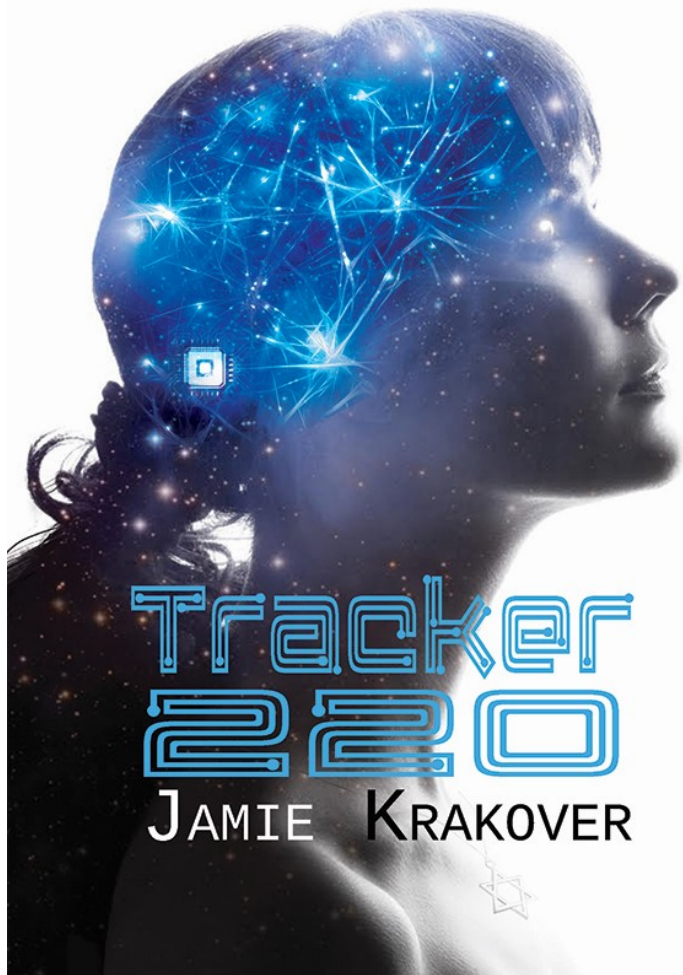


She is the **glitch** in their system



# TRACKER220

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Tracker220  
Copyright © 2020 Jamie Krakover  
Interior Format: Dorothy Dreyer

Published by Snowy Wings Publishing  
PO Box 1035, Turner, OR 97392



ISBN Hardcover: 978-1-948661-91-1  
ISBN Paperback: 978-1-948661-90-4  
ISBN eBook: 978-1-948661-92-8

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*In loving memory of Tom Krakover,  
who introduced me to science fiction and made sure it  
always filled the house.*

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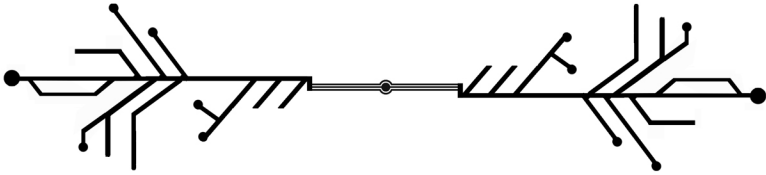
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“Come on, Kaya. You know you want to.” The black box in Troy Ackerman’s hand flirted with me like a bad boy. Half thrill ride, half arrest warrant.

We were going to get caught. No question about it.

Masking your tracker signal got you a date with the authorities at best, and at worst... I didn’t want to think about it. I wasn’t lucky enough to stay out of trouble. I was never that lucky.

Troy held the radio wave generator between his thumb and index finger as if he were expecting me to take it at any moment. While his bulky torso was slightly intimidating, his height wasn’t.

The buzz from falling off the tracker grid—pure silence and vision devoid of popups and apps—wasn’t worth the risk of losing control, losing the connection and security of the network. If the authorities showed up, brain probing us to check for tracker glitches would be the least of our problems.

Troy waved the box in my face. “You sure? It’s such a rush!”

I shivered despite the bonfire blazing in front of us. “I’m good. I don’t need a record.”

“Wasn’t it just Yom Kippur or something? You should be good on the sin front for a while.” He thrust his hips toward the box and my best friend Lydia let out a quick giggle, batting her long lashes at him.

*Ugh! Of all the boys why did she have to be into him?* “You know that’s not how it works.”

That little box was trouble. Worse than Pandora’s. My muscles tensed at the thought of all the chaos about to be unleashed. At least if I refused to disrupt my tracker signal, I wouldn’t have to lie about breaking the law.

Trekking into the woods to watch everyone attempt to beat the record for longest signal disruption was insanity. Why couldn’t we hang out at the fly-in theater instead? Anything other than pursuing a one-way ticket to tracker juvie.

But the guys loved the thrill of tempting fate—the ultimate game of chicken. At best, they had about five minutes of interrupted tracker signals before the network alerted the authorities.

I leaned into my boyfriend, and he put his arm around me wafting the comforting sea breeze scent of his aftershave in my direction. Harlow would never ditch me. But most of his friends wouldn’t hesitate to use me as authority bait if the agents showed up. Not if—*when*.

“Looks like your girlfriend’s afraid of getting caught.” Troy should have known by now his taunts wouldn’t work.

And yet, my insides warred. I twisted my hair back into a stubby ponytail wishing I hadn’t recently chopped off ten inches. By the time I let my hair go, the rule-follower piece of me prevailed like always. “I’ll watch for now.”

“Maybe after you see how it’s done?” Harlow squeezed my shoulder, making my muscles tense more. Their stunts



were dangerous enough without him dragging me into it. Last time, we'd spent an hour trying to evade the authorities and nearly missed curfew.

I shook my head.

"She's a wuss."

"Stuff it, Troy. If you want to scramble your brains, fine. I'm out." It shouldn't be a fight to do the right thing.

"It's just a little signal interruption. But if you want to be a wimp about it..."

A blinking chat bubble appeared in the lower left-hand corner of my vision with the initials *H.G.* for "Harlow Green." I thought about the message and blinked twice in rapid succession to open it.

H.G.: You don't have to if you don't want to.

There wasn't a chance Troy could talk me into it. But Harlow's support gave me extra confidence, even if it only came through private chat. He cared too much about his image to say anything in front of the guys.

As I minimized the message to save it for later, a second icon appeared to the left of Harlow's message, with the initials *T.A.*

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then let the message enter my mind. As the message opened in my line of sight, an image of a chicken emerged. It flapped its wings and ran in circles.

Instead of collapsing and disappearing like normal, the image of a bomb exploded, obliterating the circling chicken. When the fake dust cleared, the picture was nowhere to be seen.

Laughter drew my attention to the crowd.

*Great. That wasn't so private.*

Harlow punched Troy in his well-defined biceps. "Let it

go, man.”

Troy was lucky that was all he'd gotten. If I hadn't promised Lydia I'd be on my best behavior, I wouldn't have had to clamp my mouth shut. If it weren't for her, I'd have sent out a chat bomb of my own that would transform Troy's ego into a limp balloon. Harlow had sent me pictures and messages, the kind that Troy wouldn't want to go public. And once you put something on the tracker network, it never fully went away. I could bury him if it weren't for Lydia.

I'd do anything for my best friend, but I wasn't sure her crush on Troy was worth getting arrested over.

Troy pulled the box away and turned to Lydia. “How about you?”

Her cheeks pinked as she twirled her long, black hair around her finger. “Why don't you show me?” she asked with a giggle. She was laying it on extra thick. I didn't like who she was around him, but I wasn't sure how to tell her.

“Sure.” Troy pulled the radio wave generator apart at the center then flipped the switch on. A red light blinked on each half of the unmarked box as it hummed softly. “Who's got my time?”

“Me.” Wes stood up from an adjacent log, his thin frame towering over everyone. He blinked twice in quick succession, opening a timer program from the tracker network. “Ready?”

“I'm going to crush this.”

“Okay, go.” Wes blinked twice again. The timer was running.

Troy placed each half of the device on his temples. Lydia nudged Troy with her elbow—any excuse to touch him. “So what's the record?”

“Who cares?” I asked. “The only thing getting broken is us if the authorities show up.” The woods sat far enough from town that minor issues weren't worth the authorities'

time. But it was close enough that if anyone messaged, we could make it home in a parentally acceptable amount of time.

Lydia shot me her knock-it-off face before returning an innocent smile at Troy. I gave her a sorry-please-forgive-me-look. Silently, I prayed they'd get bored and give up. Then I wouldn't have to risk disappointing her.

"The record is five minutes and three seconds held by yours truly." Harlow flexed his biceps. I rolled my eyes at his standard macho routine but secretly enjoyed the show. His muscles were fantastic, even if the display required zero intelligent thought.

"Not for long. Your record is about to be shattered." Troy paced like his adrenaline was bottling inside and taking up the remaining space his brain cells used to occupy.

"One minute," Wes called.

Harlow nudged Troy as he paced between him and the fire. "Want to quit yet?"

"Not a chance. I have five hundred bucks riding on this."

"Oh, big spenders," I said. "Get a hobby."

"We've got one," Troy said. "If you don't like it, leave."

Lydia kicked the heel of her calf hugging boots at the toe of my sneakers with enough force to tell me she was going to kill me if I didn't stop immediately. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. I wanted to support her, but the rumors of what happened to people who got caught ghosting their trackers were enough for me. The fact that we were teenagers wouldn't matter to the authorities. They wouldn't hesitate to haul us off to lockup in Global Tracking Systems and leave needles in our brains for the night—or so the rumors said.

I blinked and pulled up the Mystery Gems app and allowed it to fill half my vision as I played the mindless game. Anything to distract me from the insanity.

"Does it hurt?" Lydia asked Troy, pulling my attention

from the game and causing me to lose my last life.

*Dang it.*

Now I needed a new distraction, as it would be an hour before I regenerated another life. This inane game of theirs would be long over an hour from now. Hopefully.

Troy didn't remove the device from his temples but stopped pacing in front of the log we were sitting on.

"Nah, it's mo... mo... morrrrr..." Troy started to shake, slowly at first. But it quickly morphed into full-on convulsions. His eyes rolled back as he collapsed next to the fire with a long moan.

Lydia shrieked. My mouth dropped open as my heart threatened to pound out of my chest. I placed my fingers on Troy's neck to check for a pulse. Nothing. I shifted my fingers around in a frantic attempt to see if I could find one but failed to remember the right spot. If he hadn't been so hellbent on disrupting his tracker, it would have already signaled for an ambulance.

"I'm—" I swallowed the lump in my throat that was preventing me from speaking. "I'm calling for help!"

Troy burst into a fit of laughter. He sat up and shook his dark, curly hair while still holding the boxes in place. "Gotcha!"

I wanted to knock that smug look off his face, but my body was too stunned to react.

"You should have seen your face."

I kicked his calf, wishing I had daggers on the end of my shoes. "Why are you such an ass?" My face pinched into a scowl before I could stop myself. Why was I the only one not laughing?

Even Lydia giggled and kissed Troy on the cheek. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Four and a half minutes," Wes said between laughs.

And my nightmare continued.

Harlow rose from the log and stalked over to Troy. Inches from Troy's face, he asked, "Scared yet?"

"No. I'm going to destroy your record." The shape of Troy's upturned lips cemented his determination.

Harlow's hands balled into fists.

*He better not start a fight.*

"Five minutes," Wes called, then he counted out the seconds.

At six, Troy dropped his arms.

"And we have a new record!" Wes raised Troy's arm into the air like the winning boxer in a championship match. "With an outstanding time of five minutes and six seconds, our new victor, Troy Ackerman."

The guys took turns chest bumping Troy. There was so much testosterone flowing between them I was afraid all the stupid would rub off on me.

A message with TA popped up in the corner of my vision. Against my better judgment, I opened it and found an image of Troy with a crown on his head, twirling scepter in his hands. The word WINNER flashed above his dancing figure.

"I'll take my five hundred bucks now." Troy held his palm out to Harlow in anticipation of his payment.

"I'll hold on to my money. I'm just going to shatter the record again anyway."

"If you beat it." Troy's grin morphed into something downright demonic. "In the meantime, enjoy this payment hack app I found."

"What the hell, man?" Harlow blinked twice before stomping to the edge of the clearing and punching an oak tree.

Those apps were annoying as hell. They clogged your vision until you took care of the money you owed. Landlords used the app to force tenants to pay. Since Troy's dad owned several high-rises, he had inside access to such an app.

Harlow clenched his fists, more hurt than his face let on.

“Harlow, what are you thinking?” I was sick of the hothead routine. It was not a good side of him, and lately, it was making a frequent appearance. I clasped his hand in mine and ran my fingers around the edges of his wound. He’d split several of his knuckles open. “Lydia, get my purse.”

I grabbed it from her and dug out some tissues to clean the dirt out of his wound. “What’s wrong with you?” But I already knew the answer—he hated to lose.

He placed his fingers under my chin, lifting my head until our gazes met. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” Leaning in, he kissed me on the cheek, spreading warmth across my face. After eight months, he still managed to make my knees go weak with a single kiss. As much as I hated these games, I was glad Harlow was there. He’d never let anything bad happen to me. Then again, he was responsible for putting me in a messy situation in the first place.

“You have to get over this sore loser crap.”

Based on the mixture of disappointment and frustration on his face, I had a small window to calm him down.

I kissed his split knuckles, hoping it would soften his mood. “All better.”

“Thanks,” he said, letting the word hang in the air with regret.

I brushed his long, dirty blond bangs to the edge of his forehead, then stood on my tiptoes so I could kiss him. He pulled me in and slipped his arms underneath the back of my jacket, grazing the skin that peeked out between my tank top and jeans. His soft lips caressed mine, causing me to shiver. He pissed me off sometimes, but the guy could kiss.

“All right, lover boy, time to show us what you’re made of.”

I shot Troy a death stare for interrupting our moment.

Pulling away from Harlow, I stood between them.

“Unless you’re too chicken to try and beat *my* new record,” Troy said.

With a single taunt, Troy managed to reel Harlow back in like an addictive drug. If I allowed Harlow to seethe any longer, he’d start foaming at the mouth.

“You don’t have to do this. The agents will be swarming if you try to break that record.” Despite my best puppy dog face, his eyebrows narrowed—the same tenacity he got on the soccer field right before he was about to score. “A few seconds is one thing, but you know the authorities don’t mess around with the five-minute rule.”

I had a feeling it wouldn’t matter what I said. There was no convincing his stubborn ass.

“No, it’s cool. I’ve got this.” He strode inside the ring of logs around the fire and swiped the radio wave generator off the ground.

“Harlow, wait.” I called after him, unable to give up on a fight I knew I’d already lost. When Harlow decided he wanted to do something, he never wavered. Although his expression appeared even, I could see the fire building inside him. He hungered for the challenge.

Sometimes I hated that I cared so much about all the trouble he got himself into.

Ignoring me, he turned to Wes. “Time me.”

Wes blinked twice and pointed to Harlow, who pressed the boxes to his temples. Things were spiraling out of control faster than I could process.

I thought about a timer and quickly blinked twice. An image of a clock appeared in my line of sight. I focused on the ticking numbers, then moved my eyes to the lower right. The box followed, and I blinked again to lock it into place. The timer wouldn’t be exact, but at least I’d have a better idea of how deep Harlow was diving in.

Everyone grew silent. Wood crackled and popped inside the fire. Birds screeched from the branches above us. A cool wind whipped up, rustling the leaves. I drew my jacket around me and zipped it.

Each ticking second on the timer app blurred into the next. When I couldn't take the silence anymore, I said, "Harlow, please stop this. You don't have to prove yourself to anyone." I wrapped my arms around his waist and gazed up at him. He was half a foot taller than me, but until recently, I could stare him down even when he was putting on his macho routine for the guys. "Come on. This is stupid."

"Four minutes and forty-five seconds," Wes called.

My clock hit four minutes thirty seconds. Great, I was fifteen seconds behind. That was an eternity in tracker time.

"I can't stop now." Harlow grunted, almost as if what he said was an automated response.

"Yes, you can," I said in a firm tone.

"Five minutes." Wes called out again, then he counted out the seconds.

"Okay, you proved your point."

Harlow gritted his teeth and pivoted from me, his lame attempt to keep me from swaying him away from the madness. "No, I'm going to show Troy how you really shatter a record."

Any minute the authorities would overrun our tiny wooded refuge. I hoped trekking beyond the edge of the city was too much effort for the authorities. If only I could track them like they could track us.

I thought about the First Responder app, then blinked. A moment later, the app appeared in my vision. It was meant for emergencies, part of the tracker alert install, but it should do the trick. Besides, the situation kind of was an emergency. Tiny red circles spotted the map. They were at least a mile away. But one dot rounded a corner and doubled back in our



direction. Maybe it was a coincidence. But when a second circled the block and headed toward the outskirts of town, my stomach sank. Of course the authorities had nothing better to do.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one.” Wes’s counting dragged my attention from the map. I blinked twice to minimize the app.

I grabbed Harlow’s arm and yanked with all my weight, trying to pull his hand away from his temple, but he didn’t budge. *Damn his muscles.* I never thought I could hate them so much.

“Six minutes!” Wes yelled.

The silence persisted well beyond the point of uncomfortable. When I could no longer take it, I said, “*Please.* I don’t want you to get caught.”

His muscles twitched with fury, an indication there was no stopping him.

“Six minutes, twenty-two seconds,” Wes called.

I maximized the first responder app again. The dots had closed the gap between us and them by half.

I tried one last plea. “Enough is enough! The agents are on their way.”

Harlow blinked, like he was trying to understand what I’d said, then lowered his hands.

I let out a long breath in relief.

“And *that* is how you break a record.” Harlow laughed like a mental patient. “What was my final time?”

“Six minutes and thirty-three seconds,” Wes said.

Harlow dropped the device at Troy’s feet. “Beat that.” He spun on his heel and paraded around the circle, waving his arms in triumph. A chat with *HG* appeared at the bottom of my sight. I opened it and a rain of money flooded my vision with an image of a proud Harlow standing among it. Behind him, Troy’s head had been pasted on top of a snorting pig.

I had to hand it to Harlow. He certainly had a flare for getting even.

Some of the guys patted him on the back, but a few stood silent. I remained next to Lydia, unsure what to say to Harlow. She'd be there for me no matter what. I couldn't believe he'd taken the stupid bet so far. Thankfully, it was over and nothing bad had happened, other than Harlow dancing like a monkey and rubbing Troy's nose in it. Everything would be fine as long as the red dots turned around. They usually gave up when trackers popped back online.

But they didn't.

Harlow abruptly stopped parading around. No, not just stopped, he froze completely. As unmoving as a boulder. *What's he doing?* As the question crossed my mind, dread swirled inside. They'd gotten to his tracker, controlling his movement. He wouldn't be able to go anywhere if he wanted to. In a matter of minutes, the woods would be crawling with authorities. My stomach dropped. *Why did I have to be right?*

On cue, the beating sound of the unicopters swooshed in my ears, growing louder by the second. The small crafts' blades blew leaves up from the forest floor. Within moments, a spotlight beamed from above.

"Stay where you are," boomed a voice through the speakers hanging from the unicopter's composite frame.

Everyone scattered. Troy scooped up the device from the ground. Grabbing Lydia's hand, he dragged her away from the clearing.

"Come on, Kaya." She held her hand out to me as she ran past.

My mind screamed *run*, but my heart said *stay*. "I can't leave him."

I hated myself for following the rules to the letter. Part of

me wanted to bolt, be the rebel like my friends. e worse than facing tracker diagnostics was a lecture from my dad about morality. Brain probe or not, he'd make me apologize to the authorities for wasting their time, which was infinitely more humiliating if they had to chase me. It was pretty sick if you asked me. Not like they'd apologize to me for the drive-by lobotomy.

My friends disappeared deeper into the woods, where they'd stashed their flying crotchrocks. My breath caught in my throat. I should have run.

I hated that Harlow made me do stupid things. I hated my moral compass more. I was too smart for illegal activity, and yet there were the authorities circling above like vultures.

Five unicopters landed around Harlow. Four uniformed agents stood up from their seats in the small, open-aired vehicles. In one fluid movement, they ducked under the upper part of the frame, briefly balancing on the running board before their combat boots hit the ground with a thud. They marched toward Harlow, leaving the unicopter blades running on low. The fifth approached me, flipping up the visor on his black helmet. The rest of his body was covered by the black authority uniform, complete with black gloves. The glint of the silver bands on his belt was the only hint of color.

"Miss, what happened here?"

"I.. I.." A huge lump in my throat prevented me from speaking, which was good because I wasn't sure I wanted to tell them anything.

"This one's in shock. Get the kit." The agent reached out for my arm.

I blinked and snapped to, yanking my arm away from him. "I'm fine," I said. "Is he going to be okay? I don't know what happened." Playing dumb when it came to the

authorities was usually the best tactic. Which was convenient because after this stunt, enough dumb had rubbed off on me.

“Seems like a tracker malfunction. But we need to take him in for some diagnostic tests.”

I nodded, sweat beading on my forehead. The authorities made my skin crawl. You couldn’t argue with them. They always made you feel like you’d done something wrong, even when you hadn’t.

“Miss, you best head home. It’s getting late.”

I forced a quiet “okay” in response. Heaven forbid they actually offered me a ride home. But they didn’t care about anyone’s wellbeing unless it involved a malfunctioning tracker or a bribe.

He flipped down the visor on his helmet and jogged to his vehicle.

An agent cuffed Harlow with the silver bands. When they clicked in place, a red light flashed three times before a loud beep rang out. Harlow swallowed as his shoulders relaxed. He clenched his fists a couple times, but his feet remained planted in place.

Two agents hauled Harlow to one of the unicopters and slammed him into the rear-facing seat before securing the arm and leg straps into the clip at his chest. An agent jumped into the remaining seat in the front. He pulled back on the stick, and the vehicle rose toward the sky. As quickly as they’d swarmed in, they were gone—leaving me alone in the woods.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Growing up with a fascination for space and things that fly, Jamie turned that love into a career as an Aerospace Engineer. Combining her natural enthusiasm for Science Fiction and her love of reading, she now spends a lot of her time writing Middle Grade and Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Jamie lives in St. Louis, Missouri with her husband, Andrew, their son, and their dog, Rogue (named after the X-men not Star Wars although she loves both). When she isn't being a Rocket Scientist by day and a writer by night, she can be found catching up on the latest sci fi TV, books, and movies as well as spending time on Twitter (maybe a little too much time :-P). And no, the rocket science jokes never get old!

Through Snowy Wings Publishing, Jamie is the author of Tracker220 (October 2020). She also has two female in STEM short stories published in the Brave New Girls anthologies and two engineering-centered nonfiction pieces that published in Writer's Digest's Putting the Science in Fiction.

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