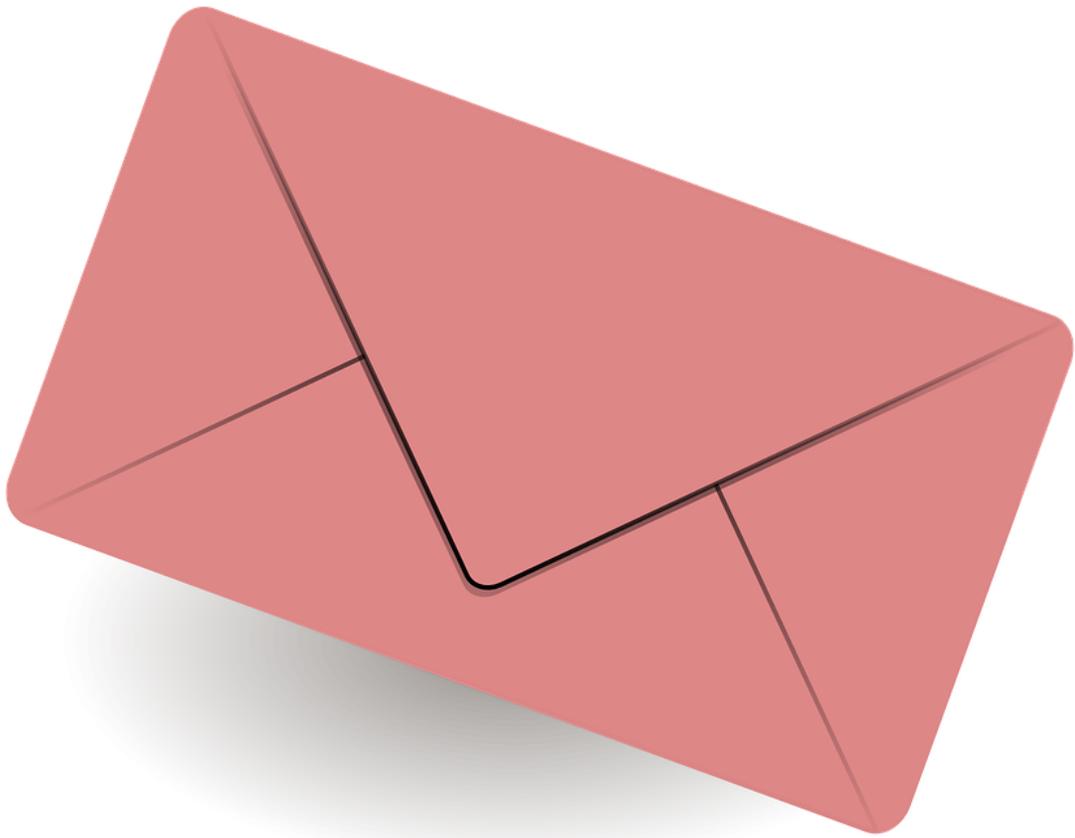


✧ Red Willow ✧

Jordan Bradley

Sixteen year old Willow Batch is well accustomed to the ways of her hometown of Warrington, Washington, knowing the things that lay far beyond the stretch of her everyday life. She'd always heard about the kids who were chosen every few years to fight of these very entities, but she'd never believed she'd receive the call too.



Part 1-
Sealed Within the Wax

I held the red envelope closer to my heart, a shaky breath rattling my chest. I should've been ecstatic to open it, had the urge to tear into it like kids tear into their presents at Christmas. But something in me was terrified of what would be inside, that I wouldn't be able to handle its contents.

"C'mon, you already know what this is all about. You've known about this stuff since elementary school!" A disembodied voice reminds me not so gently.

It was true though, I'd known about the day a select few people got their red-letter since I was in elementary school, those supposedly "lucky" kids being handpicked by the higher-ups for the opportunity of a lifetime. That's how it was presented at least. I remember that day well, although I'd be surprised if I hadn't, our teachers managing to burn images they'd flashed on the screen into our malleable minds. They'd introduced all of it to us near the end of fifth grade, the part of the year where we'd almost been big, "mature" middle schoolers who were one step closer to handling the real world. In reality, they'd show us what's to come in fifth grade because training would begin next year, leaving no time for introductions.

Five years ago, they'd stuffed all of us in the last classroom down the hallway, locking the door and ushering us to find some form of a seat quickly. I remember scrambling to sit on the rainbow carpet beside my then best friend Gwen; the girl turned to me and had given me her signature metal smile. I had returned a toothy one and had started to tell her how I'd almost dumped chocolate milk all over myself during lunch before the lights shut off. There was the usual gasps and breathy yells before a red bulb had lit up above us, revealing sullen faces. I almost hadn't recognized Mrs. Angelica, our social studies teacher, standing among the group of adults, her familiar happy go lucky smile replaced with a grimace. I hadn't recognized anyone else in the group, guessing they were middle and high school teachers I was bound to have in the future. I did, in fact, end up having one of them, the man who'd stood beside Mrs. Angelica becoming my freshman biology teacher.

Mr. Charlie was also the one who'd given me my letter today.

That wet and dreary day all those years ago in the last classroom down the hall, we'd all been exposed to what a few of us would be forced to face in the all too quickly approaching future. We were shown pictures of the very people who were behind this project, the words used to explain them only being high praises. We were then shown pictures of past groups of kids who'd been selected by the red letter, each one portraying a group of four high schoolers who had had the same metal smiles as us then fifth graders. After slides of innocent, rosy-cheeked faces came the hellish images of what those very kids faced. They were the types of images that stay with a 12-year-old forever; they'd inspired chatter and soon to be nightmares. The boys had all cooed to each other, "Cool!", but deep down knew they'd be gripping their blankets extra tight that night. I'd stared at images of deformed figures

shrouded in a shadowy hazes wide-eyed and curious, trying to process exactly what I'd seen.

To this day, I still wasn't sure what exactly I'd been shown, but I knew I was still afraid, not arrogant enough to deny that. Maybe I lacked the arrogance to tell myself that I wasn't worried about the letter still clamped in my clammy fingers too. Part of me had at least hoped though that being older and supposedly wiser would diminish some of the fear still churning in my stomach, but it worked to no avail. I was still a scared sophomore sitting on the edge of my bed, wishing with every fiber of my being that I was somewhere else. Not here. Home alone. With the letter.

And for some reason, I still dragged my nail through the waxy seal. I'm not sure I was all there when I did though, but the letter still found itself opened in my hands, the paper itching to be read. So I did what it wanted. I slid it from the envelope and threw it to the side, only the cream-colored parchment remaining. My eyes still weren't completely focused, the words only black blurs swimming across the paper. Somehow though, I still knew exactly what they'd say.

"Congratulations! You have been chosen for an opportunity to make a difference, to be a part of something so much bigger than you'll ever be able to fathom. Thank you for your soon to be service."

It was all packaged like those adventure stories, like *Magic Tree House*. Everything was about being taken to distant lands no one believed could exist in the first place, our mission being to fight off the fantastical beings. I guess part of what we'd seen had been some sort of fantastical creature hiding in some far away place, the only difference between Magic Tree House and the world I had been inducted into however being that these "magical creatures" most likely wanted to kill us.

"Just burn it. Burn it! Burn it!" the disembodied voice urged.

The anxiety found its way not just through my body, but now my conscious too. My chest trembled with another breath, but I forced myself to calm down and focus. My eyes slid to the words in front of me, finally letting them in. I only now realized how rough the parchment was in my hands, but the ink was smooth and flowed easily, like the honeyed words used to lure us into our soon to be fate. My mind conjured up the visual of some man sitting at an oversized oak desk that had sat there for ages, miscellaneous scratches and holes scattered throughout the wood to further prove its age. The man wasn't bent over slaving away at a dimly lit paper, much too professional and sophisticated to stoop to that. Instead, he sat up straighter than what could be humanly possible, the light of the room streaming from a chandelier dripping with teardrop cut crystals. Beside his suit-clad arm, he had a tiny gold pot of ink beside him with an eagle feather protruding from it in all its glory. It was the feather of a bald eagle too, another symbol of the Administrations infatuation with the American dream. He'd dip the feather ever so gently into the ink, the words flowing from his mind as fast as the ink did from the tip of the feather. Once he was done, four of these letters would be packaged in their infamous red

casing to be sent off to the four kids handpicked by the group. And that's how it got into my hands.

"Dear Ms. Batch," it began. It wasn't anything fancy, but at least they hadn't just used my first name, Willow.

"A group of four juveniles, all of highschool age and that reside here in Warrington, have been handpicked for a special project founded and funded by our very own Administration system. Our hopes with this project are to keep our city as safe and secure as possible, each of us striving to have future generations live and thrive here as we have done. To carry out this projects mission, however, we require the sharpest, strongest and most capable youth to assist us, each of you being monitored from a young age to see if you'll grow into these required traits. If you are currently in possession of one of these letters, it means-after careful consideration, you've proved to us that you meet our vision of what a participant in this project should be made of. You, Mrs. Batch, have shown us your cleverness in and out of the classroom, your quick judgment in any given situation and your possession of man's most sought after virtue. Patience."

I stopped reading, thinking instead of the praises they'd extolled upon me in just the letters introduction. Maybe that's why everyone wanted a letter so badly, simply to have someone finally acknowledge their strengths and feats, even if they were only doing so to make the choice they'd made for you seem better. If that was even part of the case, then I had to admit, it was kind of working on me. For once I wasn't being mashed together with the rest of my class, hidden behind much taller and dominating figures. Those were the kids who, all throughout elementary, middle and even when we were "low life" freshman, still managed to represent our class by being shining examples of academics, athletics, and service. They dominated in the classroom, the fields and in our lovely city of Warrington, Washington. They were chosen mainly by the teachers, us other students not really getting a say in who would become the unofficial leaders of our class. In most cases, the kids who are picked for this sort of stuff turn out to be absolute airheads behind the scenes, teachers feeding them their lines off stage. Part of me hates to admit it, but our representatives actually knew what was going on, none of them needing a teacher to hold their hand the whole way through. The only funny thing about me receiving a letter today was that I was nowhere near being a representative for my sophomore class, teachers not seeing me as "superstar" material. Sure, I was a good student with a few good friends who did her best when it came to competitive swimming. I even did a few hours of service at Warrington's soup kitchen and homeless shelter my freshman year. That still didn't group me anywhere near the kids at the top.

And yet, by some odd turn of events they hadn't been picked.

Well, I couldn't actually one hundred percent guarantee that yet, having to find out who the other three participants were at the ceremony I was to be invited to. We weren't actually supposed to know about what went down after you were given a

letter, but kids around the city didn't know how to contain themselves when it came to knowing secrets. Kids who'd had older siblings who'd been chosen spread the news about what their brothers and sisters went through with their friends rather quickly, the word finding itself in the halls of other schools in a matter of months. The news they didn't like to share however was how their siblings hadn't returned home after being recruited, the tragedy instead shared through the scheduled program aired after the project ended that year. Whatever had been playing was quickly shut off in every home, apartment and housing unit across the city, everyone accustomed to the interruption. The screen first showed the names of the kids who'd been picked that year, a "may they rest in peace" message under each of them. The projects mission statement then replaced the names of the fallen, the bolded words projected on our screens for the rest of the night, making sure the point got across. I'd heard however that a couple of years ago a family who'd lost one of their children to the project had demanded that their child deserved more than just his name flashed on TV for a minute or two, the family not resting until he got justice. To keep their image in good graces, the higher-ups complied, implementing a remembrance ceremony for the families of the fallen. No one, not even the siblings of the past kids who'd been selected, talked about what the ceremony was like. We'd all continue to ask though, none of us really caring how broken up they looked when their brothers and sisters names were mentioned. After years of no answers, we finally stopped asking. Maybe that was another reason we all wanted to be picked so badly, finally being a part of the secrets that had been so well hidden. Not that we wanted to get hurt or die if we did happen to be picked, but we wanted to be immersed in the other worlds that lie somewhere in our city. We knew they were there, no matter how contained the higher-ups tried to keep them, a few things managing to slip from under the lid. That was why this whole operation existed, why we'd been shown all those pictures of past projects and the kids who'd been recruited for them. There were very real dangers outside of Warrington and to keep up our cities image of the perfect place to create and nurture the future, some of us were going to have to leave our comfort zone. Some of us were going to have to risk having our families sit at what was likely the head of a grand table, seated by members of their very own Administration system. Families of three other kids would be there too, all of them dressed in black I'd imagined. Each set of parents, siblings and other relatives would be gathered there to remember and celebrate their children, their flesh and blood who'd been sent off to preserve the very world as they knew it.