that place was the same—*look out for yourself, even if it means hurting someone else.*

It was what Rett had done, breaking that boy's hand.

"You found another room?" Rett could hardly grasp what she'd said. His heart was a jackhammer working on his rib cage. "Is there . . . anyone in there?"

Bryn didn't answer.

"I think there's someone else here," Rett tried again. "And . . . I heard you talking to someone a minute ago."

Bryn tensed. "Someone else *was* here. That much is obvious." Her hands curled at her sides. "What did you do to them?"

Rett flinched. "I didn't—" He'd been stupid to let her be scared of him, stupid not to try to explain that he hadn't hurt anyone.

But something didn't make sense. "Who were you talking to?" he pressed. He took a step toward her. Her eyes widened with alarm.

And then her gaze shot to the ladder in the open lounge to Rett's right.

Why?

In Rett's mind, he saw her standing in the dark room at the top of the ladder, the room that mirrored the one he'd been trapped in, and he remembered hearing the drawer *snick* shut.

"What's up there?" he asked Bryn. And then he thought of the muffled conversation he'd heard a few minutes ago, and he knew. "A phone?"

Bryn's wooden expression told him he was right.

Rett went for the ladder.

Flew up the rungs before she could make a move to stop him.

Why would she hide this from me?

Why did she trap us in here?

The room above was so dark. A bed made a vague shape against one wall, a bunk bed against the other. Rett crept toward the bank of drawers, goaded on by a faintly glowing reflective strip on the floor. Already his eyes were adjusting to the low light.

He slid open a drawer. Nothing. He felt inside to be sure.

Opened another drawer. Empty.

Maybe she didn't hide anything. Maybe she's just as harmless as I am.

He yanked open a last drawer, expecting to find nothing. Instead: a gun.

Gray against black darkness. His mind tried to reject the sight. The tube of the barrel, the angled lines of the grip and the guard. Strange proof that Bryn wasn't harmless. He reached in to touch it, to know for sure that it was real, to calm the wild flutter in his chest—

A voice ruptured the silence: "*Rett.*" Bryn's voice—so sharp, so close behind him it pierced his skull and sent his mind spinning into blackness.

