

A woman with long blonde hair, seen from behind, wearing a denim jacket, stands in a desolate, ruined city. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a bright orange and yellow glow in the background. The buildings are heavily damaged, with some windows showing fire. A utility pole with wires is visible on the left, and a large, dark structure, possibly a crane or a piece of machinery, is in the foreground. The overall atmosphere is one of post-apocalyptic devastation.

# WILD CHILDREN

HANNAH ROSS

**WILD  
CHILDREN**

**HANNAH ROSS**

~ ~ ~

**Mason Marshall Press  
Medford, Massachusetts**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are entirely the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, persons, or anything else is entirely coincidental

No part of this book may be used, reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any manner by any means, known or unknown, without express written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Published by Mason Marshall Press.

Copyright © 2017 by Hannah Ross

Cover copyright © 2017 by Mason Marshall Press.

All rights reserved.

ISBN-10: 1-63247-027-6

ISBN-13: 978-1-63247-027-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016919841

For information, please contact:

Mason Marshall Press

P.O. Box 324

Medford, MA 02155

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# **Contents**

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

**To my children, who taught  
me the power of mother's love.**

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

Rebecca clenched her teeth and steeled herself as another wave of pain washed through her as she shook her head. Of this, at least, she was certain. She was healthy and strong. She would pull through. She must.

"We can't go," she told him in a ragged whisper. "You know we can't."

Her husband sighed and fell silent. He knew well what would happen if they should go.

"Help me to the bathroom," she gasped.

He nodded, white-faced, his lips pursed and held her by the elbow as he followed and helped her climb into the tub. "Be careful not to slip."

In the apartments above and below, people were eating and watching TV, talking and laughing, fighting and making love. Bedtime stories were told, children were put to bed, a dishwasher steadily hummed. But here, in this enclosed, private, steamy little space, Rebecca Hurst was having a baby.

"It's happening, Daniel." Her voice was steady, her body still, the pain gone.

Something even greater and more terrible was going to happen now, something that would require all her strength and endurance. And though she felt she had none left, she knew there must be something still, deep within her. In the mirror, she saw her husband's helpless expression. He, too, knew he would have to do what must be done. As she threw back her head and let out a low, guttural cry, he bent, reached between her thighs and saw the baby's head making its appearance. Seconds later, his son was born into his hands.

Smiling and crying at once, Rebecca sank into the tub and leaned back. She reached out and her husband laid their son upon her bosom, still attached by the umbilical cord. His cry echoed off the hard walls of the small room until Rebecca put him to her breast.

"He's here," she said. She was exhausted, but feared to close her eyes,

afraid to discover when she opened them again that it was all a dream. "Our son is here, Daniel."

She examined him from top to bottom, counted every tiny finger and toe. He was pink and perfect. *It seems like a miracle.*

Daniel helped her to bed with her swaddled newborn, then took up the mop and began putting the apartment in order. He mopped and cleaned and sent evidence down the incinerator chute until every trace of the birth was gone. Only then was he able to let out a sigh of relief and take a peek at his wife and new child. *A son. Another son.*

When he entered the bedroom, he was surprised to find her awake, staring at the sleeping baby with a dreamy, loving smile.

"You know this isn't over, Becky. It's just beginning."

Her smile faded. She knew he was right. They long ago fulfilled their allowed quota of two children. Jordan was ten now. Kate was nearly eight. Their family was perfect, complete. And they never even thought of asking permission to have a third child.

Some did, they knew, particularly if there was a known problem with either of the existing children – if one was seriously ill, or suffered from a permanent handicap. If a child was tragically lost, authorization was usually given to have another, provided the couple was still of childbearing age. In other instances, valuable individuals who displayed uncommon inherited talent or rendered important services to the government were allowed, and even encouraged, to have more than two children, though such prodigies were unlikely to encumber themselves with even one.

After the War, the population had to be strictly regulated. Resources not destroyed by nuclear and chemical bombs were scarce and precious, and had to be distributed in a very controlled, very rational manner if the country was to survive and maintain a civilized society. Such was the explanation behind the *Decree of Population Control* that was issued so many decades ago as a temporary measure, it was said, but somehow its necessity had never been questioned since.

If a woman found herself unexpectedly pregnant with an unauthorized baby, she was immediately referred to the local abortion clinic, where her problem was swiftly and conveniently disposed of. In the first years of the Decree, the number of forced abortions caused a wave of public protest until

the practice ceased. Now, the parents of illegal children had to pay such heavy taxes it inevitably led to the financial destruction of the average-income family. For the poor, no government assistance was given unless the woman consented to the placing of an IUD or tubal ligation.

Rebecca knew all that when she found herself unexpectedly pregnant, but she could no more contemplate abortion than suicide. That meant concealment, no doctor visits, and when her pregnancy became visible, she removed herself to an isolated Country Island, as farming areas were called, where her parents lived, ostensibly to write a book, which she actually had to sit down and do in order to avoid suspicion when she returned. When her time got close, she chose to return home under cover of night.

Now the baby was here, and his destiny became the most pressing concern.

"Say what you will, Becky, it was madness." Daniel sighed as he stroked the newborn's downy head. "A week ago I calculated all we own and all we're likely to own in the future. There's no way we can ever pay the taxes for a third child, not without ending up begging in the streets. And we work in government-assisted institutions. We'll both lose our jobs, and then what?"

Rebecca frowned. "We could retroactively apply for permission to have a third child. It's seldom done, but sometimes it works."

Daniel shook his head. "Retroactive permission is frowned upon, to discourage people from breaking the law. And there's nothing exceptional about our family. Our chances of getting such a permit would be very, very low."

"Then nobody can know."

"How can we pull that off? Always keep this poor child within four walls?"

"We'll see. We'll think of something."

~ ~ ~

The children returned ten days later. The turning of the key in the lock threw Rebecca into a flutter of spirits. She was seated in an armchair, her son at her breast, as they rushed over and looked down in earnest curiosity.

Breathless, Kate asked, "Is this the baby?"

Rebecca smiled and nodded and held him so both could see him better.

"Your new little brother."

"What's his name?" asked Jordan.

For ten days he was *the baby* or *the boy*. Daniel and Rebecca shared a look before she said with sudden certainty, "Benjamin. His name is Benjamin."

Kate reached out. "May I?"

Rebecca rose, allowed her daughter to sit, then gently placed him in her arms.

"And must it still be a secret?" Jordan looked as solemn as he sounded. "Can't we talk about him to anyone except Grandma and Grandpa?"

"No," said Daniel, resting a hand on his son's shoulder. "Never."

~ ~ ~

A few weeks later, late at night, they had another of their conversations. Jordan and Kate were sleeping in their room. Benjamin slept next to his parent's bed in the crib made by Rebecca's father, who took to carpentry after his retirement and soon became extremely skilled at it. Sending it with Daniel was the only thing he felt safe doing for his daughter. Shopping for baby supplies was, of course, out of the question.

Rebecca's spirits were weary. Daniel, with what she felt was needless cruelty, pressed her about what they ought to do next.

"We can't hide him for the rest of our lives, Rebecca," he repeated for the third time.

She sighed. "I can retire from the city and go live with my parents."

He struggled to keep his voice from rising. "But what about us? What about the children?"

"You could all come on weekends. Jordan and Kate are old enough to understand. We won't all be together every day, but we'll still be a family. And the children always enjoy going to the Country Island."

"What about your work?"

"I'll have to quit my regular job, but I can still write. I can do it anywhere." As she spoke, she envisioned the life – the quiet satisfaction of it, the peaceful rhythm so unlike what she experienced in the past years. *On Sundays, we'll all sit around the big scrubbed wooden kitchen table and eat and talk and laugh. Three generations of a happy family. And my baby will be with me, safe and well.*

Daniel rubbed his brow. "It won't do. The children need more of you than just the weekends. Yes, they enjoy visiting the Country Island now and then, but make them go every week, and soon they'll grow tired of it. They have their friends here, and the soccer and swimming teams. They won't want to always miss out on things."

Such objections seemed insignificant to Rebecca. She was about to open her mouth to say so, but Daniel cut her off. "And most important, even there you won't be able to conceal this child forever. Somehow, you succeeded in hiding your pregnancy. But it's a small, close-knit community there. There are visitors. People hear and see things, and the older this child grows, the more difficult it will be to hide him. Besides, think of *him*. What kind of life would he lead? A life of isolation, without friends, without belonging to a society. Officially, he won't even exist."

"My parents' neighbors would not report us," said Rebecca in the most assured voice she could muster. "They've known me all my life."

"You can't trust people with something like this. It's too serious. It *will* come out eventually that we broke the law and had an illegal child, and when it does, our lives will be turned upside down. We will lose everything, Becky, *everything*, and so will Jordan and Kate."

"What do you suggest we do, then?" Rebecca looked up at him, fearing the answer she knew would be coming.

Daniel struggled to meet her eyes. "Sometimes illegal children are born anyway and..."

"Don't say that word," she snapped. "*Illegal*. I hate it. As if being alive is a crime!"

"Alright. All I meant was that sometimes, unplanned pregnancies do happen. Most of those are terminated, but not all. Some children get retroactive permits, but not all. So what's to be done about the rest? In the first years of the Decree there was a wave of infanticide. Yet we are civilized people. We could not let that go on. So the Bureau of Excess Population Management was formed and an unplanned child could be given up anonymously, without any negative effects for the mother. Her identity wasn't sought after, she was not followed. To all intents and purposes, it would be as if she had never been pregnant."

Rebecca's eyes were wide and accusing. "I know that. And I know what you're getting to. I can't believe you would bring up those...those *institutions*."

"They're far kinder than they used to be in the first years after the war, when they were all but concentration camps. Now the conditions in them are tolerable, almost like any boarding school. A little bleak, to be sure, but..."

"Bleak!" Rebecca took a breath and calmed herself as the baby stirred in his crib. "Have you ever visited one of those places? The children are torn away from their families and grow up without love or proper care, or even knowing their true identity. That's no way for a human being to live."

Daniel sighed. "Some are adopted by couples who have reproductive permits but turn out to be barren. As for the rest, they still have a life." He saw she was about to interrupt him again and raised his voice. "Yes, Rebecca, a life. They're given basic education and sent to Country Islands or Industry Islands, depending on which has the need for extra hands at the time. Those who display increased abilities are sometimes given a place in regular boarding schools. If they're especially successful, they may even get a permit to reproduce later on. Yes, it's a sad destiny, but still it can't be compared to what people suffered during the War."

Benjamin opened his eyes and made a little whimpering sound, and Rebecca picked him up. She slid down one strap of her nightgown, baring a breast, wincing as he latched on. His suckling still caused her uterus to contract every time she fed him, and the cramps were sometimes painful. She knew she should see a doctor, but that, of course, was out of the question.

"This is our son," she said. "*Our son*. I'm not giving him up to an orphanage, to be given a random name and raised by random strangers, to grow up never knowing anything about us. He won't become some anonymous farm drudge or factory hand. I don't know yet what will become of him or what I can do for him, but I love him more than life, just as I love Jordan and Kate. I would never think of leaving one of *them*, just because things are hard. Benjamin is our child, no less than his brother or sister. He's part of our family, and we must all stick together, for better or worse."

~ ~ ~

When Daniel rose the next morning, Rebecca and Benjamin were gone. At first he was puzzled, then, when calls to her mobile phone yielded no results, anxiety set in. *Where could she possibly have gone?*

Distracted, he made his way to work, where he messed up several routine assignments. At lunch break, he picked up the phone and dialed his home number. Jordan, already home from school, answered.

"Hey, Dad. Where's Mom?"

Daniel's heart sank. He hoped she would be back by now, but for his children's sake he feigned unconcern. "Mom will be back soon. You and Kate heat up what's left of yesterday's dinner and eat, alright? And then do your homework."

Kate could be heard in the background. "Remind Dad about ice-skating practice!"

"I haven't forgotten," Daniel said, hating that he had to lie. "I'll be back at five to drive her."

He was about to say goodbye when Jordan said, "Dad. What's up? Mom took Ben and..."

Daniel interrupted. "I have to go now. Lots of work. See you later, son."

He cradled the receiver as possibilities raced through his mind. *An accident? No, she always has her ID with her. Someone would have called already. An arrest? Even with all our precautions, it's possible. But again, I'd have heard something by now. She keeps talking about how she wants to visit her parents, but showing up in the Country Island with a new baby would be madness. Maybe she really convinced herself it could be done without evoking any attention. I guess I could call there, but if she's not there they'll worry.* He suppressed a sigh.

He was too upset to work until his usual hour, and arrived home around four. Kate was busy doing her homework, but Jordan was slumped on the couch, playing a video game. Just as Daniel was debating whether he ought to badger his son about homework, he heard the key turning in the lock and Rebecca came in, cheeks flushed, looking lively and exhilarated. The sleeping baby was held close to her body in a sling she made from a piece of long, stretchy fabric.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"I fancied a walk."

"A walk?" Daniel was shaking with suppressed rage. "A *walk*?"

"Yes, Daniel, a walk. I've not been out since Benjamin was born and felt like the walls were closing in on me. And he needed some sunshine, too. It was a fine day, and I decided to take advantage of it. And don't look at me that way. I took a train to another Island, where nobody knows me. It was perfectly safe."

Daniel forced himself to remain calm. "You were gone nine hours. What did you do all day?"

"Walked the streets. Looked at shops. Looked at people. Went to the park where I could sit on a bench and nurse Benjamin. Do you know how good it feels to be out and about, after you've been shut within four walls for so long?"

"You could have said something. Do you have any idea how worried I've been? I didn't know what to do, where to look for you, without raising suspicion."

Her voice softened. "I'm sorry. I should have called. I just got a bit... carried away. I felt free, Daniel, for the first time in a long time. It was intoxicating."

"It was stupid. If you think you took no risks, you're wrong. Worse. You're delusional. What if one of the neighbors noticed you as you were going out or coming in?"

"That's unlikely. I went out very early, and came in at a time when the kids are already back from school, but most adults are still at work."

"I came home early today. Someone else might have, too. What you did was reckless, Rebecca. Reckless and selfish."

Her eyes flashed. "Selfish?"

His face burned with anger. "Yes! Having this baby because *you* wanted to was selfish and stupid and has put us all in danger. And *then* you go out in public with him like it's nothing. Like we wouldn't lose everything we've worked for if you were caught. Don't you wonder..."

He forced himself to stop, to let his fury drain away until he finally let out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Becky. I'm sorry I spoke to you that way. It's just... I'm scared. I see our lives, the kids' lives, all falling apart because we kept an illegal child. It's all I can think about. We've worked so hard, so long for the comfortable life we have, the opportunities the children will have, and the thought of it all being taken away..." He snapped his fingers. "...just like that..." His head shook. "Don't you ever wonder what it would be like if we didn't let this happen?"

It was Rebecca's turn to force herself to remain calm. "You mean if we chose to terminate his life before it even began? To kill him? But Benjamin's life is his. It didn't belong to us, Daniel, and we had no right to take it away."

"So you never doubted, not for a second? Never asked yourself if

perhaps you're doing something totally insane?"

Rebecca's eyelids fluttered as she glared at him in defiant silence.

~ ~ ~

Benjamin was three months old when, late one morning, he started to fuss and refused to take the breast. His cry was one of irritation and pain and so unlike the healthy cry of hunger Rebecca was used to hearing. As she held him close and paced the apartment, trying to calm him, she realized he felt warmer than normal and the infant thermometer confirmed her suspicions. He was running a fever.

*What can I do? I can't call Daniel at work. Someone might overhear the conversation. And him buying baby medicine would be risky if he met someone he knew who asked why he was buying it when his youngest was eight. If only I could go out to buy the medicine I could always say it's for a neighbor. But there's no one I can trust to watch him while I... She shook her head. Of course. The children. They'll be back from school soon.*

Calmer now, she bathed him in lukewarm water. He still fussed, but settled down enough to nurse and relieve some of the heaviness in her aching breasts.

When she heard the children on the landing, she rushed to meet them at the door. Kate looked at her, surprised, as Jordan pushed by her.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a tone that reminded her of Daniel.

Rebecca closed the door and explained the baby was sick but sleeping now, then rushed downstairs. She walked as fast as she could without attracting attention, wasted no time in the store, and hurried home where she was met by a worried-looking Kate.

"Umm...Mom..."

Rebecca paled. "What's the matter?"

Jordan came out of the bedroom, holding the baby wrapped in a towel. "We didn't know what to do so we washed him in the sink."

"But I just gave him a bath. What happened?"

When both looked toward her bedroom, she hurried in, wrinkled her nose at the powerful sour odor. Holding her breath, she discovered the blanket, crib sheet, and mattress underneath it were soaked with dark, greenish-brown liquid. Benjamin's soiled clothes were lying in a small, stinky heap in the crib.

She paled, grabbed some clean clothes, and rushed out to take the baby from Jordan's arms. He felt warmer than before and seemed weak and listless. She hurried to dress him in clean clothes, gave him the medicine, then sat down to try and nurse him while she waited for Daniel to come home.

~ ~ ~

When he stepped through the door, the first thing Daniel noticed was the stench. He took one look at the strained, anxious face of his wife and, without a word, stepped around her to the bedroom. A minute later, Rebecca watched him carry the dirty clothes and bedding to the washing machine. Then he sat by her on the couch, put a gentle arm about her shoulders, and asked quietly, "How is he?"

"Better, I think," she whispered.

Daniel helped her up and led her to the bedroom. She did not protest. Though Jordan and Kate pretended to be absorbed in their homework, she knew they were listening to every word.

Her breasts were emptier now, and she felt calmer. When she looked at the baby, he seemed more like his normal self. The extent of her fears began to feel excessive, even foolish. If it was not for Daniel's grave face, she might have smiled as she said, "I think he'll be fine."

"I hope so. But he still needs to be seen by a doctor, Rebecca."

She bit her lip. "I know." Then, unable to keep the desperation from her voice, she added, "But we can't."

She felt awful as she remembered how, when Jordan and Kate were infants, they rushed to the doctor's office for every trivial little complaint. Now, however, it was impossible. Going to the doctor would be the sealing of their fate. "He's better now, Daniel. It isn't necessary."

The weight of a heavy sigh seemed to push him back against the sofa. "Perhaps not today, but another day, it will be."

"What do you mean?" she asked, knowing she would not like his answer.

"I mean we all get sick and need to see a doctor at some point in our lives. I mean we all rely, one way or another, on government services. And those who cannot rely on them, in our age, in our reality, are outcasts. I'm not talking about our future, or even the possible complications for Jordan and Kate. Think about this baby, Rebecca. By going on as we have until now, you are condemning him to a life in which he can never be anything but an outcast,

in which he can do nothing but hide. He won't be able to meet anyone outside the family, not without lying about who he is. He won't even be able to get proper medical care. One way or another, this will all explode in our faces someday and the longer we protract it, the more painful it will be."

Rebecca got up from the bed and stood by the baby's crib. She looked down for a long time as tears poured silently down her face. She used to understand the Decree of Population Control. But now, for the life of her, she could not see who would be hurt, what damage could possibly be caused by the existence of this poor, sweet, vulnerable creature.

Daniel rose and stood on the other side of the crib, his expression grim. "You know what must be done."

Where moments ago there was nothing but grief, anger now stirred. "You don't care," she said, her agitation mounting. "You never have. You detached yourself from this baby on purpose, right from the beginning, to prepare yourself for giving him up. For giving up *Benjamin*. He has a name, you know, but you won't even use it. To you, he's a problem, a hindrance. To me, he's precious. Every day, every moment that he lives and breathes and is close to me, every time I see his eyes focus on me is priceless. Have you noticed he started smiling? No. Of course not. Soon, he'll reach out for toys. He'll roll over. He'll sit, and crawl, and walk, and talk. Would you deprive me, deprive us all, of that?" Her shoulders heaved with sobs. "I want nothing but to see my son every day of my life, to watch him as he grows up. Where is the crime? Where is the terrible crime, Daniel? *I don't see it.*"

Daniel felt his eyes grow moist as he walked over to her, to the woman who shared so many years, so many dreams and fears with him, and enveloped her in his arms. She stiffened at first, but after a moment her resistance melted and she collapsed into his arms, crying as Daniel held her and stroked her hair.

His voice soft, he said, "I do care, Rebecca. Of course I do. For weeks now, I've been going back and forth on this. I wish there was a legal way for us to keep Benjamin, to raise him the way we raised Jordan and Kate, to love him and care for him without being labeled as criminals. But I see no way. If we don't end up in jail now, we surely will after a few months of not meeting the tax requirements. And let's be real, who *can* meet them? And then we would have to face the choice of who goes behind bars, you or I? What would we tell the children?"

Rebecca wiped her eyes and drew away a step. "The law is unjust. Do

you know that parents of illegal children, on average, get longer prison sentences than rapists and child abusers? In the eyes of the law, it's worse to give birth to an unauthorized child than to hurt the innocent. The law is twisted and faulty. It must be changed."

"It must," echoed Daniel. "I hope it will. I believe it will. We'll do everything we can to keep an eye on him, Becky, see how he's doing. And maybe a day will come when we can bring him back."

He tried to sound hopeful, but his words rang hollow. They both knew there would be no way back. Once an illegal child was revealed and given up, the path that awaited him was set. He would be raised in an institution that prepared children for a lifetime of drudgery and sent to the bleakest regions of the Islands. No contact with the biological family was permitted. For all intents and purposes, it would be as if their son had died.

And yet, as horrible as it was, as much as every fiber of her being struggled against acceptance, she could not deny the soundness of Daniel's arguments. He was right. They had no choice.

~ ~ ~

Mrs. Stocking pushed up her glasses and adjusted her knitting needles. Brow furrowed in concentration, she counted stitches as her rocking-chair rocked slightly back and forth. She often indulged in this innocent, quiet pastime while on night duty and Madam Hart was away or busy shut up in her office. Many considered knitting outdated, an unproductive waste of time, but Mrs. Stocking long ago noticed the scarves, mittens and sweaters she produced were far superior to anything she might buy at the department store. So she quietly went on with her business, knitting for herself, her husband, and her two boys, who would soon finish school. A thought made her smile. Despite their tricky age, her sons, bless them, were never ashamed of sporting a hand-knitted hat.

Night duty was her biggest frustration, not that she actually had to stay up all night. If all was quiet, close to midnight she usually retired to a small side room where a bed was kept especially for her. But bed or not, she missed spending the evening with her family.

When her husband and boys sat down to the table, and she set a pot roast on the table, took off the lid, untied the strings of her apron, and sat down with the rest of the family, it seemed to her as if nothing could be better in the whole world. If she had her wish, they would retire to one of the remote Country

Islands and live there in a snug little home where she would be busy all day long, cooking and cleaning, sewing and ironing. But the boys needed to be put through school, then college, and life was expensive. Her husband was a good man and an honest, steady worker who wanted only to provide for his family, but his salary alone was not enough to maintain a comfortable home. Then again, hardly anybody's salary was enough for that these days. Few were the privileged women who did not have to work. Which was why, more than a decade ago, she took up the position of a matron at the orphanage.

Because she was a decent, quiet, hard-working woman, she was favored by the administration. Because she was motherly and kind, in time she came to regard the place, gloomy and cheerless as it was, as almost her second home. For the children, she often told herself, this was likely to be the *only* home they would ever know, and with the utmost goodwill, she did all that was in her power to make the place more comfortable. The children felt and appreciated it, and the smaller ones often vied for her attention with a zeal that nearly broke her heart. She could not bear them calling her Mother, but many were secretly allowed to call her Aunt as long as Madam Hart was out of earshot.

She thought she heard hurried footsteps crunching on the gravel path and put her knitting aside and adjusted the glasses on her nose again. Who could it be? It was nearly eleven o'clock, much too late for any inspection or delivery, much too late for anything, unless it was one of *them*. She looked outside the window, squinted, and saw the hunched-up figure of a woman in a long, wide, dark raincoat walking slowly and, it seemed, carrying a bundle in her arms. Mrs. Stocking's heart plummeted. *Yes, she must be one of them, poor soul.* She knew this was no pre-arranged delivery. When they came, it could be at any hour.

She was glad Madam Hart was away. The Director always made it harder on the poor women, and God knows it was already hard enough. Hearing a hesitant knock, she hurried downstairs as quickly and quietly as her short, plump frame would permit, lit the small, dim hallway lamp, and opened the door.

*What a night to be out!* The wind was howling, bending the tall, dark trees growing sparsely in the courtyard. A bolt of lightning pierced the sky, followed by a distant rumble of thunder as she felt the first, misty drops of rain on her face.

But all that was nothing compared to the expression on the woman's face.

*She can't be more than forty, but the poor dear looks like she's lived through a hundred years of torment. She was pale and shivering, and Mrs. Stocking had half a mind to invite her in and offer her a cup of hot tea, but then she looked down at the snugly bundled, sleeping infant in the woman's shaking arms and almost gasped. That's no newborn. Three months old at least. Illegally born, of course and she hid it this long. How? Where? Why?*

It was not for her to ask.

The woman put the child in her arms as if holding him for even a moment longer was more painful than she could bear. Mrs. Stocking felt her throat tighten and blinked back tears as she made a futile attempt at an encouraging smile. "It's a boy...a little boy, isn't it?" Her voice was soft and gentle to let the mother know she cared.

The woman could manage but a slight nod.

As their eyes met, Mrs. Stocking saw words were unnecessary, that by handing over the child, this woman was giving away a part of herself, a part of her soul. She was about to turn and walk up the staircase with the infant in her arms, when the mother spoke at last.

"Benjamin. His name is Benjamin."

---

---

---

The little girl turned her face to the dirty white wall, absent-mindedly scratching it with a fingernail. Her tousled, pale-blond hair was spread across the pillow, though only part of it could be seen, as she had pulled the blanket over her head.

"Come on, Cora." The soothing voice of an older girl sounded in her ears as a gentle hand rested on her shoulder. "It's time to get up."

"I've got the flu," Cora protested. "Mrs. Stocking said I can stay in bed. She *said* so. I'm not in anybody's way."

"But the Forresters are here to meet you. They came here especially for you. Don't you realize how important this is?"

Cora only stared at her with big, vacant, seven-year-old blue eyes. Perhaps she was too young to understand all the implications, but she did know what a miraculous chance this could be for her, or for any child thus selected from the orphanage. And she was certainly old enough for skepticism.

Her voice sullen, she said, "Nothing will come out of it," as she turned her face to the wall again. But Elisa shook her by the shoulder again, a little more forcefully this time. "You must get up now, Cora. You can go back to bed later."

With a show of reluctance that made Elisa's eyes roll, Cora sat up and swung her skinny legs down from the bed. The dormitory was empty. The other children had hurried off to breakfast, which was not a thing to be disdained, as no other nourishment would be offered until two o'clock. Cora pulled off her grey pajamas and carelessly put on the grey orphanage uniform, consisting of a cotton blouse, stockings with holes in them, and a skirt that was becoming too short for her. Elisa helped her get all the buttons fastened the right way, and brushed her hair until it shone. After putting on her battered black shoes, Cora was ready to go, but still she protested.

"Why do we have to go to Madam Hart's office? I don't want to go there."

That was understandable, as every child in the orphanage was keen to

avoid setting foot in Madam Hart's office. Now, though, there was no choice, and Elisa took hold of Cora's hand and firmly marched her downstairs.

The Forresters were already waiting inside when the little girl reluctantly walked through the door. They were a respectable-looking middle-aged couple, both wearing business suits and rectangular glasses. Upon seeing Cora, Mrs. Forrester clutched her chest and sank into a chair, too overpowered by emotion for speech. Mr. Forrester, though rather pale, was more composed. He gave Cora a long, intent look before he turned to Madam Hart.

"This is incredible! When we saw her picture, we were amazed, but actually seeing her is beyond description."

His wife could not tear her eyes away from the child. Her voice weak with emotion, she said, "She looks just like her. If I didn't know otherwise, I could almost believe this is her, our Maisie."

"May I offer you a glass of water?" asked Madam Hart in a poor attempt at kindness. Thin and upright, she was dressed in a pencil skirt and a snowy-white blouse.

Breathless, Mrs. Forrester muttered, "No, thank you," as she rose from her chair, approached Cora, and asked, "How old are you, little one?"

Unable to meet the woman's eye, Cora replied, "Seven," in a voice just above a whisper.

Incredulous, Mrs. Forrester shook her head and said, "Just like Maisie was," in a matching whisper.

"Am I correct that you lost your daughter in a road accident two years ago?" asked Madam Hart with affected sympathy.

Mr. Forrester nodded. "A school bus crash. It was one of the few times when we didn't take Maisie to school ourselves. Our reproduction permit was renewed, of course, but by then it was much too late for us. We weren't young when we started a family, and..." He turned to the girl. "...what is your name, child?"

"Cora."

"Will you mind very much, my dear," said Mrs. Forrester in a tremulous voice, "if we call you Maisie from now on?"

"Whatever suits you," said Madam Hart before anyone else could speak. "The children's names aren't of much consequence. I usually leave the task of

coming up with names to Mrs. Stocking, our matron."

"My name is *Cora*," she insisted, speaking louder now.

Mr. and Mrs. Forrester exchanged a quick glance and a nod.

"It doesn't matter right now," Mr. Forrester assured Madam Hart. "We will have plenty of time to settle all that at home. Where do we sign?" He pulled an elegant-looking pen out of the pocket of his suit.

"Before you do, I must remind you of what I told you before. The child has a congenital heart defect. Nothing life-threatening, but she isn't strong, and can't be allowed much exercise. You see how pale she is. She has always been rather sickly, even as a baby. That's why her biological family decided to give her up."

Cora's big blue eyes widened. Nobody ever told her why she ended up in the orphanage.

"A heart defect," repeated Mr. Forrester. "But can't it be corrected?"

"Of course," said Madam Hart. "A rather simple surgery, as far as I understand, but it is quite out of our scope. Our budget doesn't cover such treatments."

"Money is of no concern," Mrs. Forrester assured her. "We can afford good doctors, surgery, the best care. She turned to Cora and took her hand. "You will be quite well, my dear."

The child did not pull back, but seemed unsure of how to react and made herself stand very still.

"You will live with us, and will have your own bedroom, a nice bedroom with a plush carpet and a cozy bed and a big bookcase, and a playroom with as many toys as you can wish for."

Cora's face clouded. "Go to live with you?" She shook her blonde head. "I don't want to leave Mr. Paws."

Mrs. Forrester appeared puzzled. "Who is Mr. Paws?"

Madam Hart made an impatient noise. "Just a stray cat that wanders around our yard. I've told Mrs. Stocking to stop feeding it."

Mrs. Forrester brightened. "Would you like to have a cat, dear? We'll get one. We can choose a kitten together. What do you say?"

For the first time, Cora's pale, thin face became animated. "Can I really have a cat? A cat of my own?"

"Of course," Mr. Forrester assured her, sounding oddly choked up. "You can have *three* cats, if it makes you happy. Madam Hart, can we sign the papers now?"

"Certainly." She pushed a stack of legal documents toward the husband and wife. After reading through them, they signed, and after they signed, Mrs. Forrester took Cora by the hand, preparing to leave.

As they walked out of the office, Cora turned her head and looked at Elisa, uncertain about what to say or do. The older girl stood outside the principal's office, leaning on the dingy greyish wall. The Forresters did not pay her the slightest bit of attention. Cora looked again, and then raised her free hand in a timid farewell.

Elisa returned the gesture, blinking back tears. She would miss Cora. The girl was like a little sister to her, yet she knew she must be happy for her. Cora was walking out to a kinder fate and a better life than most of the children in the orphanage would ever know.

There was not much time left until class, and though the sensible thing would be to go to the dining hall and have breakfast, Elisa made her way to the courtyard. Being late to class was apt to draw the wrath of Madam Hart, but this time she would risk it. She needed a few minutes of quiet reflection, of time to think and breathe. Her heart was torn between the joy of realizing there are some happy endings in the world and the pain of knowing how rare they are.

She knew she could count on finding at least one other person in the courtyard, and there he was, a tall boy about twelve years old, standing under one of the few trees in the yard, his hands in his pockets.

"Benjamin!"

He had a lean, slight build and a head of brown hair which, despite the customary close-cropped haircut of the orphanage boys, gave a full, lush appearance. His lively blue eyes appeared very light in the sunshine-diffused morning as he turned to see who called.

Surprised, he said, "Elisa! I thought you are in class already. You'll be late for Mr. Bradley."

"So will you. It's almost half past eight. We really should go in, Ben."

He studied her face for a moment. "What happened?"

"It's Cora Wood. She's just been adopted."

"Oh." Benjamin knew her by sight, but not much else about her. "Well, that's good for her, I suppose." He thrust his hands deeper into his pockets and rocked on his heels, forward and back, as though he wanted to say something else but was not sure what.

Elisa could not hide her sadness. "Yes. It's good to know that at least for *someone*, there was more than one way out of here."

"Cheer up." He made an involuntary motion, as if to pat her shoulder, then thought better of it and left his hands in his pockets. "We'll be gone soon, too. I don't know what to expect, but it can't be worse than Madam Hart."

Elisa gave a very shaky laugh. "You're only trying to seem brave. Trust me, Ben, after we leave the orphanage we'll very soon wish we could come back here."

He shook his head with disbelief, but decided not to press the point as the bell rang. "Let's go. Maybe Bradley will teach us something useful for a change."

They set off together across the courtyard, walking at the same pace. But while Benjamin's walk was firm, upright, and springy, Elisa carried herself with a slight limp caused by one of her legs being a trifle shorter than the other. It was not enough to be debilitating, but it was noticeable. It was also the reason why she was cast off as a baby twelve years ago.

Reproductive permits were not to be wasted on imperfect children, or so felt the family to which she was born. Nor had they the resources to spend on surgery which would correct her leg. It was easier to give up their baby, pretend she was never born, and hope for better luck next time.

When Benjamin and Elisa entered the classroom, Mr. Bradley was standing with his back to them, writing something on the blackboard. When he heard the door open, he turned around and surveyed them with a look of cool displeasure.

"Benjamin Grey and Elisa Wood. You are late again."

The habit of surnames was too much culturally ingrained to be set aside, but the names thus given to the children had nothing to do with family ties. The source of *Grey* was in the color of the orphanage uniform. *Wood* originated in the scratched and dented wood paneling of the girls' wing. Naturally, many of the children carried the same surname, but they seldom objected. It gave them a feeling of unity, an illusion of being all related to one another.

"We're really sorry, Mr. Bradley," Elisa said with as humble a tone as she could manage. "We hurried as much as we could, as soon as we heard the bell."

Bradley was a reasonable man, and not unkind. His eyes flicked down, as he recalled Elisa's slight handicap. He was fond of this quiet, pretty girl who kept her head down so much and worked so diligently, though he feared in the future that awaited these children, diligence alone would not be enough.

"Well, never mind that now. Take a seat." He pointed toward an empty desk at the back of the classroom. Benjamin and Elisa hurried there and took out their things. Elisa began taking notes, while Benjamin pretended to do the same.

Mr. Bradley turned back to the board. There, the words *Wild Edible Plants* were written in large, bold letters.

"As I was saying before we were interrupted, for many generations, the diet of mankind heavily relied on edible plants found in the wild. The varieties of such plants, naturally, depend on the region and season in question. Today we will go through the list of the ones most commonly found in our area."

Elisa perked up. This was a subject she found interesting, much better than last week, when he talked to them about hunting. She could barely stomach the *talk* of killing something in order to eat it, though the boys all seemed pretty excited. She felt like such a ninny for wanting to bury her face in the notebook and cover her ears with her hands.

"I would listen rather more attentively if I were you," Bradley said, looking at one of the back tables, where two girls were giggling and whispering to each other, heads bent closely together. "I don't care if you take notes. I don't care about your homework assignments, except for the fact that the school administration expects you to hand them in. There will be no end-of-term examination. That would be absolutely pointless. Paying attention to what I tell you is in *your* best interest. Of all the lessons you receive in school, mine are the only ones that will give you a chance at survival."

The background buzz died down as if switched off. Everyone was listening now. Every eye followed the neat, handsome figure who paced back and forth in front of the board until, satisfied he had everyone's attention, he nodded once and continued to speak.

"I will not attempt to deny that your lot is hard. Your birth has placed you

in an unfortunate situation, by no fault of your own. It isn't right. It isn't fair. But unfortunately, few things in life *are* fair. I cannot change the law. I cannot change your legal status. I *can*, however, try to give you the tools to make the best of what you have."

"It doesn't seem we have very much," a bitter Benjamin muttered in the quiet classroom. Heads turned to look at him as Elisa kicked him under the desk, and his best friend, Tom White, who was sitting a few desks across, made a half-approving, half-exasperated face.

Mr. Bradley, however, seemed unperturbed. "You are quite right, Mr. Grey. You don't have much. I will be the first to admit this. But you will have *something*. Equipment, information, knowledge of what to expect. Courage, I hope, to face it." His eyes swept the classroom. "You are all twelve years old. According to the norms of our culture, you are children, fit only to be kept in the neat, well-controlled, strictly scheduled environment of middle school. You will, however, have to rise above these standards. In certain areas of the world, young people in their early teens are treated like adults. They work for a living, build their own homes, and start families. This is what you have to keep in mind when you pass through the school gates. Unfortunately, there is no place for you in the Islands. Industry and agriculture are saturated with labor such as you can provide, and the government can't afford to keep you beyond this age. The gates of the Islands are, therefore, closed to you. But you have all the resources of the open country at your disposal."

"Have *you* ever lived in the open country, Mr. Bradley?" asked Benjamin with cool politeness, his piercing blue eyes never leaving the teacher's dark brown ones.

"I have. I trekked through woods and down rivers, and visited the ruins of destroyed cities. I did not stay for *extended* periods, of course, and I wouldn't go as far as to say that we all ought to leave the safety of the Islands and scatter over the empty land, but I firmly believe it is possible to survive, and even thrive in the open country if one knows how to obtain food, find shelter, and avoid polluted areas."

Elisa Wood raised her hand. After receiving an encouraging nod, she asked, "Mr. Bradley, is it true that some people have *chosen* to leave the Islands and go out into the country?"

For a moment, Mr. Bradley looked a bit unsettled. "I have heard such rumors, but I confess, Elisa, that I find them extremely hard to believe."

The lingering silence that followed was broken by a knock on the door. Bradley's surprised "come in" was answered by the entrance of Mrs. Stocking, who appeared flushed and out of breath. "Mr. Bradley," she said in a low voice that, nevertheless, was heard by almost the entire classroom. "You are expected in Madam Hart's office. The inspector. Have you forgotten?"

"Oh!" Mr. Bradley glanced at his watch. "Is it now? Slipped my mind entirely. Well, I suppose I had better go down with you at once, Mrs. Stocking. Class dismissed." His words were followed by a deafening scrape of chairs as students rose from their places, eager for an unexpected break. There were still twenty minutes to go until the next class.

The sky was clear now, the weather pleasant, and most of the boys and girls poured out into the corridor with the intention of going down to the courtyard, but three lingered – Benjamin, Elisa, and Tom, who was one of the three children of a drug-addicted teenage mother who, at the tender age of nineteen, got a legal warrant for tubal ligation. Each of her children was sent to a different orphanage.

"Want to go out?" he asked Ben and Elisa.

"I thought I'd go through this writing assignment we're supposed to hand in," said Elisa.

"What's the point?" snapped Benjamin. "You heard what Mr. Bradley said. They don't give a damn about us. We have until spring, and then we'll be kicked out, and nobody cares if we live or die."

Eliza sighed. "I know it's silly, but somehow, I keep hoping for...I don't know what. Something. Perhaps that a place will be found for us after all. That it will all work out."

Tom nodded. "I know. But that's just how things are. You grow up hoping you'll be adopted, or that you'll be discovered as some amazing talent and snatched away from here, or that somehow it turns out your birth papers were messed up and you were never meant to be here at all, you know? But it never happens. There isn't really any hope for any of us."

Benjamin drew himself up. His fists were clenched, his jaw set.

"What's up, Ben?" asked Tom.

"No," said Benjamin.

"What do you mean, *no*?" Elisa's brow furrowed.

"I mean I don't want to believe there isn't any hope. I don't care how small our chances are. I don't care what's really waiting for us *out there*. I don't care that even Bradley has hardly any clue about what he's trying to teach us. I don't care about any of it. We are going to live. I don't know where or how, but we *are* going to live."

Tom slapped his shoulder. "That's the spirit, mate."

Ben sighed and went on, somewhat more calmly. "We're still going to be together, right? They aren't going to separate us. If they did, then I'd say yeah, we're probably goners, all of us. Alone, we wouldn't last a day. But together, we stand a chance. And we *are* going to stick together."

Eliza nodded. "Always. No matter what happens."

~ ~ ~

As Mr. Bradley and Mrs. Stocking stood outside the door to Madam Hart's office, they heard two voices talking from within. When Bradley raised his hand and knocked, the voices stopped, and Madam Hart's sharp little heels clicked across the tiled floor in brisk steps.

"Ah, Mr. Bradley, there you are. And Mrs. Stocking, I see you're back, too, which is just as well. I think we can all profit from a short conference. She gestured toward a small thin man in a well-cut grey suit, "This is Mr. Turner, the inspector."

"You can call me George," he said, expecting but receiving no reply.

Madam Hart, never one for informality like first names, pressed her lips in disapproval.

"You work for the Department of Excess Population Management?" Mr. Bradley asked.

Mr. Turner nodded.

"Here on a routine visit?"

"Oh yes, nothing out of the ordinary. All the excess population centers are inspected once a year, though the committee members usually vary. This is the first time I get to visit here, and I must tell you, Madam Hart, I'm very impressed with how you run this establishment. I've never seen one managed better. Everything seems in excellent order, and I'm going to mention you most favorably in my report."

"I am merely doing my job," Madam Hart said, looking very pleased.

Turner turned to Mr. Bradley. "I understand you instruct those who are soon going to be... sent out?"

"That's right. And I must say that the longer I teach, the longer I observe these children, the more I feel that we, as a society, have failed them. There is something deeply wrong about sending twelve-year-old children into conditions we would never choose for ourselves, or our children, or anyone we know."

"And twelve is such a young age," Mrs. Stocking added as a deep blush colored her face. She was not accustomed to speaking her own mind. "What harm would there be in letting them stay just another year? I don't think we would exceed the school budget, and the children would be able to grow, become more prepared."

That Madam Hart was not pleased was clear from the scowl she gave the matron before turning to Turner to say, "Mrs. Stocking has been our matron for many years. She takes care of the children from infancy, and is of course a little biased on the side of what is better for *them*...regardless of what must be done for the good of the society in general."

"Most natural," Turner said countering Hart's scowl with a friendly smile. "Believe me, Mrs. Stocking, Mr. Bradley. I can perfectly understand your sentiments. We are using these children extremely ill. From any civilized point of view, they are being treated barbarously. Yet what else is there to be done? For the time being, we cannot sustain population growth. It might change in the future, but right now that is a statistically proven fact. Our resources are limited, our balance extremely fragile. Throw uncontrolled population growth into the picture, and you have the makings of poverty, famine, and civil war. Still, we are a democracy, with freedom of speech and freedom of press. Forced early abortions were the most practical way to deal with those who refused to be responsible, yet this brought on an outcry. 'Impossible,' they cried! 'An intolerable violation of bodily autonomy!' Well, I don't have to explain, I'm sure. A consensus was reached. We can hand out birth control, we can campaign for zero population growth, we can fund and promote terminations of unwanted pregnancies, but we cannot make a woman have an abortion against her will, not even if she is a drug addict with a terrible record. So far, so good. And then, after the first Blameless Birth campaign, I'm sure you remember there was the terrible scandal."

"Please," said Mrs. Stocking with a shudder. "I can't bear to hear this

talked of."

"I understand. And yet consider, Mrs. Stocking, that the act was horrible only from *our* point of view, the point of view of thinking, intelligent, rational, moral beings. A newborn has barely any consciousness. He doesn't fear, he doesn't suspect. He is warm, comfortable, and swaddled in a soft blanket. The injection was administered as carefully as possible, usually when the baby was asleep so he hardly feels a thing. And then he just...goes on sleeping. There was no suffering involved. None at all."

Mrs. Stocking seethed with indignation. "Please, Mr. Turner. It really doesn't matter which terms you use. It was mass murder, and nothing more. When the whole story came out, my husband and I both went out to the streets to protest. We were horrified, and for good reason. Nothing can justify that atrocity. *Anything*, is better than living in a country that kills babies just for the crime of being born."

"Most people were of your opinion, Mrs. Stocking," Turner said, "which is why the current method came into practice."

"And a great improvement it is," said Bradley, unable to hide his sarcasm. "We no longer give hour-old infants a lethal shot because we claim we cannot afford to keep them. Oh no, we send pre-teens into a dangerous, empty, polluted wilderness. Furthermore, we all signed a secrecy statement, because if the public discovers this government policy, we are risking another scandal, perhaps even a riot. And I'm sure you'll agree that's the last thing anyone wants. It's a lot nicer to let people think the illegal children are merely brought up to do menial jobs."

"Some *are*, you know," Turner said. "Only the quotas for such workers are far lower than the actual numbers of our excess population, which always surprises me. One would think that, with how crowded our Urban Islands are, and with how rigorously the population control laws are upheld, we would hardly have any...umm...transgressions. Yet they keep on happening, and the children are, of course, the ones who suffer."

These last words, with much stronger emotion than was heard in Turner's voice, echoed in the motherly heart of Mrs. Stocking. She knew each child in the orphanage from early infancy. She watched them grow, soothed their nightmares, and nursed them through childhood illnesses. She knew every face, every name, every character, and something about which her charges had no idea – the background story of each child. In a way, she felt as if they were her

own children. She often wished she could take some of them home once in a while, to visit her family, so they could all sit together around the big table and eat and talk and laugh. But it was impossible. The children seldom left the school premises, and when they did, contact between them and Class A citizens was forbidden. They were not allowed to talk of their fate, plead for change, or awaken pity. They were only permitted to live, for a certain number of years, on the fringes of society.

Mrs. Stocking thought of all the children together, and each one separately. She thought of little Cora Wood, who had been adopted by a stroke of good luck and of an older boy who became hysterical every time departure was mentioned, and had to be given drugs to cope with his panic. She thought of the beautiful and gentle Elisa Wood, who could have been the pride of any parent, but who was ruthlessly discarded because of an easily-corrected defect. And she thought of another boy, a boy who was different from his peers in a way he could not suspect. *His mother loved and wanted him, and gave him a name. All these years later I can still hear her say, 'His name is Benjamin.' I wonder what Mr. Turner and Madam Hart would say if they knew his mother never completely lost sight of him.*

Direct contact with the biological parents was strictly forbidden. As far as most bio-parents were concerned, it was as if their children had never been born. Yet Benjamin's mother had sensed the sympathy of Mrs. Stocking and would not give up. She wanted to know about her son, and Mrs. Stocking's good heart overpowered her judgment. She was sometimes able to give his mother reports of Benjamin's growth and progress. There was even a hidden spot beyond the school gates, from which she could, once in a while, catch a glimpse of the boy.

*Next time we meet, I'll have to tell that poor woman she will never see or hear about her son again.* Her heart ached at the thought.

~ ~ ~

By half-past nine, the lights were out, and most of the boys, used to early hours, were already asleep. However, the door to the corridor was ajar and a dim night lamp in the hallway cast some light on the two nearest beds. Their occupants were propped up on their elbows, talking in low voices.

"Do you ever think about what it's like *out there*?" Tom White asked. His voice betrayed his anxiety.

Benjamin's stare was fixed on the peeling grey wall, but he was clearly

seeing something beyond. An almost dreamy smile appeared on his lips. "Like in the old books, I guess. From before the War. There's space. You look around and all you see is this great big space. That's what I imagine."

Tom did not appear to be reassured. "Yeah, but in the old stories, you always get *somewhere* after you cross all that space, to a city, or even a town or a village. We'll get nowhere, or at least, nowhere with people."

"There *might* be people. They've been chucking people out for years. We're bound to run into some of them."

"If we do, I hope they're friendly."

Benjamin grinned. "They have to be friendlier than Madam Hart." The faraway, dreamy look filled his eyes again. "To tell you the truth, I kind of look forward to going."

Tom shook his head. "You're nuts."

"I'm sick of school. I'm sick of being shut in here, of being treated like garbage. Mrs. Stocking is alright, but almost everyone else looks at us like we're a useless pile of..."

"Will you keep it down?" sounded a hoarse voice from one of the beds farther down the narrow, dark room. "If you don't shut up, you'll be in trouble."

Benjamin gave a hollow laugh and raised his voice a bit. "Don't you see? We *are* trouble. At least, that's what they think." A sigh later, his voice lowered. "Anyway, at least something is finally going to *happen*."

He slept fitfully that night. It was finally beginning to dawn on him that life as he knew it was coming to an end. He dreamed of standing in the middle of an enormous plain, looking at a great, big green emptiness as far as his eyes could see. A bright warm sun shone in a cloudless blue sky. The wind ruffled his hair and he heard the sound of laughter. The dream was so life-like he woke laughing, and in the first moments of consciousness, was not sure where he was. Then the reverie faded and he saw he was still in the orphanage, in the same room he had known for years, and the sunlight looked almost greyish as it struggled to pass through a scratched, grimy window.

The alarm bell must have already rung as the dormitory was almost empty. He wondered how he had missed the shrill, harsh sound. Usually he woke at dawn, well before the alarm, and was one of the first to make it down to breakfast.

As he sat up and reached for his pants, Tom walked out of the bathroom,

already fully dressed. "Hey. I didn't know if I should wake you. I don't remember you ever sleeping this long."

Benjamin rubbed his eyes. "It didn't feel long."

He dressed in a few quick, efficient movements, and within two minutes the boys were on their way to the dining hall where they found the usual, unappetizing cold toast, skim milk, stale Cornflakes, lumpy scrambled eggs, fake butter spread, and limp slices of fake cheese. Still, they hurried to grab and fill trays then looked for an empty table. There were none, but he spotted Elisa, who was sitting alone, squeezed into a corner between a wall and a window, a half-eaten piece of toast suspended in her hand. Her vacant stare out the window at the empty courtyard made him wonder what she was thinking.

She started at his, "Mind if we join you?"

When she saw them, she brightened. "Hi, Ben. Hi, Tom. I thought I'd missed you. Did you know there's no English today? Mr. Hughes is off sick."

"I thought he sounded hoarse last time. Well, at least I hoped so," Tom said, grinning. "So, that's first period off. What are we going to do?"

"I thought...I thought we might see if Mr. Bradley is in the staff room."

"What for?" asked Benjamin.

"Don't you see?" She paused, stared at them for a few seconds, then shook her head. "No, you don't. We're going to be on our own soon and the lessons aren't enough to really prepare us. And we don't have many of those left, anyway. We should try and ask him as many questions as possible about his expeditions, what's waiting for us out there, where we should go once we are out...everything we can think of."

Ben and Tom exchanged glances. Finally, Ben shrugged. "Why not?"

They did find Mr. Bradley in the staff room, alone, with a half-empty cup of cold coffee at his elbow, and his red pen hovering over some homework assignments he was checking.

When Elisa cleared her throat, he lifted his head from the papers, looking quite pleased to have an excuse to postpone the tedious work. "Good morning. We wondered if we can speak to you."

"Of course. Come in. I think I have the staff room to myself for the next hour."

Children were not allowed in the staff room, but Mr. Bradley was always

ready to bend the rules a little, provided nobody would notice.

Elisa explained the purpose of their visit.

"Of course," he said, nodding. "That's quite sensible. You can never learn too much, especially...well, I have some maps of the area." He pulled one from his briefcase, unfolded it, and jabbed a finger onto a spot close to the branching-out stream of a larger river.

"You are expected to start here. It's a good spot. I fished there once, and the haul was great. Sunfish, catfish, bass... Things change year-round, of course, but you should do well."

"And did you...eat it?" Tom asked.

"What? Oh, you're wondering about the pollution. So did I, but I felt I owed it to myself to make a little experiment. And as you can see..." Mr. Bradley spread his arms wide, smiling. "...I'm intact and whole and never even sensed any off taste in the fish, the game, or the wild herbs and mushrooms I ate while I was beyond the Boundary."

He rummaged more in his briefcase, found a thin, rather tattered book and handed it over to Elisa. "Here. You might find this an interesting read. This was written before the War. Long before, actually, by a couple of people who were crazy about 'living off the land' as they called it. The War caused some changes in the ecosphere, to be sure, but the animals and birds, the fish, and plants are still much the same as they used to be. And you'll have another resource, one the people who wrote this book didn't have...abandoned towns and cities. Visit them to get equipment, clothes, even canned food, if you dare to try it. There might still be some in underground storage that's good."

Ben studied Bradley's face. An uneasy expression appeared on it as Elisa put the book in her bag and said, "Thanks, Mr. Bradley."

"You're welcome. Look, come and talk to me as often as you like. Anytime I'm not in class. I'd like to help in any way I can. And remember, it's quite natural to be afraid. I know I'd be scared out of my wits if I were in your place."

Benjamin tried to look confident as he said, "We aren't afraid," but he could tell Mr. Bradley did not believe him. He hardly knew whether he believed it himself.

---

---

---

The sky above was overcast and it was uncomfortably cold, but the merciless calendar spelled April, so a string of twelve-year-old children, loaded with backpacks, could be seen milling about in the driveway close to the school gates. There were no smiles, no laughter, just nervous whispers. Mr. Bradley frowned as he looked at his watch, while Mrs. Stocking fidgeted with her coat, zipping and unzipping it again and again. At the front entrance, close enough to supervise but far enough away not to have to speak to any of the children, Madam Hart and her lofty stare stood with arms folded and back straight

"It should be here any minute now," muttered Mr. Bradley, his voice heard almost by no one.

Sure enough, no sooner did he say it than the school gates opened and an odd-looking bus crept up the short narrow driveway. The children stared at it in surprise. It was nothing like the bus that took them to their rare school outings. Not only did it look old, as if it were made before the War, but it was absolutely plain, without symbols or letters or stickers of any kind, and was covered in chipped dark grey paint. Its square windows were thick dark glass.

Mrs. Stocking shook her head. *I suppose it's a blessing the children don't know those buses are used to convey prisoners.*

Still, the sight of it gave many of them an ominous feeling.

Ben stuck his elbow in Tom's ribs. "Here comes the vehicle of Doom." It was a brave attempt at humor, and contrary to his habit, but Tom did not crack a smile.

Once the bus stopped, the children looked around, as if waiting for instruction. None came, but Mrs. Stocking and her good soul rushed toward them and started hugging them one by one, as she fought to restrain her tears.

"Well, this is it. This is it. You be good, now, all of you, and don't do anything foolish or reckless. Do you hear me? Do you hear me, Ben and Tom? And you, Alec? This isn't a game, so none of your pranks, alright? Take care of

yourselves, and of each other. And girls, I trust you to keep those boys in check. Won't you, Elisa? You're a clever girl. I know you will. So you all just keep your heads down, and remember all you've learned from Mr. Bradley and..."

Her speech was cut short by a piercing, heart-rending wail. Everyone spun around to see a boy flailing and writhing on the ground, next to his discarded backpack.

"No!" he screamed. "No! *Nooooooooooooo!* I'm not going! I'm not! You won't make me! I'll die out there! Please let me stay! I'll sleep on the floor, I'll do all the work, all the cleaning and dishes and anything you tell me! Find me a place on a farm, in a factory, in a prison, anywhere, anywhere, just don't send me *out!*"

"I knew Jimmy Stone would crack," Tom whispered to Ben and Elisa.

The whole group of children stared at him as if mesmerized. Some faces showed pity, others disgust, but most just watched as Jimmy half-raised himself from the ground, tremulously wiped his snot with his sleeve, then crawled on his knees toward Madam Hart, and attempted to seize the hem of her dark wool coat. She recoiled from his hand, looking scandalized.

"Madam Hart, please, I'm begging you, Madam Hart. Let me stay, and I'll do anything, *anything*. I don't want to die! I don't! I don't!"

Revolted by the unseemly display, Hart took another step back. "Mr. Bradley!"

The teacher hurried to her aid, seized the trembling boy under his armpits, and pulled him up.

"Come on, Jim. Up you get, now. That's a good lad. Mrs. Stocking, could you fetch something to calm him down?"

"I'll get his pills," she said and hurried up the stairs.

Still holding him in a firm grip, Bradley brushed the dirt off Jimmy's clothes while the other children continued to stare. Some had their heads bent together, whispering.

Madam Hart shook her head. "Pathetic," she muttered. "He will never make it. It would have been kinder to administer the death shot straightaway. It's a pity it's no longer allowed."

Jimmy was far too upset to take in a word of what she said, and most of

the other children stood too far away, but Elisa Wood's face darkened as if she had been slapped. She hurried to Jimmy and took him by the arm, murmuring soothing words. Together, she and Mr. Bradley guided him to the bus, followed by Ben, Tom, and the rest of the children.

As the scene played out, and the children filed into the bus, no one knew they were being watched. From the spot where Rebecca Hurst came to know pain and pleasure for many years as she caught furtive glimpses of her son walking across the yard, playing at recess, and talking to his friends, she now witnessed the unusual spectacle. She was too far away to hear what was said, but Jimmy's cries, like those of a wounded, desperate animal, made her heart break. When she saw her Benjamin line up, ready to step inside, her eyes widened with worry. She had to use every ounce of self-control she possessed to prevent herself from dashing out of her hiding place, throwing arms around the skinny's boy's neck, telling everybody that he belonged to her, that she is his mother, and that it was a mistake, a terrible, unpardonable weakness to ever give him up.

Minutes later, tears rolled down her face as she watched the bus disappear on the horizon.

~ ~ ~

The ride was long, and most of the children were getting restless. Benjamin fidgeted in his seat. He, Tom, and Elisa had seats too far from the driver to be able to glimpse anything through the windshield, and the dull brown, bullet-proof, wire-mesh covered windows along the sides and back, designed to prevent desperate prisoners from trying to escape, allowed in only a bit of light and a murky hint of landscape. They also served another function, that of preventing the prisoners, and children, from being seen by curious eyes.

"D'you think it's far yet?" asked Tom in a hushed voice.

Ben shrugged, feigning indifference. There was nobody to ask. Mr. Bradley was up front with the driver.

"Can't be," Elisa said, glancing at a battered, cheap wristwatch. It was a years-old gift from Mrs. Stocking, who annually spent her own wages on Christmas presents for the children, but never birthday presents. None of the children knew the exact day of their birth. Knowing the year was supposed to be enough for them. "Do you remember how they took us to the evaluation center last year? They said it was on the outskirts of our Island and the drive there took nearly as long. We must be nearing the Boundary."

No one was cheered by the memory, but still they welcomed knowing they would soon step off the bus.

Not quite ten minutes later, the bus stopped, and men's voices could be heard talking quietly outside. Mr. Bradley hopped out. Moments later he stepped back in and they heard a great creaking, almost wailing sound, as the gate was opened and the bus drove through. It was done; the children had crossed the Boundary. They were outside the area which, since the War, was kept safe from pollution and possible military action. Nobody shouted a warning or uttered premonitions. And nobody bothered to wish them luck as the wheels of the bus rolled on, carrying the children to their precarious fate.

Seconds later, they felt a change. The road was not as smooth and well-tended as before. The bus slowed and did funny little jumps now and then. It navigated several bends and curves, and at one point, went uphill. Benjamin could tell the bus was not built to cope with roads that had been abandoned for decades. He and the others had to clench their jaws to keep their teeth from rattling.

And then it was over.

The bus stopped and the front and back doors opened with a whoosh. Everyone grabbed their bags and coats and headed out, but without any of the pushing and shoving that usually accompanied their school outings. Nobody was in a hurry to meet the place where they would be abandoned.

When Benjamin, Tom, and Elisa stepped out, they looked around, then joined the others around Mr. Bradley, who was standing with his hands in his pockets, surveying the scene. There was nothing to mark the location. It was simply the end of a gravel road.

Benjamin stood in the middle of the field and took a second look around. *Seems nice enough. Nothing like what I'd imagined, though. It might have been part of a farm before the war. Just a field of wildflowers, now.* He took a deep breath and smiled. *Nice. Too bad the orphanage never smelled this way. I wonder if there's any animals in the woods over there. Maybe we can hunt them.* He turned his attention to the small, lazy river that rolled out from behind the trees and wound its way into the distance like a fat snake lazing in the sun. *Plenty of water. Maybe fish, too. I suppose they could have dumped us in worse places.*

His thoughts were interrupted when Mr. Bradley, hands still in pockets, rocked on his heels and cleared his throat. "Well. Here we are."

He might have meant to sound sympathetic, but Benjamin felt a prickle of anger. *What right does he have to say we, when he'll soon be climbing back on that bus and driving away, leaving us here?*

"It's a good place," Bradley said, gesturing toward the woods and the river. "I know it, though I haven't been here in years. Good fishing, game, plenty of firewood. A good season, too, with the days getting longer and warmer. And down the river, a few days' trek, you'll also find abandoned towns. Depressing sight, that, but a good source of supplies."

Hands in his pockets, Bradley rocked on his heels again and cleared his throat. Despite his feelings for the children and the injustice of what was about to happen, the moment arrived when that injustice would be made crystal clear. He was going back to the city, to the Island, to the Protected Area, and they were staying here to fend for themselves as best they could.

As he watched his former teacher fidgeting, Benjamin wondered whether he would offer to stay with them for the first few days, or even the first few hours. The answer came quickly when the bus driver rolled down the side window. Clearly impatient, he said, "Well, then, professor. Are we going back, or what?"

Mr. Bradley gave him an uncomfortable look. "Uhh, yes. Of course. Unless..." His helpless stare made many of the kids understand how guilty he felt for what he was about to do, but for Benjamin, it hardened something in his heart.

*For months he's been trying to make us think he was our friend, not just our teacher. He said he cared about us, felt bad for us. Maybe he did. But not enough to share our fate out here in the wilderness. Not even for a day. I guess caring only goes so far.*

His voice sharp, his feelings clear, he locked eyes with his former teacher and, speaking for the entire group said, "We'll be fine. You can go."

Few looked as confident as Benjamin tried to sound. Two girls who usually chatted and giggled at the back of the classroom were now on the verge of tears.

Elisa stepped closer and gave the perturbed teacher a consoling smile. "It's alright, Mr. Bradley. Really. We'll be fine." She patted her backpack. "I have your book with me."

Bradley's chin trembled the slightest bit as he returned her smile. He

opened his mouth, as if about to say something else, but the bus driver clicked his tongue and repeated, "Well, then," obviously in a hurry to depart.

With a final, resolute nod, Bradley said, "This is it, then. Good luck."

He shook hands with some of the boys. Though Benjamin hesitated, he briefly grasped the teacher's outstretched hand, too. *No point in being bitter, I guess. It's not his fault and we'll probably never see each other again. And I guess maybe he did care a little, unlike most of the other teachers.*

"Wait just a moment," Bradley told the driver.

He drew Benjamin to the side, reached inside his coat, and thrust something into the boy's hand. Benjamin recognized the item at once. It was the small pair of binoculars he saw many times in Mr. Bradley's office.

"Here," Bradley said quietly, "I thought these might come in useful."

"Thanks," said Benjamin as he stowed the gift in a pocket of his backpack. "But why me?"

"Because, unless I'm a really lousy judge of character, people will look up to you now. You've always been quiet, but you're smart and, I think, resourceful. And you have the two qualities that are essential to a true leader – you can make decisions and you don't care three straws what others think of you. It won't be easy, Ben, but take care of them as best you can."

With that, he turned and waved at the others as he stepped onto the bus. They all watched as it drove away.

It was done.

Behind her, Elisa heard a snuffle. She turned and said, "Okay now. We're here, all alone in this wild place, far away from the orphanage, from Madam Hart's cruelty, from Mrs. Stocking's care, and Mr. Bradley's instructions. We're far away from lessons and bedtime and those terrible meals in the dining hall. We're far away from the showers and library and everything we used to know. That was our old life. This is our new one and we all have to work together. Okay?"

The concept was too strange and too grand for some to grasp at once, but one of the girls said, "I think it must be about lunchtime."

No one checked the time, but they all knew she was probably right. They had taken their meals at fixed hours for so long their stomachs were more precise than alarm clocks.

"Well, we have food," said Jimmy, who was making an admirable effort to hold up. "We could take out some of it."

The orphanage did provide some food for them to take along, including tins of sardines, packets of crackers, canned meat, dried noodles, raisins, and salt. It was enough for a few days, perhaps a week if they rationed it, but not more. They were also given a change of clothes and underwear, matches and candles, some basic medicine and bandages, flashlights and batteries, compasses, and maps. Each backpack was topped off by a rolled-up sleeping bag.

"We shouldn't touch our supplies yet," Benjamin told Jimmy. "We should try to find something to eat."

"What, here?" said the girl who wanted lunch, looking around in disbelief.

"Of course," said Tom. "If it turns out we can't, we're in deep trouble, aren't we? That was the whole point of Bradley's lessons."

"Where should we start looking, then?" Jimmy asked. He picked up a handful of grass, rolled it between his fingers, and smelled it, as though unsure whether he should try to taste it or not.

"We're not cows, Jimmy," Ben said, which drew some laughter. "We should get closer to the river. We're far more likely to find something there."

He was a lot less confident than he sounded, unsure if they would find *anything* by the river. But thanks to what Mr. Bradley said, he did understand that at this moment, *sounding* certain was more important than *being* certain. Everyone needed someone who seemed sure of what he's doing. Otherwise, they would all break down and panic and that would be the end.

He turned and walked toward the river. After a moment, he heard the others following him.

The children's prior experience with water was the steady, regulated flow of a tap or a shower. They never before saw a river or any body of water setting its own boundaries. Now, right in front of them, one was flowing, not to fill a pipe, or irrigate a field, or produce anything of value to humans. It was simply flowing without any apparent purpose, a sparkling silver ribbon bordered by green banks under the blue sky. Benjamin squatted on the riverbank, dipped his hand in the water, and let it flow between his fingers. A few joined him, all mesmerized by their first experience with nature in the

wild. Others stood back and followed its winding course as far as the eye could see.

"Where do you think this river ends?" asked Elisa, squinting at the local map. "I wish we had asked Mr. Bradley which one it is." She frowned. "It could be any of these."

"What does it matter?" snapped David Oak. "Why should we care where this damn river ends? It's all the same to us. No matter where you look, we're in the middle of nothing. A great, big, empty nothing." Back at the orphanage, he always appeared not to care about anything, but he did not look so indifferent now. Despite his bravado, Elisa could see he felt as scared and lost as the rest of them.

"It might *seem* that way," Elisa said. "But by knowing where we are, we can better decide where to go. Even if every direction looks the same from here, there are bound to be differences. Some places will be better than others."

"Do you reckon this water is good for drinking?" Tom asked.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," said Benjamin, scooping up some water in his hand. A sharp intake of breath made him turn in Elisa's direction. "What? We have to know. It's important. In case you haven't noticed, we all have only a small bottle of water each."

Having said that, he brought his hand up and dipped his tongue in the water. Then he turned toward the others, stuck it out, and said, "Is it turning green or black or anything?"

When several of the kids laughed, he leaned closer to the surface of the river. Small, rounded stones could be seen below the little rippling waves. The water was perfectly clear, and smelled fresh, so he scooped up a double handful and made a bold swallow. Then another. He grinned.

"Well?" Tom asked.

"It tastes just fine. A little different from the tap water at school, maybe, but it's good." He took another swallow, stood, and declared, "It's *better* than tap water."

Elisa gave an almost imperceptible frown and shake of the head, but said nothing.

Ben understood. He dried his hands on his pants, then drew her aside and said, "I know we don't know what drinking this water might do if it's polluted

or something, but what choice do we have. The water in our bottles won't last a day. I suppose we should probably at least boil it to kill any germs, but it tastes good and isn't making me sick so that has to be good enough right now. Do you see any other options?"

"No," she said. "I guess not. Maybe they dropped us here because they knew the water was okay."

Behind them, they heard Tom say, "It doesn't look deep. We could wade across, make it to the woods on the other side."

"What for?" asked Lauren Brown as she toyed with her long, dark braid. "It's a lot nicer here."

"No, Tom is right," said Elisa. "We'll do better if we cross. It will be evening soon, and we'll need shelter and firewood."

"And besides," added Tom, "there might be something in the woods we could hunt! We're supposed to get our own food, right? So we'd better start now."

He looked excited as the children removed their shoes and socks and rolled up the pant legs of their school uniforms up to their knees. The water was shallow, and they all made it to the other side with practically dry clothes, except for Jimmy Stone, who slipped in the water, landed on his bottom, and came out sopping wet from head to toe.

Some of the others laughed, but Eliza helped him up and said, "No matter, Jimmy. We'll just hang around here while you change."

He spotted a clump of bushes and hastened to retreat there. A few minutes later he reappeared in dry clothes, holding his dripping wet clothes in one hand and his equally wet shoes in the other.

"You don't have to put them on right away," Ben said. "The sun's warming everything up. We'll walk here on the bank for a while so you can go barefoot."

The prospect of stepping barefoot on soft new grass was, in fact, so appealing that several children took off their shoes as well and tied them to the backpacks by their laces.

Meanwhile, Eliza was looking happier by the second. "Look! Here's wild asparagus, and cattail, and chickweed. They're all good to eat. And there might be more plants around here we can eat." She started picking until she had an armful.

"Are you *sure* you can eat these?" Lauren asked, staring suspiciously at heap of plants.

Eliza nodded. "Of course. Here, they all appear in this book, clear as can be." To further her point, she nibbled on a bit of wild asparagus.

"Well, that's great," said Tom, "but when I think *dinner*, I usually have something more substantial in mind than a pile of weeds, you know?"

Elisa looked hurt. "These are all very nutritious..."

"Yeah, sure. Still, I think we should try hunting. Who's coming into the woods with me?"

Ben and several others wanted to join him while the others stayed by the river.

For the first time in his life, Benjamin entered a forest. In library books, he read tales of ancient rainforests, of trees taller than houses, standing so close together a man would find it difficult to squeeze between them, and of dense, dark green leafy canopies casting a shadow so thick no ray of sunlight could penetrate it. This forest, however, was nothing like it. "These woods can't be too old. The trees aren't very tall and they're kind of far apart. I'd bet it all started growing here after the war. But there are things living here. I can hear them scurrying around."

As he spoke, a few birds took flight from a nearby tree.

"Those were pretty small," said a disappointed Tom. "And whatever we're hearing can't be much bigger than a mouse."

"Well, what did you expect?" asked Jimmy, who joined them because he felt safer next to Ben and Tom. "Chickens roaming in the wild?"

"Geese," said Tom. "Maybe ducks. Partridges, pheasants...any of those birds Mr. Bradley said were good eating."

Jimmy grunted. "And what would you do with one if you caught it? Do you know how to clean it and cook it?"

"It doesn't matter right now," Ben said. "We'll figure it out. Besides, it's spring. Mr. Bradley mentioned the best season for fowl-hunting is in the autumn. I don't think you'll see anything here that won't be a waste of arrows."

One of the many contradictions surrounding their fate was that it was perfectly legal to send unwanted twelve-year-old children across the border of civilization and abandon them. But being minors, they could not be given

firearms for hunting. Instead, they were given ancient hunting bows and a supply of arrows. Mr. Bradley showed them how to fashion new ones out of wood, but they were never given the opportunity to practice with the weapons while at the orphanage. Bradley knew it would take time for them to become proficient in their use so he unofficially advised them to roam through abandoned towns in search of old firearms and ammunition and teach themselves to use rifles. He also secretly handed out booklets for beginner hunters from before the War. It was the most he could do for them.

"So what do you think we should do?" asked Tom, his shoulders slumping a bit.

"Go back to the river," said Ben, "and try to catch some fish."

Everyone looked a little surprised at them coming back so soon. Benjamin noticed Elisa looked relieved to see them return empty-handed. He knew she had a soft spot for animals, and would hate to actually kill something in order to eat it, but doubted this spirit would last long if she were faced with starving.

He was first to sit on the riverbank with the fishing rod in his hands, and felt a little silly since he had never seen anyone do it before. But soon, several others took their fishing rods, tackle, and bait out of their backpacks and scattered here and there near the water, some frowning in concentration, some grinning a little, as if not believing it could ever work. Others spread out to explore the area, turning old logs and stones, and searching for anything edible, but few had much success except Elisa, who gathered more wild-growing herbs.

As Elisa was thinking she should spend some time making sure the others all knew how to identify wild edibles, Benjamin felt something pull on the rod. Without thinking, he pulled too, hard, and a large trout came flapping out onto the shore. Emboldened by his success, Ben hastened to grab the slippery, thrashing body of the fish so it would not slip back into the water. Several kids around him whooped and cheered.

"Well done, Ben!" said Tom, clapping him on the back.

Just shy of an hour later there was another success, though the fish was smaller. But enough time passed between catches that Lauren's frustration got the best of her.

"This is useless," she said as she folded her equipment and stowed it in

her backpack. "Are we supposed to live off this? Two fish between twenty people?"

"We're only beginning," Ben said as several others joined Lauren. "I wouldn't be surprised if we'd caught nothing at all today. We'll do better later on once we gain more experience, see where the best spots are. Stuff like that."

Again, he made a brave attempt to sound more confident than he felt. A side glance from Elisa told him she understood. Both knew despair would finish them off a lot faster than hunger would.

"Can we eat now, then?" Jimmy asked, his stomach rumbling.

"We have to clean the fish first," Elisa said. "Give them to me. I'll do it."

Jimmy looked skeptical. "Do you know how?"

"No," she confessed, "but I'll learn. I don't have much choice, do I?"

"We have to cook it, too," added Tom. "I have some firewood here, but I'm not sure how much we need. Anyone else up to getting some more dry wood and leaves? There's plenty on the edge of the forest."

Several people rose to help and soon they had a large pile of firewood. Tom bordered the edges with flat stones from the river and struck a match. By then, the sun had already set, and soon the fire blazed cheerfully in the dark.

Elisa, who consulted the book Mr. Bradley gave her, got over her squeamishness and learned how to clean and fillet fish. It was not the neatest job, but she did not care since it was going into a soup.

She took out their largest cooking pot and poured some river water into it. Then she added the fish, tore the wild plants they found into bite-size pieces, and added them with some dried potatoes and onion, and two cans of white beans. Salt was added at the end, as a stroke of inspiration. Everyone was hungry by now, and the smell of food was immensely cheering. People arranged themselves around the fire, bowls in hand, and waited for the soup to be ladled out. Several kids seemed wary. Though many of them did kitchen duty in school, they never fashioned any meal themselves, much less one with such unusual ingredients. But watching the braver ones enjoying soup quickly convinced them to try it. Like the river water, it tasted different, but good, and though the portions could have been larger, nobody mentioned it so as not to dampen the spirit.

Once the meal was done, and everyone sat back to relax, they realized the night was very still and quiet. They began to talk as the red embers glowed in

the velvety darkness, but gradually, conversations wound down and people rolled out their sleeping bags and climbed inside, keeping close together for comfort. A few propped themselves on their elbows to continue talking with their neighbors in low, cautious voices, though there was nobody to tell them off for talking.

For a moment, Ben wondered whether he should suggest that they keep watches throughout the night, like in adventure tales. Then he decided against it. Everything around them was so peaceful, this little spot on the riverbank so sheltered, and from what he knew, the only large animals in this area were supposed to be herbivores. It felt safe to close his eyes, but he could not keep them closed. He felt too much alive. When he stretched out on his back and looked above, he saw the blanket of stars dotting the dark canopy of the sky.

He remembered a night in school, a few weeks earlier, when he and Tom decided to find out what it was going to feel like, sleeping out in the open like that. The sleeping bags had just been distributed, and they took off the nylon covers and snuck out once everybody was asleep. They got out into the school yard and spread the sleeping bags under one of the trees. Once they were settled, Ben tried to make out the stars between the slowly waving branches, but it was a cloudy night.

Close to midnight they were discovered by Mrs. Stocking, who approached them, lamp in hand. "What on earth are you two doing?"

"Practicing," said Ben.

Her expression softened. There was no need for further explanations. "It's a cold night."

"Yes," agreed Tom, "but it's not like there won't be colder nights when we're...*out*."

She looked at them for a moment with the little frown they knew indicated compassion and worry. Ben once wondered what things would be like if Mrs. Stocking, rather than Madam Hart, were in charge of the orphanage. But then he realized it was unlikely a person like her would be chosen for that kind of job.

"If one of the janitors finds out you've been sleeping outside, he'll report you to Madam Hart."

With that, she turned and left. Ben watched the yellow light of her lamp bobbing in the distance until the door closed behind her.

The brave adventurers tried to sleep, ignoring the gusts of chill and the occasional drizzle until, close to four in the morning, they were vanquished by a steady rain, snuck back inside, and tiptoed into the boys' section. They did not attempt to go back to sleep, but whiled away the time playing hangman. At breakfast, they surprised everyone by falling like birds of prey upon the hot porridge, which normally nobody seemed to want.

The incident was much on Ben's mind now, when the night was so mild and peaceful and the sky so clear. *It won't always be so. The spring rains will come, and summer showers too. And then, autumn will arrive, and winter. If we're going to survive, we have to look ahead and prepare.*

"We have to find a shelter," he said aloud, "or build one."

When Tom did not answer, Ben looked sideways to find Tom's eyes were closed, and his chest rose and fell steadily. He was fast asleep.

---

---

---

Rebecca was waiting.

During the past twelve years, she became accustomed to waiting. She waited for time to pass and she waited for the heartache to stop. She waited for the occasional snatches of news and rare glimpses of her son. *Who you gave up like a coward*, a familiar, evil voice whispered in her ear. And though she knew it was futile, though she knew it would be better to go on as if Benjamin never existed, she could not bring herself to do it. A force stronger than all her reason and good sense made her stand there shivering, waiting for the school matron to make her way to the bus stop. She was thoroughly familiar with Mrs. Stocking's hours and knew it would not be long.

Sure enough, minutes later, Mrs. Stocking's short, plump figure appeared from out of the fog. She wore a long, dark green raincoat, and clutched a thoroughly worn handbag to her ample bosom. She did not recognize Rebecca until she threw back the hood of her sweater. Mrs. Stocking paled and took a step back.

"I'm sorry I startled you, Mrs. Stocking."

"I... I didn't expect to see you, that's all," Mrs. Stocking replied, her voice faltering. She did not meet Rebecca's eye.

"I wouldn't have bothered you," said Rebecca, "if there wasn't something I couldn't quite get out of my mind." She paused, drawing breath. "You know I come sometimes, to take a glimpse of...of the children. I did that today. I saw them, Benjamin and all his classmates, by the look of it, boarding a bus. I would have thought it was a school trip, if it weren't for... Mrs. Stocking, that bus. It was a prisoners' bus, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Stocking sat down on the cold, hard bench of the bus stop, and ran a shaking hand over her face. Her voice was weak when she finally said, "There is no need..."

"No need for what?"

Finally, Mrs. Stocking's eyes met her own. "No need for you to come

anymore."

Rebecca's sudden deathly pallor made Mrs. Stocking wish she chose her words more carefully. She stood and caught Rebecca's elbow as she swayed and led her to the chipped plastic bench.

"Please calm down, Mrs. Hurst," she said, rummaging in her handbag for an object of comfort. She found a packet of mints and offered one to Rebecca, who shook her head.

"No thanks," she muttered. The matron sounded so kind, her curiosity overcame her fear. "How do you know my name?" she asked.

Despite having quite a few surreptitious meetings and quick, hushed conversations with Mrs. Stocking over the past years, they were never properly introduced.

Mrs. Stocking gave her a faint smile. "You aren't the only one who knows how to find things out. I've known for years. I never mentioned you to anyone else in the school, though."

Rebecca nodded, acknowledging this gesture of mercy, but her mind was already consumed by something far more pressing. "What happened to my son?"

Mrs. Stocking lowered her eyes. "Nothing unusual," she said. Her voice softened. "I think I mentioned this some time ago that when the children are twelve years old, they are...sent away."

Rebecca drew a deep, ragged breath. "Yes. I do know they aren't schooled until the usual age. They're sent to other Islands and specialize in agriculture or factory work. But of course, you know where they've gone."

Mrs. Stocking took out a tissue and dabbed her face which, despite the chilly night, suddenly felt sweaty. There was no point denying it. "I do."

"Tell me. Please tell me so I can go there and find out how Benjamin is doing."

Mrs. Stocking shook her head and sighed. "I'm afraid you can't do that."

"Why not? You said you know who I am. You must know I'm a journalist. I can go practically everywhere without raising suspicion."

Mrs. Stocking took out a mint and slowly unwrapped it. "Are you sure you don't want one?"

Rebecca laid a hand on the matron's arm. "Mrs. Stocking, why do I have

the feeling you're hiding something?"

The matron closed her eyes for a moment, taking in the quiet of the night and the freshness of the air. *Telling this woman the truth will bring nothing but grief. But what else can I do? She's too clever and too determined. She won't rest until she finds out.*

She talked for a long time, revealing many secrets she swore to protect. As she spoke, Rebecca sat still as a statue as her eyes widened and the color drained from her face. When Mrs. Stocking finally fell silent, Rebecca sprang from her place on the bench, shaking all over.

Alarmed, Stocking rose, too. "Please calm down," she said, her voice faint.

Rebecca's eyes flashed with anger, and her voice quivered as she said, "I've just learned my son was sent out beyond the Boundary and left there to perish and you are telling me to *calm down*? Are you serious?"

"I'm truly sorry, but there's nothing you can do."

Her soothing tone only seemed to further anger Rebecca. She drew herself up to her full height. "Of course I can," she said, her voice mirroring her emotions. "You tell me where the children were sent, and I will go there. I *will* go there, no matter what it takes."

"You can't cross the Boundary without a special permit."

"Why not? People do it all the time, to look for old treasures in abandoned cities. It might not be perfectly legal, but..."

"This is different." Rebecca saw a hint of fear in her eyes. "This is a government program. You won't be allowed to interfere."

Rebecca nodded. "Of course. *Of course*. Something like this could never be done without directions from above, and without someone very powerful hushing it all up. How long has this...this *practice* been going on?"

"Several years," Mrs. Stocking said, desperately looking for the bus, but no relief came in the form of lights blazing through the distance. As shame overwhelmed her, tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Many times I've wondered whether I should continue working at the school. I felt so guilty, being part of this...this great injustice." She wiped her eyes with her coat sleeve. "You know, Mrs. Hurst, I never really believed much good would come out of the government interfering with how many children one can have, and who can have them and when. But I stayed for the children's sake. I

couldn't be sure my place would be taken by someone who'd care for them the way I do."

Rebecca's anger eased some. "It wasn't your fault. And I'm glad you stayed. Nobody else would have let me know about my Benjamin. It might have compromised your position. You could have reported me."

"I would never do that." She sighed and whispered, "I would have loved to have another baby myself."

The long awaited bus lights could be seen in the distance. Mrs. Stocking swung her bag across her shoulder and laid a hand on Rebecca's arm.

"Why don't you take a ride with me? It isn't far to my home. We could have a cup of tea and, you know, talk things over."

Rebecca shook her head. "Thank you, Mrs. Stocking, but I need to walk for a while. Walk and think."

As Mrs. Stocking turned toward the slowing bus, Rebecca disappeared into the darkness of the night.

~ ~ ~

When Rebecca arrived home, her mind so swirled with thought and emotion that she did not notice the unnatural stillness of the apartment. True, she hardly saw the children these days. Jordan, at twenty-two, was finishing his last year of college at a distant Island to obtain a degree in biotechnology and sustainable ecology. Kate, now twenty, chose social studies and was attending a city college. Though she still lived at home, her life was such a whirlwind that Rebecca could hardly keep up with its recent happenings.

*Kate is very popular* had become a mantra of sorts to explain her absence at social functions. It was true, but still Rebecca felt a pang when she recalled days past, when she and her daughter were best friends. They would talk for hours, and Rebecca knew Kate's every thought, dream, and plan. But all that slipped away and she had no idea how, when, or why.

"I'm getting old," she muttered. "Old and boring."

A shake of her head brought her back to the present. *I didn't expect Kate to be home, but where's Daniel? Probably jogging. I didn't think he'd last a month, but it's been, what, three now and he's still out almost every day.* She let out a soft grunt. *Maybe I should join him. He keeps asking.*

Lost in thought, she wandered around the apartment until she found herself on the bed, gently rocking back and forth while she waited for her

husband. *I used to rock just this way when the children were babies and I comforted them in my arms. Jordy. Katie. Benjamin. He's twelve years old now. Twelve. Where did the years go? I know what he looks like and a little bit of his doings at school, but in all other respects he's a stranger. He's my son, and we never had a conversation, never looked into each other's eyes to see ourselves reflected.*

Once he became old enough to read and write, Rebecca begged Mrs. Stocking to help her establish a correspondence with her son, but the matron flat-out refused to do that. "I would never be able to keep this a secret for long," she had said. "And besides, think about the boy. It would only bring him confusion and grief."

For, perhaps, the hundredth time, Rebecca tried to imagine what life could have been like if they kept Benjamin. *I'd be involved in his schooling, probably a member of the parents' board as I was with Jordan and Kate. Daniel would drive him to soccer practice twice a week. I'd probably have to nag sometimes to make sure he did his homework. Right now, we might be arguing about the proper bedtime for twelve-year-olds. I can almost hear him whining, "But I'm not tired!", and me telling him, "You have school tomorrow, young man, so no arguments."*

The sound of the key turning in the lock brought her back to reality as Daniel entered the apartment.

"Becky?"

Half an hour ago Rebecca longed to talk to him, to relieve her heart, but now she could not bring herself to move or speak. *He'll know I'm home by the handbag and sweater on the couch.* She waited for him to find her.

"Oh, hey," he said with mild surprise as he opened the bedroom door. He wore a still zipped-up sports jacket and a pair of old sweatpants. "I thought for a moment you might be in the shower."

She gave him a vacant look. "How was jogging?"

"Good. I wish you'd come too. Tonight was just right, clear and cool and... Rebecca, what's up?" He was frowning. "Did something happen?"

"I went to the school today."

His frown deepened. Then he sighed, sat down on the bed next to her, and took her hand.

Gently, he said, "Becky. Why do you keep doing that? Why can't you..."

She turned to him, her mouth set in one thin, straight line. "Why can't I *what?*" she snapped. "Forget that we ever had another son?"

"No. Not forget, because that is impossible. Neither you, nor I, nor the children, though they never talk about it, can forget. But the idea was that we would, you know, go on with our lives." He pressed her fingers in a gentle plea for silence. "And you can't deny that it would have been easier to do if you didn't keep going there to see him."

"You would never go with me." She sounded hurt.

"No. And I know you're thinking it's because I don't care. It isn't true, Becky. I do care. I always have. And precisely because of that, I chose not to go."

Rebecca sighed. "It doesn't matter. I'll never go there again either. Today was the last time."

There was something horrible and hollow in her voice that made Daniel stare. "Do you mean to say that you have decided not to..."

"What I mean to say is that Benjamin isn't there anymore." Some of the bitterness and anger Rebecca held in her heart for so long found its way out in the form of tears. They stung her eyes, welled over, and ran down her cheeks.

Daniel let her talk without interruption, and when she was done, the stillness in the room was so deep she could almost hear the haphazard beating of her own heart. Her husband's face was grave.

"It makes sense," he said after a long silence. "You know, I've studied the statistics on unauthorized children. Even with all the precautions, bans, and punishments, there must be too many such children to be fitted into field or factory work. Almost everything is done by machines, you know. I *have* wondered...but most people probably don't. They simply accept what they're told."

"Yes." Rebecca, quivered with rage. "They accept that the way we live is the only way. That the government gets to decide who can have children, and when, and how many, or else we'll all fall into the abyss of starvation and chaos. Did you know that for many years before the War, the population stayed at just the replacement rate? The average woman bore about 2.1 or 2.2 children and the population remained stable, without any government initiatives."

"I know that. But things were different before the War. We were left with

a fraction of livable country, with ridiculously limited resources, in a very precarious position. There are only so many people we can feed. The government can't leave such matters to chance."

"Not chance. Predictable, reliable social trends. In the current situation, most people wouldn't choose to have more than two children anyway. Many have a reproductive permit for two, and they choose not to have more than one. If you actually check the statistics, you'll see that the birth rate is, in fact, below replacement, less than 1.5 children per woman. Apparently, this is what our government wants. There's a lot of talk about *zero growth*, but it's more than that. It seems those in charge want the population to shrink."

"And wouldn't that be a good thing? After all, our resources really are limited."

"Enough to justify throwing pre-teens across the Boundary and leaving them there to fend for themselves?" Rebecca's anger flared again. "Enough to rip innocent lives apart?"

There was a long silence. Daniel knew the set, determined expression he saw. He admired it. Many years ago, it was one of the things that made him fall in love with her. Now, however, a chill ran down his spine as he looked at her.

"Inevitably, there's a great deal of injustice in laws that take so much control over the personal choices of men and women," he said, laying a gentle hand on Rebecca's arm. "But we live in hard times. Most people, when asked, would say that sacrifices are necessary."

Rebecca's eyes flashed. She moved away from his touch. "Each one of these *sacrifices* has a name and a face. They are *children*, Daniel, and our son is among them. I will not give up..."

"But you did." He saw her flinch at the hard truth. He knew he sounded merciless, but he saw no other way to get her attention. "*We* did, all those years ago. There was no choice but to give up. We realized we couldn't keep the baby, not without destroying our whole family. So we handed him over and attempted to get our lives back. It was heartbreaking, it was devastating, but it was the only way. The *only* way. You shouldn't have gone there again and again to see him. What good ever came out of that? It only ruined your peace of mind, it took away your joy of life. It's time to let go, Rebecca. Please. *Please*. Let go."

She shook her head. "We didn't do what was right all those years ago,

Daniel. We were afraid. We picked the easy way. We gave up our son, and there is no escape, no forgiveness. It's much too late, but I can't let go. Not now that we know of the horrible injustice that's happening in this country every day, every year."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet, but there must be *something*. I'm a journalist, a writer. I know how to do research. I have some connections. At the very least, I can find out the whole truth, and I can tell people about it. People deserve to know."

Daniel's face darkened. "Be careful, Becky. If you get in the way of important people, we might all pay the price. If someone chooses to dig deep, it will become known that we had an illegal child, and then we'll be facing the penalties we tried to avoid in the first place. Even with the Blameless Birth act, our name will be tarnished, our family's career options limited. You and I could retire, of course, but what about Jordan and Kate? Have you thought of *them*?"

"I think of *all* my children. Every day of my life."

With a final glare, she went into the bathroom, locked the door, turned on the faucet, and leaned onto the sink. With the sound of running water masking her tears, she could finally cry in peace.

Morning melted into evening, another day came and passed, and another sunrise colored the sky pink, and still they followed the river. Benjamin walked at the head of the column, his keen eyes observing everything around and in front of him. Behind him, what little talking he heard was someone complaining.

The cheery atmosphere of the first evening, of their first dinner in the independence of the wilderness, did not last long. They soon learned fishing, gathering wild plants, and looking for freshwater clams and snails and birds' nests would not bring them near enough food to keep their stomachs from rumbling. No one was happy they had to cut into their supplies, especially since there was not much left and it was only their third day.

As important as their dwindling food supply was the lack of adequate shelter. They had four tents among them – two for the boys and two for the girls – in which they took refuge during the night when it rained, but it was not enough. The first rain storm flooded the tents. Lesson learned, Benjamin suggested a higher place on the riverbank for the following night, but he knew it would not do in the long run. They had to find or build something more solid, something that could withstand snow as well as rain, in case they stayed in the area. It was only spring, but already he was thinking of winter.

Day four was worse than any before. The cold, steady rain made the season seem more like late autumn than spring. It was so wet they were unable to start a fire to cook breakfast, not that there was much to cook. Their supplies were nearly at an end, except for a small stash Ben insisted on keeping for emergency situations. For safekeeping, he divided the pitifully small pile of tins and packages between himself, Tom, Elisa, and Jimmy, who seemed to stand a little taller in the face of this new responsibility.

Ten of them huddled, cold, damp, and grumpy, under the flimsy cover of a tent, nibbling on some crackers with fake cheese spread. As the hours passed, they all grew more dejected until Lauren broke the silence.

"I can't stand this! Isn't there *any* way we can get out of this horrible rain?"

Look, it's crept into the tent again. My sleeping bag is wet, and it sure won't dry by tonight. We can't even start a *fire*."

"I'm sure the rain will clear up in a bit," Elisa said, not really believing her own words.

"Oh yeah? Have you looked outside? It's almost like the sun's about to set. Don't tell me you aren't cold."

"And hungry," Shauna Hill said. "We haven't had a decent meal in I don't know how long. I'm tired of this. We need a good breakfast."

Ben, Tom, and Elisa exchanged glances. They understood things were not going well.

As Ben listened to the others venting their frustration, Mr. Bradley's words from one of their afternoon talks resounded in his head. *There will be moments when your attitude is what makes a difference between life and death. Whatever happens, you must be able to pull everyone together. Yes, it is a lot to ask, but you don't have any choice.*

Before he could voice a suggestion, David said, "I'll tell you what we can do. We'll cross the river. See, this area where we are now, it's all exposed, but there are trees on the other side. We can take shelter there."

Tom shook his head. "Cross the river? Dave, did you look out? The rains have swelled the river and you can hardly see the other bank."

"It isn't too deep here."

"It *wasn't*," Tom corrected. "We don't know how deep it is now. And besides, we'll get soaked trying to cross in this weather."

"We're getting soaked sitting here." David stood and hoisted his backpack. "I'm going. Anyone else?"

Several others sprang to their feet, backpacks in hand.

Elisa sounded frantic as she whispered to Ben, "What are we going to do? We can't split up."

Ben knew she was right. Bradley's warning echoed in his mind. *Together, you might stand a chance. Break up and you're lost.* There was no choice. For good or ill, they had to remain together. He reached for his backpack.

It was clumsy work folding the tents in the downpour. As he helped, Ben realized the plan was madness. *But what can I do? They're determined.* He understood that only extreme frustration, restlessness, and the urge to do

something, anything, rather than sit still, hungry and cold, could have driven his classmates to it. *But that doesn't make it any less foolish.* He was thoroughly annoyed with David.

His annoyance was forgotten when he finally stepped into the river and felt the cold water rushing past. *David was right. The river isn't deep. Even in the middle, the water's only up to my chest. But some of the others...it's up to their shoulders. And now my backpack is soaked through and heavier. And this current keeps trying to drag me down. Thank goodness the food, matches, and medical supplies are all in waterproof packages. But the clothes and sleeping bags will be soaked. This was so stupid.*

A gust of wind-driven rain slapped him in the face and got into his eyes, making it difficult to see the opposite bank. He clenched his teeth, and was battling against the desire to strangle David as he struggled to put one foot in front of the other when a loud scream cleared his head. *That was Elisa's voice, but she's standing there. She's fine.* Then he realized she was calling, "Lauren! Lauren!" and Shauna yelled in a shrill, panicked voice, "She went under! Help, someone!"

No one knew how to swim, but Tom ducked down and pulled Lauren up by the arm. When her head reappeared above the water surface, wet hair was plastered to her face and she was spluttering and spitting water.

"My foot's caught," she yelled through the wind and rain and sound of gushing water. Supported by Tom on one side and Shauna on the other, she worked her foot loose and made it to the other bank.

The trees provided some shelter, but it was woefully inadequate in such weather. They were soaked through, numb with cold, and it was clear they would not be able to light a fire for hours.

Ben resisted the urge to tell David just what he thought of him and his notion of crossing the river in a downpour, but he kept silent, sensing it would likely end with a punch in the nose and an irreversible rupture in their group.

He was more concerned about Lauren. Though saved from the immediate threat of drowning, she was deathly pale and shivering more than the others. Her right foot was propped up on a log, and she winced with pain as Elisa examined it.

"It's her ankle," Elisa told Ben in a low voice. "It got caught under a rock at the bottom of the river. That's why she fell. I think she might have sprained

it. And she's so cold. Ben, we have to get her warm, but how?"

They fumbled with the tents and managed to set them up again, but everything was so soaked the thin canvas roof and walls did not give much protection from the rain and wind. Everyone sat in their soaking wet clothes, numb with cold and dejection. Despite the chilly weather and the cold water compresses, Lauren's ankle continued swelling and she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning.

It was a night of thorough misery. The rain eventually stopped, but the wood was still too wet to get a fire burning. Wolves could be heard howling in the distance. Most tried to huddle together for warmth, but without dry clothes, blankets or towels, it did not help much. Sleep was out of the question. There was nothing left to do but sit, shivering and hungry, waiting for dawn to break.

David sat alone in a corner, avoiding everyone's eye, knowing they blamed him for their misery.

"We could all have drowned," Tom murmured. "We should have let him go alone."

Ben shook his head. "No. We're a team. We don't let anybody go alone." *But next time someone suggests something stupid, I have to speak up.*

It seemed like the night would never end, but finally, the first pale rays of the sun brightened the atmosphere. Trees cast long, early-morning shadows on the damp ground. The air warmed, and a light, misty vapor rose as their surroundings dried. They wrung out sleeping bags, blankets, and clothes as best they could and hung them over branches of nearby trees. The sun dried dead grasses and small branches and by mid-morning they had kindling to light a fire, which provided some warmth and comfort. They ate a sparing breakfast of dry potato flakes mixed with boiling water to form a kind of porridge. The stuff was revolting, and back at the orphanage they would have turned their noses up at it, but now everybody ate their portion in concentrated and grateful silence.

~ ~ ~

The prolonged rain and cold, the river crossing, and the dreadful night did not pass without effect. Several people, including Jimmy and Lauren, succumbed to colds. Jimmy burned with fever while Lauren, no matter how much they stoked the fire, shivered with chills and continued ankle pains.

Frantic to help, Elisa read the instructions on the back of medicine

packages, trying to figure out which should be used for what before opening them with trembling hands. *I have to be careful not to give out too much. I don't really know what these medicines will do to them. Why didn't they teach us about medicines at the orphanage? And what will we do when we run out? Maybe we'll find some once we get to an abandoned city. But will it still be good? How will we know?*

While Elisa worried and tried her best, Ben said to Tom, "Come on. Let's go find something to eat."

They took their fishing gear, but had no luck catching anything in the muddy, rain-swollen river. They did find some freshwater clams as they strolled along the bank, turning every rock in their search for anything edible, but a handful was a pitiful reward for all their efforts.

Ben's mood grew somber. "If this was winter, we'd all likely be dead or close to it after a night like we had with no shelter or fire." He felt vulnerable and distraught, like a little boy in desperate need to run to someone for comfort, only there was no one. They were on their own.

"Kind of makes you wish we were back at the orphanage now, huh?" Tom said, as if reading his mind.

Ben wanted to agree, but knew that admission would make despair harder to ward off. Instead, he squared his shoulders, looked up at the sun high in the sky, and said, "We'll be fine. Come on. Let's get back to the camp. Maybe one of the others found something to eat."

By the end of the day, Lauren's condition concerned everyone even more than lack of food. She burned with fever, but continued to insist she was cold. Her breath came out in a hollow, wheezing sound that did not bode well. Fighting despair, Elisa gave her a double dose of medicine and, holding her head up, helped her sip some tea she brewed from comfrey leaves found near the camp, but neither seemed to help much.

Shauna, Lauren's best friend, was in tears. "Is she going to die?" she asked.

Eliza knew she had to be firm. "Don't be silly. It's only a cold."

Unconvinced, Shauna said, "She needs a doctor" as she looked away.

Eliza knew that much was true. In the orphanage, life was bleak, but nobody was allowed to get seriously sick without treatment. But there were no doctors out here in the wild.

~ ~ ~

The next morning found Jimmy feeling much better and Lauren feeling a little better, though she was still very weak. This cheered everyone, but Ben could think of only one thing. "We need shelter," he said to Tom and Elisa when the three of them could get away from the others. "Decent shelter. It shouldn't be too difficult to find. Think of all the people that lived out here before the War. Many of those houses must still be standing."

Tom nodded. "Yeah. This stretch of the country seems empty but who knows what we'll find if we explore further. All I know is we can't stay here."

Ben pulled his map from the waterproof pouch. "Look. If I'm guessing right and we're here..." He pointed to an area on the map. "...we're not too far from where the river is supposed to fork. We could branch out, too, and see what looks more promising, the west or southwest."

"Yes, but perhaps we should stay here for a couple more days," Elisa said. "People are still ill, especially Lauren. She's trying to seem stronger than she is, but I know she shouldn't be marching anywhere anytime soon."

Ben saw the anxiety on her face and the fear in her eyes. "We don't all need to go at once. Five or six people are enough. We can split into two parties but we really have to move forward. We have nice weather now, but nobody promised us there won't be another rainstorm tonight. And we're getting really low on supplies. We have to find decent shelter soon, something permanent, so that we can feel safe and focus on getting food."

~ ~ ~

The scouting party set out next morning. Ben and Tom were joined by David, Shauna and Jimmy, who insisted he was quite well already. David seemed eager to atone for his suggestion of crossing the river in the rain, and volunteered at once to be one of the scouts.

They were on their way at dawn, and kept a good pace for the next couple of hours. By mid-morning, they reached the river fork.

Ben smiled. *This is a good omen. We read the map right and know exactly where we are. Now it's time to decide which branch of the river to follow.*

They climbed an outcropping of rock to survey their surroundings. The area immediately to the west was a depressing-looking plain strewn with rusty carcasses of old machinery and heaps of rubble where a town or a village

might once have stood. The southwest, in contrast, seemed relatively untouched. A road was visible, still in pretty good condition despite decades of disrepair, and some old telephone poles ran alongside it.

"Doesn't look too bad that way," Tom said. He cleared his throat. "Of course, it means we'll all have to cross the river again."

He glanced at David, whose face burned with embarrassment.

"I...I guess I...I mean..."

"Forget it," Tom said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm just messing with you. Anyway, now that we've done our bit of scouting, how about getting back to camp? Or maybe we should try to do a bit of fishing first? Somehow, I'm not expecting a good dinner. We..."

"Hey!" David said. "What's that?"

He was pointing at a tall pile of large rocks a little to the south.

"It doesn't look natural," Shauna said. "Maybe we should check it out."

"That means we'll have to cross the river," Ben said.

Tom sighed. "Which means we'll have to go back a ways to find a spot shallow enough, unless we want to go swimming."

Shauna shrugged. "It's sunny and warm. We can swim in our underwear so we'll dry out quickly when we get back."

Twenty minutes later, the damp group approached the rocks to take a closer look.

"A cairn," Shauna said, touching it.

"What's a cairn?" David asked.

"This. A pile of rocks someone set up as a landmark or monument or something. Who do you think made it?"

Tom shrugged. "It could have been here for ages."

"I don't think so," Ben said. "The stones don't look like they've been there for decades." He shook his head. "This isn't something from before the War."

They all exchanged glances. They knew they were not the only people released beyond the Boundary. There were older graduates from their orphanage and most likely people from other orphanages as well. And if people built this not long ago, there was a good chance they would eventually meet them.

Ben stared at the cairn. *Is that why they made this? To let newcomers know there are other people around? To make the area easier to recognize? Or is it a warning sign?*

~ ~ ~

The next morning, even Lauren felt strong enough to move forward at a slow, steady pace. Her ankle still bothered her, but with a tight bandage around it, and the forked branch David found for her to use as a crutch, she was able to walk.

Ben led the way. Tom and Elisa walked alongside him. Both boys knew Elisa's limp made her tire faster than everyone else, but they also knew she was determined to keep pace and would have none of them slowing down to accommodate her. She also seemed to have the best eyesight and was the first to notice anything interesting or useful.

They crossed the river at a shallow spot that only soaked the shortest of them to the waist. Again, David took a fair amount of ribbing, but he just grinned and apologized as he did the previous evening.

Twenty minutes after they passed the cairn, Elisa shielded her eyes with one hand, pointed ahead with the other and asked, "What's that?"

Tom squinted. "A clump of trees?"

Benjamin looked. *Yes, there are definitely a lot trees grouped together. Too many, though. Like...* "What's that poking above them?"

He pulled the binoculars from his backpack. "A roof! A roof means a house!"

The three exchanged glances.

"Do you think anybody lives there?" asked Tom.

Ben shrugged. "I don't know. It's probably a farmhouse from before the War. I don't know whether to hope there are people there who can help us or hope it's abandoned so we can use it. Let's get closer and have a look."

As they drew near, they saw the place was obviously long abandoned. The clump of trees turned out to be an overgrown orchard, which spilled into the inner yard through a broken and rotten gate. Many of the roof tiles were missing, and several windows were gaping black holes, but the house itself looked solid enough. The yard was strewn with the littered remnants of what might once have been outbuildings.

The ancient wooden door was locked, so they helped Jimmy climb in a window. A minute later, he yelled, "I unlocked it but I can't open it. Push from the outside."

First Ben, and then Ben and Tom pushed, but to no avail.

"It probably swelled up so much it's jammed in the frame," Tom said. "Maybe we can kick it in."

Instead of swinging it open, their few determined kicks made it collapse inward, taking parts of the frame with it.

"Must have been really rotted together," Jimmy said as the group filed in.

After the brightness outside, the room appeared dark at first, but their eyes soon adjusted. Sunlight poured in through the doorway and empty window-frames, illuminating a desolate room with peeling, moisture-stained walls. It was almost empty, apart from some scattered debris that spoke of hasty abandonment. There was a blackened chair with a missing leg, an old kettle with a rusted-through bottom, and some unrecognizable rags which might once have been clothes. The only relatively intact piece of furniture was an immense wooden table, which was pushed against the wall across the cold black fireplace grate.

"D'you think we should go upstairs and check what's there?" asked Tom, looking doubtfully at the wooden staircase that led to the upper floor. "Those stairs look kind of rickety."

Ben blushed when he realized that not just Tom, but everybody else were looking to him for an answer. It felt odd. It was not like he was stronger or smarter than the others, but somehow it appeared he had to be the one to make the decisions.

"Maybe later. The stairs may be rotted through. This will do for now." He looked around as he spoke. "We can use this place as a base for a few days. It might be a bit drafty, but it's better than spending the night outside, especially if it rains."

As it turned out, it did rain, but not before the former schoolmates made the necessary preparations to make the place as cozy and sheltered as possible. Canvas tent parts were fixed across the window-frames and the door, and plenty of dry wood was found outside among the trees of the orchard. Elisa thought its owners must have been proud of it once. There were apple, pear, peach, apricot and cherry trees, with a few pecans here and there. But though

the trees were lovely with their fresh foliage and bloom, at present they could do nothing to augment the dwindling supplies of the company. There were at least two months to go until the beginning of fruit season.

They were luckier when they explored the backyard, where the vegetable garden must have been in its day. The beds were long destroyed, of course, but some of the hardier crops continued to grow on their own. They laid dormant all winter, and now were happily poking their heads through the sun-warmed soil. Elisa uttered an exclamation of delight when she saw this, and immediately grabbed a thick stick and began digging.

"Onions!" She sounded as if she wanted to sing. "Carrots, beets, garlic!"

She looked so exuberant with the heap of muddy vegetables in her arms that it would have been easy to laugh, but nobody did. After getting much too familiar with the taste of cattails and wild asparagus, they were delighted to find something that had been part of their school lunches, even if it was something they usually pushed to the side of their plate. It was almost like meeting old friends.

That night, after a trip to the river to wash their bounty, they made a savory stew with the fresh vegetables, a few handfuls of oats from their supplies, and the last of their canned meat. As the pot was propped up above the crackling fire and the smell of food filled the cramped space of the abandoned kitchen, everyone sat with bowls in hand, impatient for dinner to be cooked.

When the stew was ladled out, Benjamin savored the first spoonful. *I wonder when we'll taste meat again. We haven't had any success with hunting and I can't see how we will without much better equipment and a lot more training.* He kept his worries to himself, though, because the last thing he wanted was to be a party pooper.

Spending the night under a roof again, even a crooked, leaking roof like this one, felt great. Everyone was cheerful and talking, even laughing. When dinner was over, someone piled more dry wood upon the fire. It blazed and crackled merrily, and even the wind blowing in through cracks and holes could not put it out or dampen anyone spirits. Nor could the leaks that dripped into old containers they found around the yard.

"I think we should stay here," Elisa said, her eyes shining. "Fix this place up. I'm sure the vegetable garden will give lots more if someone takes care of it, and in a couple of months there will be all the fruit we can eat in the

orchard."

Tom grunted. "We don't know anything about fixing up houses."

"We don't know much about anything," countered Elisa. "That's the whole point, isn't it? We have to learn. We're on our own now. What do you say, Ben?"

Benjamin frowned. "Hmm."

*Elisa's right. We're on our own. And we've already done things we couldn't imagine doing a month ago. Not knowing how to do something can't be an excuse anymore if we want to survive. We'll have to make a lot of adjustments now that no adult is around to tell us when to eat, sleep, do homework. It's up to us to make sure we're fed, and warm, and safe. And up to me to decide I guess.*

"There might be better places than this. For all we know, in half a day's walk we might find something more spacious and in a better condition. And besides, remember what Mr. Bradley told us? We ought to get to the abandoned towns to stock up on supplies. Clothes, shoes, traveling equipment, whatever we can find. What we have won't last long, and we certainly won't find any of it here."

Elisa's shoulders drooped as she sighed. "I guess you're right. It's just that there's something about this place that feels *good*, you know? All these trees and plants, and the river nearby."

"We can always come back later. But we should stay for a few days anyway to rest, explore the area, see if there's anything useful to be found."

"Hey, Ben," Jimmy Stone called from the other side of the room. He sounded excited. "Come see what we've found in the corner!"

Once they elbowed their way past a small knot of people, Ben saw it at once and wondered how none of them noticed it before.

"I was getting kind of sleepy, and tried to put my sleeping bag right over it," Jimmy said, "and at first I thought it was just a loose floorboard. But then my toe got caught in this iron handle, and I realized it must be a floor-door! Don't you think so, Ben?"

Ben nodded. "It makes sense. We're in a farmhouse, after all. This door probably leads to the cellar."

"Let's open it and see what's down there," said Tom.

Shauna, shook her head-full of red hair. "What for? Even if it's a cellar, do you imagine any of the supplies are still good after all these years? Besides, the door looks stuck. If you open it and can't close it again, it'll make it cold and drafty in here."

"Rubbish," said Tom, tugging on the handle. "If we can open it, we can close it."

Tom tugged, but the door, more well-preserved than the one at the entrance, was stuck on its rusted hinges. Tom tugged and pulled harder and finally swore under his breath when he had no success. Then Elisa went to her backpack and returned with a little plastic container.

"Here," she said, "try this."

He looked at it in surprise. "Petroleum Jelly?"

"Mrs. Stocking always used it on stuck and squeaky hinges. Might as well give it a try."

Tom and Ben worked the jelly into and around the hinges. Then, with a lot more tugging and pulling, the door was finally pried open, and the large square space underneath it gaped like an empty black mouth. Someone pulled out a flashlight and they saw the top of a solid stone staircase.

"And here are the cellar stairs," said Ben. He took out his own flashlight and descended, slowly and carefully. Tom and Elisa followed him, as did a few others, but most stayed above, peering into the dark hole.

"It's alright!" Elisa cried from down below. "There's only nine stairs!"

The cellar was almost as big as the lower floor of the house and six feet high from the dirt floor to the bottom of the floor joists above.

"There was probably a marvelous supply of farm produce down here before the war," Elisa said.

Now it was almost empty. A thin, black layer of dirt, or perhaps the decomposed remnants of vegetables grown before the War covered the shelves that lined the walls. Most were bare, but two of them held unrecognizable rusty sealed cans and a few glass jars.

Elisa took one of the jars from the shelf, wiped a thick streak of dust from its surface, and eyed it suspiciously. "I wonder what's in there."

"Probably some hundred-year-old jam," said Tom, taking one of the rusty cans and tossing it in his hand.

It took all her strength, and a bit of grunting for Elisa to turn the cover off the jar. Inside was a thick, dark substance which might once have been liquid, but which solidified completely over the years. She looked at it from one angle and then another and finally sniffed it. Then she stuck a finger inside and, before any of the others could stop her, licked it. Her face lit up.

"Honey!"

"It looks more like cement to me," Tom said.

"It's crystallized, but it's perfectly good! If we heat it a bit before the fire, the honey will be liquid again."

"How do you know?"

"She reads a lot," Ben said. "Or did when we were back at the orphanage."

Elisa gifted him with a smile. "Let's see if there's any more, and take the jars upstairs."

There was, indeed, honey in a few more of the jars. Others contained a dark, putrid substance which might have been some sort of jam. Everyone stepped back, gagging at the smell, and Elisa hastened to close the jars again.

"Maybe we can compost this stuff," Elisa said.

Tom's head shook. "Or maybe it's poison and we should just bury it somewhere."

"Maybe. Either way, we might be able to use these jars. Come on, help me with the honey."

Ben watched her and a few others pick up the honey jars and carry them upstairs. After some hesitation, he decided to take a few of the rusty cans and try to open them, too.

He set them on the table, took his can opener from his backpack, and pierced one. When he did, a putrid, foul-smelling substance burst out with the force of a small explosion all over his hands and face, leaving a stinky mess in its wake. The boys guffawed and the girls wrinkled their noses and hurried away from the smell. Ben, scowling, made his way to the river to wash himself while two others cleaned up the mess.

~ ~ ~

Two days later, Ben realized they would soon be reduced to a pitiable state if they continued with their diet of clams, snails, wild herbs, some

vegetables from the garden and the few fish they managed to catch. Little was left of their original supplies. It was not enough and would soon run out. *We need to move on. We aren't equipped enough or experienced enough to stay here in the middle of the wilderness. We can always return later to gather fruit and nuts and store them for the winter. But we need to find a city.*

He gathered everyone together and was surprised when no one argued about leaving the next day to find a city.

~ ~ ~

Sunrise found some preparing to depart while others still slept. The morning was misty, with opal-white clouds above. Two hours later, everyone was up and fed. A few late risers were still re-packing their backpacks when Tom ran into the house, breathless and excited.

"What's up?" said Ben.

"Where have you been?" asked Elisa.

Tom shot her a dark look. "Guess. There's no bathroom here, is there? But never mind that." He took a few deep, steadying breaths. "You'll never guess what I just saw by the river!"

"What?" several voices asked.

"People!" he said, with the air of someone delivering a great surprise. "Go and have a look. I think you can see them from this window!"

They crowded around the window, tilting the canvas aside. Some stood on tiptoe to look over their peers' heads.

"He's right," Shauna said. "It looks like five or six people, on the other riverbank. I think they're getting ready to fish."

Several kids behind her uttered hushed exclamations of excitement.

"We aren't alone after all!" said Jimmy Stone. "There *are* more people out here!"

"Well, what are we all waiting for?" Lauren said. "This is exciting! Come on, let's go meet them before they move on!"

Ben understood her impulse. There was something extremely comforting in the knowledge of other people surviving out in the wilderness. *I think they're older judging from their height. They've probably been out here much longer and can provide valuable information. Meeting people more experienced could be very useful. But it could also be dangerous.*

"Wait," he said. "We don't know them."

Tom looked at him as if he were crazy. "So what? We outnumber them."

"They could have weapons. We have nothing to defend ourselves with."

An impatient Lauren asked, "But why should they want to hurt us? I say we go out and meet them. I'm sure they're friendly."

Elisa touched Ben's arm. "Why don't some of us go out a little further, say, to that clump of bushes. We'll be closer to the river this way, and we can have a better look."

Ben thought about it for a moment. "Alright then."

He, Tom, and Elisa went out, followed by Lauren and Jimmy. With bent heads, they slowly, carefully made their way to the bushes and peered through them. They saw there were five – three boys and two girls. All looked a few years older. One boy had his line in the water, another boy and a girl just took out their fishing rods, and the other girl was busy gathering driftwood. Talking and snatches of laughter drifted their way.

"They don't look dangerous to me," Lauren whispered.

The third boy waded into the river up to his knees, and was, by the sound of it, scolded by those trying to fish. He turned and said something, then laughed at his companions reactions. At this point, an exited Elisa grabbed Benjamin's sleeve.

"Ben! I know that boy! I know him!"

He squinted. "The one standing in the water? He doesn't look familiar to me. None of them do."

"Maybe that's because you spent so much time brooding on your own."

Ben blushed, only slightly stung by the truth. "You really know him?"

"Yes!" Elisa's face was glowing. "He's from the school. He was sent away two years ago!"

"Are you sure?" asked Tom. "It's kinda hard to know for sure from this distance."

"Of course I'm sure." Her face and crossed arms betrayed her impatience. "Where else would I know him from? I think I even remember his name. Ron, I think. Yes, it's Ron. Once I dropped my books and he was passing by and he stopped and picked them up for me."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure you just *happened* to drop your

books," he said. "I see now why you remember him. You had a crush on him."

"Don't be so ridiculous," Elisa snapped as a blush warmed her cheeks and ears. "Ben. The others must be from our school too, from a few years back. We have to meet them."

The thought of connecting with former classmates who might be able to help them was too much to resist. Ben straightened up. "You're right. Let's get everyone down here."

Five minutes later, the whole group emerged from the bushes and made it almost to the edge of the water before they were noticed. Those on the other bank froze in astonishment, while the boy in the water gaped at them with his mouth open.

"Hello," said Ben, as if this was an encounter in the schoolyard.

They all rolled up their pant legs and waded across the shallow portion of the river and stood face-to-face with the strangers. A boy of about seventeen, light and wiry, with auburn hair that shone like copper as it caught the sunlight appeared to be the leader. He stepped forward and looked them up and down, sizing them, before a smile spread across his face.

"You must be the newest batch of outcasts!"

"Yes," said Elisa. "That's us!" She shifted her eyes and smiled at the youngest boy of the group, who looked like he was trying to remember something. "Isn't your name Ron?"

"I *am* Ron," he said. "And you... I know you but I don't remember your name. Sorry." He looked to the auburn-haired leader. "They're definitely from the school, Michael."

"Michael Fox," the boy said, introducing himself to the newcomers and sticking out his hand. Ben stepped forward and shook it.

"Benjamin Grey. Did you all go to the same school as us, then?"

"Yes. We were all raised by the kind and generous Madam Hart." That drew laughter from everyone. "Are Mrs. Stocking and Mr. Bradley still there?"

Ben nodded.

"That's good. Good for the kids who are still there. They were the only two who really cared about any of us when we were there."

"They still are," Elisa said.

"We've met up with others from different schools and they're all pretty

much the same. If there's one or two adults there who care about you, you're lucky. They keep you until you're twelve, then kick you out because it's illegal to kill you outright." He grunted. "We all thought we were as good as dead by the day after the bus dumped us off. There was a flood. This tame little river we're standing in? We camped by it the first night. We were all sleeping when it started raining and the river rose fast. A few of us were washed away and drowned."

Elisa covered her mouth with her hands. Several other people exchanged grim looks.

"*You* survived, though," Jimmy said.

"We did. We figured out how to stay safe and survive and along the way, helped others survive too. By the way, this is Jen." He gestured toward a girl who looked his age. She had laughing blue eyes and an engaging smile under the freckles that dotted the bridge of her nose.

Michael put his arm around her shoulders as she said, "Hi."

Another boy stepped from behind Ron's back. He was almost a head taller than Michael, with long blond hair that was gathered in a ponytail.

"Andy Steel," he said, shaking hands. Ben thought the name was apt, as his handshake felt like iron. He wore a T-shirt with torn-off sleeves, and the exposed muscles of his shoulders and arms rippled under his skin. The other girl in the group came and stood by his side. She looked different from Jen, with her olive skin, long black braid, and liquid dark eyes.

"Edeline," she said, nodding. Her smile was sweet and shy.

"And you already know Ron," concluded Michael. "He's young enough to recognize you, of course. We're not. We were chucked out here when you must have been in second or third grade. Ron met us later." He grinned, clapped the younger boy on his shoulder. "He got lucky."

Ron's smile faded. "Yeah, I did. I had an argument with my classmates. I said we should follow the river and go west. They wanted to go south, where they thought it would be warmer and pleasanter. But I'm a stubborn type, at least when I'm pretty sure I'm right, and I was pretty sure we should stick close to where we have water. I said I'm not going anywhere and they left."

Tom was incredulous. "You just stayed out here on your own?"

"I didn't exactly mean to. It's just that, as we were making camp for the night and I climbed into my sleeping bag, I grunted at them all that I wasn't

budging from here, not going south into who knows where with the shitty little useless map we were given. I told them I'm staying right here by the river, even if I have to stay alone. And when I woke up, they were gone."

"So they took you at your word?" asked Lauren, her eyes wide.

Ron shrugged. "Must have. And most likely a few of the others wanted to be rid of me."

"And who could blame them?" Michael said with a lopsided grin.

"They just left you stranded here, alone?" Elisa shook her head in indignant disbelief. "That was...*evil*."

"Well, yeah, it was pretty bad at first, I thought I was a goner. For the first half day, I acted like an idiot, running around in circles and bawling like a baby for them to come back instead of going to look for them. I tried going south later, but I had nothing to carry water in except the one little bottle, and there was no water to the south, and it didn't rain. My mouth felt like sand so I had to go back. Then I had no choice but to go on with my original plan and follow the river west. Luckily for me, I ran into Michael and some of the others before my supplies ran out."

"And what about your classmates?" asked Ben. "Did you meet any of them again?"

"No. I hope they're still alive out there somewhere, but I have no way of knowing. We roam a pretty wide area in different seasons, but we never came across even a hint of them."

"The country is big," Jen said.

Michael agreed and looked to Ben. "So what are your plans now?"

"We're just, you know, trying to keep our heads above water."

"Of course. We all are, aren't we? I'll tell you what, why don't you join us? It's easier when people band together. We live to the west, in the City. If you go with us, you'll be able to meet the others in two days."

"You live in a City?" asked Tom. "I thought all the cities were abandoned after the War."

"They were. Most of it's crumbling, but it's still possible to find shelter in some areas. There are the supplies, too. Clothes, shoes, and everything you can't find in the wild. We took over a building and fitted it up pretty well, I think. There's plenty of room, too. So what do you say? Will you join the

Eagles?"

"The Eagles?" repeated Ben.

"That's what we call ourselves," explained Jen. "The Grey Eagles."

Ben's thoughts whizzed at lightning-speed. Michael watched him with a smile, confident of his answer. Around him and behind his back, he could hear his classmates murmuring approval. *The offer's definitely a good one. What could be better than being under the guidance and protection of older, more experienced people who already survived for a few years? Yet the group is under Michael's leadership.* Benjamin was not sure how he felt about that, but the name of the group tipped the scale in its favor, though. *The Grey Eagles. It sounds good.*

Benjamin took Michael's outstretched hand. "We'll be happy to join you."

Everyone felt more cheerful from that point on. They were not alone anymore. They knew where they were going, and they would be sure of a warm welcome, shelter, and food. Ben walked alongside Michael.

"Are there other groups?"

"Yes. Most prefer to call themselves *tribes*, though. There are several throughout the city and in its surroundings. We run into each other from time to time, and mostly we get along fine."

"Mostly?" Ben's eyebrows arched.

For a moment, Michael seemed uncomfortable. "You know how it is. There are all kinds of people."

Ben decided to drop the matter for the time being. At one point, Elisa drew him aside and nodded toward Edeline, who walked hand in hand with Andy.

"Have you noticed?" she whispered.

"Noticed? Noticed what?"

"She's *pregnant*," Elisa hissed.

Ben had to look carefully to notice what was so obvious to her. Sure enough, the front of Edeline's tunic was stretched tight across her belly, which definitely bulged more than was normal for a girl of her age and build. Nobody else seemed to be staring, though, so he quickly averted his eyes.

Until now, he had few opportunities to see pregnant women. Their excursions outside the school were few and far between, and as for the school

itself, none of the students were older than twelve. Still, girls and boys were strictly separated from about the age of ten, and all signs and instances of attraction between the sexes were strongly discouraged. If a boy and a girl held hands, the consequence was a highly unpleasant session in Madam Hart's office. An innocent kiss stolen in a private moment meant going without supper that day if discovered.

Despite this sometimes confusing strictness, the children never received any instruction or information about their bodies and why boys and girls were separated. Had they been older, they might have wondered, but even if they had, the orphanages were not equipped to handle the issue. Along with routine vaccinations, all the girls received injections that delayed the onset of puberty, to make sure none would get their period before being sent away. The school never even bothered to let them know what was being done.

Some of the more informed girls did begin to wonder, and Elisa even went as far as to ask Mrs. Stocking, who only smiled sadly and assured her it "would come in time", though she never mentioned it would be after the girls left school and the effect of the injections wore off. Privately, far from the prying eyes of Madam Hart, she provided the girls with old, faded leaflets instructing them on what to do when their period finally did come.

What happened then, of course, was none of the school's business. By then they were neither the system's responsibility, nor its burden.

As far detached as the children were from regular society and its norms, Benjamin understood that Edeline was very young to be pregnant. She was seventeen, perhaps eighteen. Yet she walked and smiled as if she had no care in the world, and nobody around her acted as if they saw anything unnatural in that.

They made camp early that night and after a long day of hiking, most were asleep soon after dinner.

~ ~ ~

Ben woke early. Thoughts and questions about their future and their new companions raced through his head until, in the quiet pre-dawn light, he saw Michael get up, quick and graceful, like a young cat. He watched him rummage in his backpack, which looked very much like his own though more tattered, until he withdrew what was undoubtedly a gun. Heart beating faster, Ben raised himself on his elbow.

Michael noticed his stare. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he whispered, grinning, as

he folded out the stock. "It's an old Ruger 10/22. The best kind for hunting. And it fits in my backpack. They're rare, though."

"Where did you get it?"

Michael noticed Ben's discomfort, but gave no sign. "The City. Nearly blew my own head off while I was learning to use it properly, but it's worth its weight in gold."

"How did you learn?"

"Books from the library and a lot of practice."

"Are you going to hunt?" Ben rose. "Can I come with you?"

They set off toward the woods that stretched along the riverbank. It was quiet and peaceful. Birds were just beginning to wake up. Michael seemed to glide between the trees that appeared grey in the scarce light while Ben followed as quietly as he could until he stopped, listening.

"There," he whispered, pointing.

Ben neither saw nor heard anything out of the ordinary, but Michael lifted the rifle to his shoulder. A second later, a sharp report filled the air and a fat, heavy bird tumbled down. They hurried over and saw a handsome wild turkey thrashing about.

"Must have hit his spine," Michael murmured as he hastened to end its pain by wringing its neck. He straightened up, smiled triumphantly, and held the bird by its feet.

"Good one, huh? He'll make a nice breakfast."

Ben was mesmerized by the abrupt transition from life to death. This was very different from fishing or prying shells apart. Then he realized how much he missed meat and his mouth began to water.

Back at the camp, they were greeted by their friends. Jen took the bird and began plucking it with expert movements. Soon, the turkey was turning on a spit above a hot little fire. It was not enough to satisfy the hunger of fifteen people, but the fragrant roast meat made a welcome addition to their meal.

~ ~ ~

They caught sight of the City on the afternoon of the second day. At first, it just seemed like any Urban Island within the Boundary – a grey, tightly packed, rather unsightly mass of buildings encompassing countless people. But as they approached, the new outcasts realized that this City was quite unlike

the place where they spent their young lives.

On the outskirts of the Urban Island where they grew up, they could always hear the great, monotonous hum of the city, the movement of cars, trains, buses, and hundreds of thousands of people. It was louder during the day, quieter by night, but the background noise was always there. Here they heard nothing. The City was silent.

As they approached, they saw the legacy of the War – half-ruined buildings with gaping black holes instead of windows, ravaged roads, yards and streets strewn with rubble and overgrown with weeds. The appearance was eerie, ghost-like, even when they passed by buildings which remained relatively intact.

"It doesn't look like a very cheerful place," Ben said.

Michael nodded. "I see what you mean, but it does grow on you, especially when you get to all the lovely stuff you can't find anywhere else. We all love expeditions into the wild, especially in the spring and summer when the weather is good and there's fish and game and fruit. But in winter, these glum-looking walls protect us from wind and snow, and the City gives us everything that was here before the War."

Their footsteps echoed along the endless empty streets. A fat grey rat ran across the pavement, disappearing in a black crack in a wall.

"We're almost home," said Jen, sounding more cheerful than any of them felt. Clouds had moved in and it began to drizzle.

Ten minutes later, they approached an almost-intact building that looked like a large warehouse. As they neared the wide steel door with remnants of red paint that blocked the entrance, they heard voices, along with a peaceful clatter like that of home utensils.

Michael raised a hand, knocked on it several times, and called "It's me!"

A jumble of excitement could be heard from inside. "I knew they'd be back soon!" someone said as footsteps got closer and closer to the door until it swung inward, giving the newcomers their first look at the abode of the Grey Eagles.

Like any warehouse, the place was a great, cavernous space, but some parts of it were divided from the main hall and made into private nooks through the use of folding screens, curtains, hanging rugs, and other improvised partitions. Ten people were gathered in the large communal space, where a girl

in her late teens stirred an enormous pot simmering over a gas burner. The boy who opened the door was short and pudgy and sported a good-natured grin. He beamed at Michael and his companions, and then frowned in puzzlement when he noticed the pack of twelve-year-olds.

"Who are they?"

"Little eaglets," Michael said. "Just chucked out here. They were lucky enough to meet us out east, near our favorite fishing spot."

"Brilliant," said the girl who was in charge of the cooking. She walked away from the pot, wiping her hands on her apron. "We have enough room for fifty people in this place, and I've just been saying how much we could improve it if we had some extra hands. Welcome!"

As she smiled at the new Eagles, a little boy who had been quietly playing in a corner toddled over to her and grabbed her pant leg. She picked him up and wiped a streak of dirt from his grubby little face.

"I'm hungry, mama," whined the boy loud enough to startle a few of the newcomers as he attempted to grab her hair. She laughed and put him down.

"You're always hungry. Dinner is almost ready." She looked at Michael. "It *would* have been ready by now if Jill had settled down for her nap sooner. I think we'll have enough for everyone, though I didn't count on so many people."

"Don't worry," Michael told her. "We still have some things in our bags, and so do they."

"Is he...is he *yours*?" asked Elisa, her wide eyes looking from the toddler to the girl.

"Sure. He was born two years ago, when I just turned fifteen. And there's also Jill. She's sleeping right now but I think she'll wake soon. She was born two months ago."

"*Here*?" said Lauren in a hushed voice. She appeared shocked which seemed to amuse the older girl.

"Of course here, in the little place Mac made for us." She pointed toward one of the walled-off corners. "I'm Gabby, by the way."

"Where is Mac anyway?" asked Michael, shrugging off his wet raincoat.

"He's out looking through some of the other warehouses," Gabby said, trying to peel her son off her leg. "He wanted to find something that'd help him fix the roof. It's leaking again, and right over our space. Never mind, though. If

anyone can fix that roof, Mac will."

"Mac is Gabby's man," Michael explained. "He's a real handyman. We're really lucky to have him."

Soon, everyone was settled in the common area and Gabby started ladling out the thick, steaming stew. It had simmered for so long that not all of its ingredients were recognizable, but its rich, savory smell made everyone's mouth water. Best of all, there were thick chunks of meat inside. The pot was large and nearly full to the brim, so even the newcomers got generous portions.

Mac arrived a short while later, thoroughly wet but looking pleased with himself. He was hauling a large package which he plunked in a corner.

"Rubber tiles," he announced. "There are more where I found these. I'll start with our section and go on to cover the entire roof. It will solve the problem once and for all." Only then did he notice the group was larger than usual, and squinted at the new people. "Who do we have here, Michael?" he asked as he sat and took the bowl of stew Gabby passed to him. The little boy greeted him with a gleeful cry and clambered onto his lap.

"They just got kicked out from the orphanage," said Ron.

Michael, whose mouth was full, nodded, and after swallowing said, "They've joined us."

"What? All of them?" Mac's eyebrows traveled toward his hairline. He was tall and thin, twenty years old, with piercing blue eyes and bushy light-brown hair which he pulled back in a ponytail. He bounced his son up and down on his knee, to the boy's delight.

"Of course," said Michael. "Didn't you always say this place was too darn big for us? Well, now it isn't."

"Eat your stew before it gets cold, Mac," said Gabby. "Come here, Darren, let daddy eat in peace." As she picked up the toddler, a cry filled the building. "Oh, Jill's awake," she said, putting the boy down and rushing to her baby.

Darren toddled back to his father, who did not seem to mind being harassed by little hands as he ate. He hoisted his son back onto his lap before he grinned and said, "So. These are your first steps out here in the big wide world?"

"Yes," said Ben. "We haven't been out long."

"Well, I have. My group was the first, I think, or one of the first."

"What happened to them?" Elisa asked.

Mac's eyes lost focus, as if they were seeing a past that was replaying itself.

"All sorts of things," he muttered before his attention returned to the present. "All sorts of things can happen to a bunch of twelve-year-old kids who get thrown out into the wild with only a vague notion of what to do next." He sighed. "We were unlucky. We wandered too far out there, without knowing where we were going. Our supplies ran out fast, and we didn't find enough to replenish what we used. By the time winter came, we were a starving, sick, sorry bunch. There was no decent shelter, people came down with fevers, and we had no medicine. Some died, others panicked because they were afraid they might catch the sickness. They ran away, and we never saw them again. The rest of us were worse off for being so few. And then, the winter was cold and harsh, and still we were driven out to go and look for food, and there was this pack of hungry wolves..." He shook his head to rid it of unwelcome ghosts. "To make a long story short, a year after our departure, I was the only one left."

Elisa's eyes were moist. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. True, the first few months were the most miserable in my life. Being alone made me want to howl like a wolf, made me want to *be* one. They were wild, but at least they had a pack. At some point, I nearly made up my mind to just lie down and die because I couldn't bear being alone. I talked to myself all the time until one day I fell silent. Then I decided to stop wandering around in circles in the same area. I began to travel with the weather, with the seasons. Then I got lucky. After a couple of years I ran into Michael and his friends."

"A couple of *years*?" Jimmy looked horrified.

"Yes. After a while, loneliness gets comfortable. You travel light and there's no one to hold you back. You don't need to adjust your plans to anyone else. There were times when I thought I was resigned to it, to the idea of never seeing another human being again. I got pretty good at sustaining myself, and I thought I had it all under control. But when I saw people, actual living people again, I started shouting and running so madly I thought my lungs would pop."

"We had half a mind to shoot him on the spot," Michael said. "Thought he

was crazy or something. Most of us are glad we didn't, though."

Mac opened his mouth to say something, glanced down at his son, and instead aimed a rude gesture at Michael before he continued. "Those kids were younger than me, but they were lucky enough to stay together and stay alive. I joined them, at first only for a season. Loneliness had become a habit and it was hard to live in a group again. But then I got together with Gabby, and she didn't fancy the two of us traveling alone for months on end. She figured we need a bit more stability."

"And I was right, wasn't I?" said Gabby, who approached carrying a plump curly-haired baby girl in her arms. "We needed a settled place, especially when I realized Darren was going to be born."

"Weren't you *scared*?" Elisa asked her.

Gabby smiled. "Sure I was, but there was no choice, right? I had to deal with it. And I was lucky. It was easier than I thought with Darren, and even easier with Jill. Now, I hope I'll be able to help Edeline when her time comes."

"How long have you lived in this warehouse?" asked Ben.

Michael thought for a moment. "About three years. We tried several places before, but this one beats any of them. It's roomy, it's practically intact, and it's located right in the middle of all the good stuff in the City Center."

"So you just go around looking for what you need and picking it out from the ruins?"

"Yes, pretty much. We were all born after the War. You can't imagine the amount of *things* everyone had before their world collapsed. I only wonder where they kept it all. Of course, not all we find is usable. A lot was destroyed in the bombings and a lot got spoiled during the years before we arrived. Then there are all the things that need to be plugged in, like electric heaters, lights, cookers, and such. All useless. But we get all the shoes and clothes we want and a lot more besides."

"And what will you do when things run out?" asked Ben after a moment's thought.

"Won't ever happen. There's enough in this city to last for generations, if there's so few of us."

"Of some things, perhaps," Mac said "But others... It's already hard to find some stuff, like batteries. Someday in the not too distant future, we'll have

to give up anything that runs off them. Same goes for gas cans for the portable cooker and oil for the lamps. There were plenty of both in the camping department of that store but then they ran out and now they're getting hard to find. At some point we'll have to rely on wood alone for fuel. And there are other things."

He shook his head. "How did you think I survived before I met you? I didn't come across any cities, only a few lousy villages. I had no gun. I hunted without one. I learned to cure hides from an old library book. Such things are worth learning, even if they aren't as convenient as walking through abandoned department stores."

"Do you think you could live outside the City, if you wanted to?" Ben asked Michael.

"We all spend quite a lot of time outside the City, especially in the spring and summer. There isn't much food to be found here, except for things that can be preserved for twenty years and more. So we hunt and fish and gather, and dry and cure and put up winter stores. It *does* get pretty lean through the winter, though."

"But if you lived outside the city," Elisa said, "like on one of the abandoned farms, wouldn't you have more food?" She blushed when she realized every eye was on her. "I mean, you could grow things. And there's more firewood, and the river seems cleaner out there. Of course, I don't really know." She looked very self-conscious until Gabby smiled and patted her on the shoulder.

"It does make sense in many ways," Gabby said. "Mac's been suggesting it for some time that we should all move out of the city and only come back for the winter."

"Why don't you, then?" Tom asked.

Michael smiled, but it seemed strained. "You must be tired," he said. "Let's set you up somewhere. Jen, are there any spare mattresses?"

Two partitions were hung off the ceiling in a distant section of the warehouse. The boys had their space and the girls had theirs. Spare mattresses were spread out on the floor, but there were not enough to go around so many, including Ben and Tom, rolled out their sleeping bags. They did not mind, though. They were inside, protected from the wind and rain. Their bellies were full, they all changed into clean clothes, and they basked in the soft light of oil

lamps.

A contented Ben stretched, feeling sluggish and tired, but unable to sleep just yet, he decided to organize the jumbled contents of his backpack. He reached inside and started straightening some things, taking others out, opening and closing zippers. When he reached in one of the bottom inner pockets, one he had not bothered to explore before, he pulled out a sealed, white envelope in a waterproof wrapping. Inside, he found a letter. It seemed long, and he recognized the familiar, rounded writing of Mrs. Stocking, so he moved closer to one of the lamps to read.

*Dear Benjamin,* it began. His eyes lingered on those words for a moment. For some reason, he fancied Mrs. Stocking's hand shook a little as she wrote them. But then the rest of the letter quickly grabbed his attention.

*I'm sorry I had never dared to tell you this before...*

When he finished reading, he sat there next to the lamp, his head bowed, the letter clutched in his hand. When he next recalled where he was, the people around him were already asleep on their mattresses and in their sleeping bags, and the oil lamp gave one last flicker and sputtered out. Only a faint ray of moonlight from one of the intact windows was left to dispel the darkness.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Tom whisper, "Hey, Ben. Are you OK?"

Ben wiped his eyes on his sleeve and faced his best friend. "I had a mother," he said in a low, solemn voice.

Tom greeted this with confused silence for a few seconds before he said, "We all had one, didn't we?"

"She didn't want to give me up. She followed me, month after month, all those years in the orphanage, until we left. She's still there, back across the Boundary. Her name is Rebecca."

---

---

---

"Why on earth aren't you asleep?"

Startled, Rebecca turned in her chair. She was not aware of the time, but she registered the extraordinary stillness that belonged to the couple of hours before dawn. The last latecomers of the night were already home, and the first early buses and trucks had not started their busy hum yet. Soon, the birds would begin to chirp.

Her eyes stung now that she drew them away from the computer screen. Her neck cricked painfully when she moved it. She blinked rapidly several times and rubbed her eyes.

In their bed, Daniel straightened up and turned on the bedside lamp, flooding his side of the room with soft yellow light. "Don't tell me you've been sitting there all night," he said.

Rebecca glanced at the screen again. A web page showing a long article with tiny, tightly packed letters was open there. The little desk was piled with freshly printed-out pages of reports, tables, charts, and graphs.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I was going to go to bed, but I just had to check something here, and I guess I got carried away."

"What's all this, anyway?" Daniel sat up, drawing a robe around his pajamas to combat the chilly spring night.

"Nothing special." Her tone belied her suppressed enthusiasm. "At least, nothing the government thought compromising enough to remove from the web. Each one of these items, by itself, doesn't mean much. Put together, though..."

Daniel approached the desk and picked the top sheet from the small pile. "*Economic Growth Statistics*. I think I saw this at one of our last conferences, actually. Harry Fishbain used this paper in his report."

"What was his report about?"

"The distribution of income tax per region. Come to bed and I'll tell you all about it. You'll be asleep in three minutes." He grinned as he gestured

toward the pile of papers. "Do you need this for something you're working on?"

"Sort of. These growth statistics belong to the last decade, did you know that?"

"Well, it's in the sub-headline. Not exactly a big secret, right?"

"No. The statistics are out there, and they're pretty consistent. Anyone can find and read them. Yet the official government stance is that there is *no* economic growth, right?"

Daniel appeared puzzled. "Well, anyone dealing with finances knows it isn't *exactly* so, but you know how political slogans and newspaper headlines are written. *Zero* is a lot easier to process than very little."

"Yes. It was a very nice, very simple line, wasn't it? *No economic growth, no population growth*. Remember?"

A cool, reserved expression appeared on Daniel's face, as he understood where the conversation was going and was not sure he liked it. "So it's about that again?"

"Yes, Daniel. Again, and again, and again, until the truth is out in the open. Until people talk about it in their homes and on the streets, in offices and in trains, in schools and universities."

Daniel stepped back and sat on the bed. "The truth? And what is the truth?"

"The truth is that we are living quite comfortably. Yes, it will take centuries to recover to the point we were at before the War, but compared to the rest of the world, what we have can only be described as luxury. Running water and electricity twenty-four hours a day! Don't you remember how it was all turned off for the night when we were little? There was a curfew, and people in general were in bed by nine because everything went dark after that. There were long lines at the grocery stores, and sometimes you wouldn't be able to buy bread or milk. Now we have pretty much everything we need, when we need it. The military budget was reduced a few years ago because the threat of another war was getting slimmer by the year. Yet freedoms are still restricted and human rights are trampled, because of principles which no longer apply."

"And you've deduced all that from a few hours of web-surfing?"

Daniel saw she was agitated again and shook his head as she got up and

started to pace up and down the little free space between the bed and the door.

"More people wouldn't threaten our survival as a nation. Our convenience, perhaps, to a certain degree, but not our survival. There's no longer any need to be so strict about zero growth, and there is definitely no need to try and shrink the population, which the government is subtly trying to do. And most important..." Her voice rose and shook a little. "...it's no longer justified to penalize so cruelly those families who have trespassed the Decree of Population Control, to tear families apart, to throw helpless pre-teens across the Boundary, hypocritically claiming we can't afford to feed them."

"Please be quiet or you'll wake Kate."

Rebecca took a deep breath. "You're right. But I know what I'm going to do now, Daniel."

Had their eyes met, his would have betrayed his fear as he asked, "What?"

"I'm going to the press. I'm going to every office, present facts, and demand answers. I'm going to talk to people until my voice is drowned in the mass of all those who ask the same questions. And I'm going to get a pass across the Boundary. Yes, Daniel. I'm going to do that. I will go there, and I will find Benjamin, and I will bring him back no matter what it takes."

Grey light seeped through the curtains. They heard the trill of an early bird. It was much too late to think of sleep now, and besides, Rebecca felt wide awake. "I think I'll go for a run," she said, grabbing her sweatshirt.

Daniel sat, unmoving, unable to understand the obsession that drove the woman he loved.

~ ~ ~

The cold morning air smelled sweet as Rebecca ran at a steady pace, feeling younger than she had in years. All around her, the world was awakening. The Urban District came alive under the lightening sky. Birds chirped and twittered in the nearby park, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted out of several coffee shops and Quick Bars. More joggers appeared, some running to upbeat music, others, like Rebecca, just enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of the morning. She did not feel at all tired. On the contrary, every nerve in her body was alive and tingling. She felt like a warrior on the verge of battle.

When she began to tire, her pace slowed, until finally she walked, taking

deep breaths to expand her lungs. Her reflection in a shop window stopped her and she appraised herself as she might a stranger. *I look pretty good for someone who's lived half a century in this world.* She leaned closer, then stepped back. *The lines around my eyes and mouth aren't visible from a distance. That's good.* She took another step back, turned sideways for a few seconds, and nodded. *I'm still in good shape. Lean and firm. And my hair's as curly and thick as it was thirty years ago.* Moving closer to her reflection, she pulled the hair from the elastic tie-back, shook it free, and sighed. *So much grey, though. Maybe I should start coloring it even if it will make it coarser. ... No, Daniel likes the way it feels. If he doesn't mind the grey, why should I?*

She decided to get a cup of coffee and just sit somewhere for a while, but when she reached into her pocket, she realized she left her wallet home when she rushed out. *Oh well. I can live without coffee.*

She crossed the street and claimed a bench in the small park. Her thoughts raced for hours as the city came alive with people and vehicles and the ever-present Security Police watching over everyone and everything.

The crowds had long-since thinned when she realized where her early morning run brought her. Behind her was a tall, sleek-looking building with polished windows that blinded her as they reflected the morning sun. It held the offices of *The Urban Observer*, the local paper which previously published several of her works on sociology and anthropology. *I wonder if Natalie's in yet.*

Rebecca made her way to the entrance, nodded to the guard, and crossed the hall to the receptionist's desk.

The woman's face split with a smile, "Why Mrs. Hurst! It's you! I didn't recognize you at first in that outfit."

"Is Natalie already in?" She knew Natalie liked to sleep late and work late.

"As a matter of fact, she is. She was the first one in today. She shut herself up in her office and said not to pass any calls to her. There's a lot of work this week, but I'm sure she'll see *you*."

Natalie, a tiny slip of a woman, could barely be seen behind the open screen of her laptop. Only the top of her bushy, flaming hair was visible as she pressed a phone between her ear and shoulder while furiously typing.

"It won't do. I'm telling you, it won't do. We've covered it at least twice in the past three months. The public is getting sick of it."

Rebecca knocked on the frame of the open door as Natalie set the phone on the desk.

"Who's that?" she called, clearly irritated. "It's a busy morning here and... Becky! What a lovely surprise! Come in. Close the door." She rose and walked around the desk to share a hug. "I see you've been taking care of yourself. An early morning jog, huh? Good for you. I'm trying to keep my energy here using whatever means I can." A mischievous grin accompanied her nod at the little aluminum tray on her desk that held a large sugar-frosted doughnut and a steaming cup of coffee. She saw Rebecca's eyes close as she inhaled the aroma, and said, "Coffee? We have a lovely new machine downstairs that makes addictive lattes."

"Thanks, I'd love one."

Natalie waved her friend into a chair as she slid back behind her desk. The two talked about family and friends for the few minutes until the coffee arrived, filling the room with the delicious smells of vanilla and caramel. Rebecca took a sip and sighed as the flavors lingered on her tongue.

Natalie's friendly smile morphed into a shrewd one. "So. Did you just happen to pass by to say hello, or are you working on something new?"

"Actually, I am. Can I use your computer?"

Natalie waved her around and Rebecca leaned over and began typing. A minute later, she began showing her several of the articles she found and printed out at home, accompanying each piece with detailed explanations of their individual and combined effects. When she finished, she glanced at Natalie and found her lips tightly pressed together as her head shook the slightest bit.

"It won't do," Natalie said. "It won't do."

Disappointed, Rebecca asked, "But why? Don't you think this has a potential to be a good story? More than a good story? An important one? Don't you think it's something that *should* be discussed?"

"It's not for me to discuss the Decree of Population Control." She sounded cool and distant.

Rebecca studied her face for a few seconds. "You're afraid."

"Why do you sound so surprised? Sure, I want stories that spread like wildfire. I want to expose hidden truths and shock people. I want to be contrary. That's what running a newspaper is all about. But more than that, I want to keep my job."

Natalie was not smiling anymore. She looked determined and defiant and a little ashamed of herself.

"So you're saying those who discuss the Decree of Population Control don't get to keep their jobs?"

"Are you just asking out of curiosity, or do you want to know if you should risk it? Do you think you're the only one who has ever asked these questions, Rebecca? You're not. People have done this before. We have freedom of speech in this country, and a pretty wide field to play in. But this field has boundaries."

"Just like our inhabited area has a Boundary."

"Exactly. And except for a few adventurers who are fond of risking their skins, people have no desire to find out what life is like on the other side of the Boundary. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Rebecca nodded, thinking about her son and a group of other pre-teens currently moving through the dangerous areas beyond the Boundary, trying to survive.

"I understand you." Contempt filled her voice. "I understand you perfectly well."

She turned on her heel and had her hand on the door handle when she heard Natalie's hasty footsteps behind her.

"Rebecca?" she sounded breathless.

Rebecca looked over her shoulder. "Yes?"

"You've always been more independent than I could be, and I've always admired that. Some of the papers you've published were really controversial, and I don't think anybody but you could have done that without losing their career. Many times you came very close to treading on a whole lot of important toes, but somehow you always pulled through. It would be a pity..." Natalie paused, considering her words. "It would be a pity if you cross the line now."

"Cross the line?" Rebecca raised an eyebrow.

"I'm saying this as a friend. It would be better if you think twice before

doing things you might regret. It will be a pity if you never get published anywhere again, if you're forced into early retirement when you still have so much energy. Besides, you have children. Think about them."

"Jordan and Kate are all grown. They're making their own way in the world now."

"Of course. But don't fool yourself. If you annoy the wrong people, it won't be just about you anymore. Your husband and children will be involved too. For the rest of their lives, they'll be trying to smash through an invisible glass ceiling. And all for the sake of what? For writing something that won't ever make any difference?"

The words lingered in the air as Rebecca nodded to her friend. *There's nothing more to say. Natalie can't understand. Doesn't want to understand. Nobody can understand but Daniel, and even he chooses not to.* She let the door swing shut behind her and walked back out to the busy street.

~ ~ ~

Daniel was already out when she got home. She was glad of that. She needed time to be alone, to think, to consider what might be done next.

There was a knock on the door, too timid to belong to her husband or daughter. Besides, they would use their key. *One of the neighbors, maybe?* Intrigued, she walked back to the door and opened it. To say she was surprised would be an understatement. She was astonished.

"Mrs. Stocking? How did you find me?"

A slight smile brightened the matron's pale face. "It wasn't difficult, Rebecca. Everyone is listed in the phone book, and there's only one Rebecca Hurst in the entire Island."

"Right." Rebecca nodded, distracted for a moment as her earlier conversation with Natalie passed through her head.

"May I come in? I have... I have something to tell you."

Rebecca's eyes widened. Whatever Mrs. Stocking might have to tell her could only relate to the one subject they had in common.

"Of course," she said, gesturing for her guest to come inside as her heart played a wild drumroll in her chest. But certain manners had to be observed. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Mrs. Stocking sat at the small kitchen table, watched her hostess make

tea, and while it steeped, remove a store-bought cake from the refrigerator and cut it into small, meticulously square pieces before setting them on a plate. She took a piece when the cake was set on the table, followed by cups and saucers and the tea pot.

"Your apartment is a lot like ours," she said as Rebecca poured. "But then, all these little apartments in the Urban Islands are much the same."

Rebecca could stand no more delay. "Please. Why are you here?"

Mrs. Stocking sighed and put down her piece of cake. "I just thought you should know that before the children...left, I put a letter into Benjamin's things. In it, I told him a bit about how he came to be in the orphanage, and about his...his biological family."

Rebecca breath whooshed as if it had been knocked out of her, alarming Mrs. Stocking. "Perhaps it was a mistake, but at the time, it seemed right and..." She sighed. "Well, the more I thought about it, the more I felt I should tell you. By now, Benjamin must have found the letter. Now he knows the name of his mother."

Rebecca looked aside, blinking away the tears. "Why didn't you let *me* write that letter? Why didn't you let me write to my son, just once?"

Mrs. Stocking laid a gentle hand on her arm. "I hadn't exactly planned it. It just sprang into my head the night before they were sent away. As I was preparing their backpacks, I wrote the letter and hid it. Smuggling something from outside would have been a lot riskier."

Rebecca felt weary, in need of a long hot shower and several hours of sleep. She closed her eyes as two tears spilled onto her cheeks.

"Perhaps I should have let this be," said Mrs. Stocking, shaking her head. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come. But I thought you would like to know."

Rebecca opened her eyes. "I would. I do. Thank you, Mrs. Stocking. I'm sorry if I was...not tactful before. This is better than nothing. Benjamin knows now what a coward I was. But he also knows he was loved. He *is* loved. He will always be loved, until the day I die."

---

---

---

"Animals," Elisa said to herself.

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Come again?"

"Animals," she repeated, louder this time. "I've been thinking. The War wiped out most of the livestock in the country. That's a pity because if you live on a farm, things are a lot easier if you have some chickens and cows. You have eggs and milk. Not year-round, perhaps, but it's still more reliable than hunting and fishing."

"You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?"

Elisa shrugged. "Been reading."

His eyes lingered on her for a moment. *It hasn't been long since we joined the Eagles, but Elisa seems different somehow. She was always steady, serious, mature for our age, but now there's this newfound confidence about her. Maybe it's because there's no adults around anymore. I guess we have to become the adults and soon if we're going to make it in this new world.* He smiled. *Elisa figured it out pretty fast.*

"Are you still thinking about getting out of the city?" he asked.

"It will have to happen eventually, Ben." She gestured toward the broken pavement, the shattered windows, the open gutters of the street where they walked with some of the other Eagles. "This city is dead. It's empty. It has no future."

Benjamin could not deny she had a point. The city, like Michael promised, proved to be an exceedingly useful resource, but it was also a depressing place. The older members of the group were used to it, but he was not. He felt it from time to time, the desire to go, get out of the crumbling walls and into the open. To be in the wild moors, near a winding river, under a clear sky. Yet he could also understand Michael's practical standpoint. Being in the city was convenient.

Elisa went on. "Who knows? We might get lucky after all. Perhaps there *are* some domestic animals out there, grown wild and bunched up in herds."

She flashed a smile. "Just like us."

"All right there?" called Tom, looking over his shoulder. "What are you two up to?"

"We're coming," said Ben, quickening his step. Elisa followed.

After a few days of walking long distances across town, he was relieved to see her limp was less of impairment than he first thought. She caught up with the others quite easily. They did not venture out alone yet, though. Today, they walked in the company of Andy and Ron. The object of their search was construction materials.

"We're going downtown," Andy said as they walked. "There's a really good warehouse that has anything you can think of, loads of it. Planks, nails, bricks, thick plastic sheets, paint, spray, brushes...you name it. It's a little out of the way, but the walk is worth it. And it's a chance for you to get to know the town better. If you go out on your own and lose your way, you can't exactly call and let us know, can you?" He chuckled as the sound of his voice echoed through the empty ghost city.

Ben felt a shiver run down his spine again. *I just can't get used to so much space. I'm used to living in a building full of people. When we're away from the group like this I keep getting an eerie, ominous feeling, like something nasty will happen any moment. I wonder if any of the others get like this.*

Andy stopped in front of a dusty, decades-old window display of a shop that survived almost intact. It was a baby gear shop. He said nothing, but studied the cribs and mobiles and rows of little shoes and outfits.

Ben could tell he was making a mental note, perhaps planning to consult Edeline and come back later to bring whatever she thought they might need. *It's so strange to see people only a few years older having children and forming families. But I guess there's something good about that. There's continuity to their lives. A future. They're not just refugees. They're really trying to make their own place in the world, a place with a home, with families that won't be torn apart. A place where people won't be punished for having children.* He whispered his mother's name under his breath. *I wish I knew what she looked like. Do I look like her? Or my father? I bet I would recognize her even in a room full of people.* He sighed. *But that'll never happen. We'll never meet. The Boundary and the Reproduction Laws make sure of that.*

Andy stopped again, and everyone else did, too. For a second Ben did not understand, until he saw them, three people standing in their way. Three unfamiliar figures. He felt a vague sense of foreboding when he caught the expression upon Andy's face. He seemed more annoyed than surprised, as if he half-expected this encounter.

The strangers were all boys in their late teens. The one standing in the middle, half a step ahead of his companions, had a dark, tanned look, and very thick smooth black hair, like Ben remembered seeing in pictures of Native Americans. He was wearing an unpleasant grin.

"How's it going, Enzo?" Andy asked with feigned nonchalance. Ben noticed his fingers coiling into a fist.

"Fine," drawled the dark boy. "The question is, where are *you* going?"

"And why would this be any of your business?" Andy was trying to play it cool, but it was not working very well. It was easy to notice his anger bubbling just beneath the surface.

"Because," Enzo said, leaning forward, feet firmly planted on the ground, "if you planned to pass through here, you'd better think again. The downtown is ours."

"Says who?" said Andy, his jaw thrust out in defiance.

"Says Barry. And if you've got any problem with that, you can take it up with him."

For a moment the two boys stood locked in a wrestle of stares. Andy looked furious, Enzo faintly amused. For a moment Ben thought things would turn ugly, but finally Andy looked away and shook his head, as if making up his mind this was not worth the trouble. "Come on," he muttered, turning back, "there are other places where we can get what we need."

The others followed, but Enzo's call made them turn around again.

"Hey, newbies. I see you've joined the Eagles."

"What if we have?" Tom said.

"Don't rush into any commitment before you've met the Bears. You don't want to find out you've chosen the wrong side."

Andy pretended to be deaf and quickened his stride. Enzo and his companions did not follow and soon disappeared around the corner.

Ben caught up with Andy, who was wearing a murderous look upon his

face. "What was that all about?"

"The Bears."

"Who are the Bears?" asked Elisa, frowning.

"It's the gang of one jerk who calls himself Barry the Bear. They used to keep to themselves, but for the past year or so they've been trouble. Barry's got more people who joined him, and once that happened he started closing off whole districts of the town, claiming them for himself and his cronies."

"It doesn't exactly sound fair," Tom said.

"No, it isn't. I don't see why they are doing it, either. The city is big, and there are so few of us. You'd think there'd be no trouble getting along, but it seems Barry thinks differently."

~ ~ ~

Their early return to the camp took Michael by surprise. "What's up?" he asked.

"The Bears again," Andy said, accepting a warm cup of herb tea from Edeline.

Michael's face darkened. "Damn! Don't tell me they didn't let you pass."

"Yep. It was Enzo. I would have shoved him away, if it weren't for the kids. I didn't want them involved in anything nasty."

An angry Tom said, "We aren't afraid..." but an agitated Elisa cut him off with "I don't understand why it has to be this way, Michael. There aren't many people here outside the Boundary. It only makes sense to help each other, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But you'll never persuade Barry the Bear to think the way you do."

"Won't I? Have you ever met this Barry, then? Tried to talk to him?"

"I've seen more of Barry than I ever cared to. Perhaps it's time to show him we aren't the wimps he thinks we are. Perhaps we should start closing off districts too."

Gabby walked up to them, holding baby Jill in her arms. "But Michael, it won't do to start fighting. Elisa's right. We don't want to let Barry bait us. We just need to carry on as usual."

Michael tilted his head sideways, considering their next move. "At the very least, tell me if you see any of the Bears around here," he said to Mac, Andy, and Ron. "I don't want them snooping anywhere near the camp."

The subjects of Barry and the Bears were relinquished for the time being.

~ ~ ~

Over the next weeks, Andy and the others went out again and found alternate stores of building materials, clothes, batteries, and much else that was needed in the camp. They made more trips outside the city, to the forest, river, and open meadows, which made Elisa exceedingly happy. They fished and hunted and gathered, and Elisa kept on casting hopeful looks far and wide, as if expecting to find a herd of cows grazing in the wild, just waiting to be led home for milking. No cows were seen, but they did catch a glimpse of some wild horses, which threw her into raptures of delight.

"Don't you see?" she asked Ben. "These can't be the only domestic animals that survived the War. There must be more."

He and others were beginning to understand the persistence of her wish. Fishing and crabbing were nice in their way, but everyone was beginning to miss milk and eggs. Having a domesticated, reliable source of protein would be a great help to them in their quest for survival.

~ ~ ~

They were starting to become familiar with the city, or at least with the districts surrounding the Grey Eagles camp. Soon, they began making short trips on their own, unaccompanied by the older members of the group. The more time that passed, the farther they dared to venture. They were becoming bolder, more confident, as if every month that passed gave them a few years' experience. It was the inevitable result of living in a world where the oldest people were in their early twenties.

They were not exactly afraid of Barry the Bear, but it seemed there was an unspoken agreement among them all about the directions in which they should not go. Still, something told Ben the conflict was far from over, and so he was not surprised to encounter Enzo again one morning.

He was walking toward one of the warehouses with Tom and Elisa. It was just the three of them, which made them ill-fitted to face the Fat Bear's cronies, but after surveying the scene for a few seconds Ben concluded that Enzo was alone. The older boy's demeanor did not appear hostile this time. He sidled up to the three friends and stood a little to the side, not blocking their way, but clearly seeking to be recognized.

"Our camp is near and yours is far," said Ben, "so just keep walking, OK?"

"Hey, don't bite my head off," Enzo said, not at all intimidated. "I'm here with a message from Barry. He wants to talk to you."

Ben, Tom and Elisa exchanged glances. "To us?" Tom said. "What would he want with us?"

"Oh, just to have a word," Enzo said, trying to sound casual.

Elisa's green eyes narrowed with suspicion. "With us? We don't know him. He doesn't know us."

"Exactly. He asked me to say that precisely because you are, you know, new in town, he doesn't want you to get the wrong impression. About him, about the Bears...stuff like that. He wants to clear things up. Barry's this way." He nodded toward a side street. "He doesn't like things to be left hanging in the air."

"I don't get it. Why should Barry care what we think of him?"

"Not just you. You can carry the message to all the new ones."

The three friends exchanged glances again. "OK. Let's say we agree to talk to him. When do we meet?"

"Right now, if you'll just follow me to our camp."

"Just like that?" Elisa said, rather sharply. "Come with you and be back by lunchtime? Somehow, I don't think so."

Enzo chuckled. "Who exactly do you think we are? We don't, you know, kidnap people. We have our style, and that ain't it. You'll have safe passage. Barry gave me his word."

"Forget it," Ben said. "We're not going anywhere with you. If Barry wants to talk to us, he can come himself. See that little plaza over there? We can wait for a little while."

The plaza was half-blocked by large piles of rubble, remnants of the bombings. Ben, Tom, and Elisa walked over and sat down as Enzo disappeared down the side street. The friends had time to get thoroughly bored, and to start wondering whether they should forget all this and head back to camp, when they heard footsteps which were clearly heavier than Enzo's. Someone else was coming, and he was coming alone.

A young man emerged from the half-ruined street and walked to them at a leisurely pace. He could not be more than twenty, but he was surrounded by an aura of strength and confidence fitting for someone much older, someone with

an established place in the world. He was very tall and impressively wide, with a lion's mane of sandy yellowish brown hair. His smile was wide and open, but neither the simplicity of his expression, nor his heartily outstretched hand, dispelled the jolt of dread Ben instantly felt. *I don't like this guy. Nothing good's going to come out of this.*

"Barry," the young man said, sounding like the very soul of easiness and friendliness. "You must be the new kids."

Ben nodded, ignoring the proffered hand. "Some of them."

Barry stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans and whistled, looking around. "This was a grand place before the War. I remember the movies they showed to us in school, you know? The shops. And cars, cars, cars. Fancy, shiny, gleaming cars. And people rushing by. So many people. Ten times more than in the biggest Urban Island. When we came here, it was hard to believe we ended up in the same place. It was so empty and quiet. And lonely. Yes, very lonely. There were only five of us. There was a lot of work to do before other people started coming along."

"Like Michael?" asked Ben.

Unperturbed, Barry nodded. "Like Michael. You live in his camp now, right?"

"We've joined the Grey Eagles."

The difference between the two definitions was subtle, yet there was no doubt Barry picked on it at once.

"What's up with you and Michael, anyway?" asked Tom, in a tone a little too casual to be natural.

"Nothing," replied Barry with an innocent shrug of the shoulders. "As far as I'm concerned, I have no bone to pick with Michael Fox. It's him who's the problem. I'm a reasonable person, see, but what's mine is mine, and I won't give it up just like that."

"What's yours is yours?" repeated Elisa, her eyes narrowing. "Like what, this city?"

Barry chuckled. "Clever girl. No, not all of this city, but some parts of it. We've done a lot of work here, see. Clearing rubble, sweeping away broken glass. So I think the least Michael can do is ask permission when he or his people want to pass through. Or he can stay away." His fingers coiled into a fist.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Elisa said. "This city is enormous, and there's a total of, what, a hundred, two hundred people living around here. Why should anyone fight over space?"

"You're right in a way, but there are...nuances. Sure, the city is big, but some of it was rendered totally useless by the bombings. Other parts are intact and hold all the good stuff. And there's the river. As far as living space goes, you have to find something close to the water. No taps, right? I think you've seen very little of the city so far. How about I give you a personal tour?"

"A tour?" Ben shook his head. "Doesn't look like there's much to see around here."

A corner of Barry's lips twitched. "You might be surprised."

Ben opened his mouth to answer, but Elisa offered a cold, "No thanks. We didn't go with your friend Enzo. Why should we go with you?"

Barry took the rejection in good stride, smiling as if he were genuinely amused. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

"You wish," Tom said under his breath.

"And you have no reason to think badly of me. How well do you know Michael Fox, anyway? You've only just arrived. You should think well, very well, about who you join, so a day won't come when you discover you've picked the wrong side."

His voice had the same pleasant tone, and his baby blue eyes still sparkled, but something ominous could be heard in his words.

"We can decide for ourselves," Ben said. "But thanks a lot."

"You can, but you shouldn't. Not before you see our camp, anyway, and meet the people. We can offer you a better place than Michael with his pathetic warehouse. Yes, I know exactly where the Grey Eagles live, and I pity you. Together, we'll be the biggest group in the city, and nobody will dare to challenge us." Barry gave them his friendliest smile, "Eagles fly, but bears walk firmly upon the ground."

Ben knew he was about to speak not just for himself, not even for his two friends, but for all his classmates. Perhaps some would hesitate, tempted by what Barry had to offer. Some people loved being the biggest kid, the biggest bully on the playground, and some loved being part of the largest gang. But he saw no choice. He had to say this, even if it meant big trouble later on.

"You're wasting your breath. C'mon, Tom, Elisa."

Together, the three of them turned and walked away from Barry the Bear, Elisa slowing down just enough to throw him one last contemptuous look.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Then Tom said, with a look of satisfaction, "You pissed him off."

"Yeah. I guess I did. Not that I meant to. It's just, you know, I didn't feel I could say anything different."

"Of course, Ben," Elisa said, signaling her approval with a smile. "You did just what you should. This Barry is nothing but a big, arrogant bully. It's time he learned not everybody will dance to his tune."

At the camp, Ben took advantage of a quiet spell, pulled Michael aside, and told him of the meeting with Barry. Michael's eyebrows contracted slightly, but there was not much surprise in his voice.

"I should have expected this. Barry does this every time, to every new person who joins our group. Of course he'd want to recruit you."

"Why?"

Michael shrugged. "I presume he wants to make his own camp larger."

Ben pondered this for a second. "Does he also try to do this with people from other camps? Or just from yours?"

His head tilted slightly to the side. "The other groups pay homage to Barry the Bear. 'Yes, Barry, you're the man. Yes, the city's yours.' *I*, on the other hand, will take no such crap. Barry knows it, and he won't let it sit. Unless I'm much mistaken, he'd love it if I were left alone in this camp."

Ben gave him a long, puzzled look. There was something ridiculous in all this, like two overgrown toddlers fighting over space in one sandbox. "Well, you won't be left alone," he said. "I told Barry he can get lost. I don't think any of us should have anything to do with him."

"You're a good judge of people, Ben."

"But I still think we should get out of the city."

Michael's hazel eyes narrowed. "Why? Do you think we should be afraid of the Bears?"

"Not afraid." Ben stopped for a second, wanting to say it right. "I just can't see anything good coming out of this. We all live like a pack of rats, scurrying from hole to hole in this great big dead city. Sometimes, when I hear

the wind whistling through broken doors and smashed windows, it sounds like the voices of ghosts. And sometimes it seems like *we* are ghosts, walking among the ruins of a destroyed world. Elisa is right. It would feel better, even safer, in a way, to live out in the open. It would be a good, fresh start. I know there are things we need in the city, and we can still come up and raid the stores, but if I were you, I'd set up my main camp someplace else. Someplace small, without crumbling walls all around me. What was before the War is over, done with. The people are dead, the cities are ruined. There's land, though, a whole lot of land. And if we want to have a future, we should learn to live off it."

Ben fell silent, feeling slightly embarrassed. *Geez. I don't remember ever saying so much at once in my whole life.*

Michael's brow was furrowed, and Ben could tell the older boy was considering his words, not dismissing them outright. There was something flattering in how Michael, who was five years older than him, treated him like an equal.

"You have a point," Michael finally said. "Perhaps someday we *will* leave the city. But on our terms. Not because Barry the Bear decided he doesn't want us around anymore." He laid a hand on Ben's shoulder, "Trust me. There's no reason to leave with our tail between our legs."

Ben, though not entirely convinced, gave him a silent nod. He did not entirely agree with Michael, but felt he was in no position to argue. It was not like he would leave on his own, or with the few who would dare to follow him, into the vast, empty, wild country. They would all have a better chance by sticking together. Of that, at least, he was sure.

"Come on." Michael clapped him on the back. "I smell dinner. Let's eat."

---

---

---

Rebecca sipped her coffee and stared at the computer screen, trying in vain to reach the degree of concentration she needed to be productive. *I have less than a week to deliver an in-depth article about post-War agricultural methods and all I've done for the past half hour is edit a few words and drink coffee.* She set her cup down and sat up straight.

"Concentrate now," she said, hoping the sound of her voice would motivate her. "Get your mind off Benjamin and population control laws and concentrate or pretty soon no one's going to want to hire you."

She was startled when the phone rang, relieved that it gave her an excuse to slack off a little longer. *Perhaps it's Kate. Or Daniel calling from work to ask if he should pick up anything on his way home. Or maybe mother's lonely again out there in her rural retirement.*

"Hello," she said, anticipating a nice chat, but the female voice was unfamiliar.

"Am I speaking to Rebecca Hurst?"

"Yes, that's me," she said, cradling the phone between ear and shoulder.

"I'm glad I was able to reach you. I'm Tracy, Tracy Locke. I heard of you from... Natalie."

"Natalie? Natalie from the *Urban Observer*?" Her curiosity now peaked, she set her half-empty cup of coffee on a side table. "Why would she direct you to me? Who are you?"

"I'm a doctor and a researcher. I... Look, this is something I'd rather not discuss over the phone. Do you think we could meet?" She paused. "Today?"

"Sure. Would you like to talk things over lunch?"

Locke hesitated for a moment. "If you don't mind, could we meet now? Unless, of course, you're busy."

"Oh, no, not at all," said Rebecca, her work forgotten. "Do you want to meet someplace for a coffee, or would you rather drop by here?"

"I'll come over, if you don't mind. I'd rather be somewhere private."

Rebecca gave Tracy her home address. Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang.

She opened the door to an athletic-looking woman with shiny black hair she brushed back and pulled into a tight bun. She wore a simple but elegant dark blue pantsuit with a crisply ironed white blouse and carried a briefcase. Next to her, Rebecca instantly felt ashamed for her frumpy sweatshirt and old well-worn slippers. Her guest, however, did not seem to notice any of it in her eagerness to come in.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice," Tracy said. "Especially as you know so little about me."

"I admit I'm curious." Rebecca pressed the button on the electric kettle, fished a bag of apricot-flavored tea out of a jar in her upper kitchen cupboard, and set a cup in front of her guest.

Locke looked around, as if making sure they were alone. Her voice low, she said "Natalie told me you're interested in the population control policy."

Rebecca froze, sugar container in hand. "Do you have something to tell me?"

Locke nodded. "As I mentioned over the phone, I'm a doctor and a researcher. I earned my PhD in genetics from the Central University fifteen years ago, just as things were beginning to settle after the War. I was one of the very few blacks in my year, and the only black woman."

Tracy's bluntness made Rebecca squirm.

"Though everyone's world was turned upside down by the War, and though the country, social organizations, economics, and ecology were altered beyond recognition, one thing did not change. Somehow, certain kinds of people still had a tendency to slide faster and deeper into poverty."

Rebecca put a plate of biscuits on the table. "You mean blacks?"

"All people of color. But treating this as a racial issue alone would be over-simplifying. It isn't about race."

Tracy blew on her cup and took a cautious sip. "Someone like you, who is interested in statistics, knows there are less of certain races in the academy now than before the War. Actually, you don't need statistics for that. You can see it with a naked eye when looking at any yearbook picture." Tracy lowered

her head, hesitating, and finally lifted her eyes so that they met Rebecca's. "Of course, that may be because there are fewer non-whites in the general population to begin with."

Rebecca nodded. "Non-whites were always minorities and, sadly, many of the first to perish during and after the War. The whole population has shrunk. And I suspect the government plan is to make it shrink even further."

"Yes," said Tracy, "but not in equal proportions, and not just non-whites. The government wants more of some groups, less of others. I work for Public Health, which gives me access to certain information few are aware of. And..." She ran a hand across her forehead, and Rebecca was surprised to notice that the hand shook slightly. "...it is a heavy burden sometimes, Ms. Hurst."

"Please, call me Rebecca."

"Rebecca." Tracy nodded. "Natalie speaks very highly of you. She's my friend, a good girl, and a careful one. She said I can trust you. She doesn't want to get herself into a mess...even if deep down, she feels you and I are right."

"She told you I came to see her not long ago?"

"Yes. *The Urban Observer* is too well-connected with the government to publish articles with risky trends. We'd be risking our skins, too, if we decided to dig too deep. But I have a hunch you're past the point of caring, and so am I."

Rebecca nodded. "I know some part of the truth, about the orphanages and what happens to most of the children who end up there. I assume I don't have to explain to you what I mean. I've come to the conclusion that every government worker of a certain rank probably knows."

"Yes, but as someone who works for Public Health, I also know that the orphanages could be a lot fuller if it weren't for a certain practice. You do know, of course, that anyone who applies for a Reproductive Permit must first undergo genetic screening?"

"Sure. My husband and I did that when we married. We were given the A code, meaning that we were allowed to have two children. I know some get the A+, which gives them permission to have more than two."

"Quite correct. Other people grudgingly get a B permit allowing one child and no more. And some are told they have a predisposition for genetic illnesses and get a C status. For them, childbearing is illegal."

"I know that. Of course, if I were a carrier of genetic defects, I probably

wouldn't want to have children anyway. The risk is too high."

Tracy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let me ask you something. If you and your husband are average people, and you go in for genetic screening, and an imposing doctor in a white robe tells you that one of you is a carrier of a potentially fatal mutation, and that any child you might have has a significant chance of a degenerative illness and death in infancy, and that therefore you get a C status, what would you do?"

"I'd probably be heartbroken."

"Yes, but would you doubt the doctor's verdict? Demand to see the full medical file? Ask for a second opinion?"

The air seemed to grow heavy, making it hard to breathe as Rebecca looked away for some seconds. "I want to say I would, or think I would, but no, I probably wouldn't."

"And if the same nice, sympathetic, and trustworthy doctor offered you a quick, simple, and effective sterilization procedure as insurance against any possible accident in the future, would you agree?"

This time, it took Rebecca a full minute to answer. "I guess I would."

"What if I tell you that incorrect diagnoses are given out intentionally and systematically?" She leaned forward. "Everything is recorded in the system, and if anyone bothered to check the data published every year by the General Bureau of Statistics, they would notice the inconsistency. The actual rate of genetic diseases among the general population is not that high. And there's no reason why the sterilization rate should be so much higher among certain groups."

Rebecca's hand flew to her mouth. "You don't mean to say..."

"It's simple, really. Those in positions of power live very privileged lives and they want to keep those lives from ever changing. They see themselves as superior by virtue of their ability to acquire and wield money and power. They want their children and grandchildren to possess the same. But taking care of those who can't care for themselves, who need government assistance, who don't care to work hard for their whole lives so others can live in luxury...they see those people as a burden to society, a burden that must be slowly but surely eliminated. There's a list of undesirable traits, like being lazy or unlucky or an undependable worker. And those who exhibit any of these traits, or who come from such inferior families, are told they are carriers of

genetic defects. Women who become pregnant before testing are usually told at prenatal screening that there is some sort of fatal problem with the fetus, that it isn't viable. Of course they are advised to have abortions, and virtually all agree. And then, 'Oh, we're so sorry Mrs. Brown. Something went wrong during the operation. It was completely unpredictable, impossible to prevent, and you'll never have children again.'"

"But the orphanages. Why don't they..."

"Not all the illegally born orphans are discarded as no good. Some might grow to be useful adults. Useful to the privileged. And the rest are dumped beyond the boundary to live or die on their own. Out of sight, out of mind."

"How long have you known?"

"Long enough to make my heart nearly burst with the weight of it all."

"Were you... I mean to say, were you one of the women who were told that they..."

Tracy's lips curled into a faint, melancholic smile. "No. I'm a valuable, trusted government worker. I'd probably get an A+ status if I chose to apply for a Reproductive Permit. But I never married. Somehow, it just didn't work out. I guess I was always too absorbed in my career...until it was too late for me."

A key turned in the lock, startling both of them. Kate's face registered surprise when she saw Tracy. Visitors were rare in the Hurst household, where the space was usually cramped and often cluttered.

Rebecca smiled. "Hi, honey. You're back early today."

"I'm going back to campus in a little while. I only dropped by to pick up a book I forgot."

"Kate, this is Dr. Locke," Rebecca said, satisfying her daughter's curiosity.

Tracy rose to shake hands, then said, "Well, I had better get going." She took a piece of paper from the stash near the phone and hastily scribbled a number. "You can reach me here. I hope we'll meet again soon."

"I'll be looking forward to it."

As she closed the door behind her, Rebecca heard, "Mom. I've met Dr. Locke before."

She turned and read questions and confusion on her daughter's face. "Oh? It didn't look as if she remembered you."

"She came to the school a few times as a guest lecturer in Public Health class. She probably didn't remember my face. I usually sit at the back."

*Why did she have to forget her book today of all days? "Were they interesting lectures?"*

"I'd say so, yes. She's an intelligent woman with a lot of experience in the field. But what was she doing *here*?"

"Oh, I'm interviewing her for an article I'm working on."

Rebecca knew she was a lousy liar and was not surprised Kate's face wore the same skeptical expression she often showed her children when they were young and offered feeble excuses as to why they had not done their homework or cleaned their room.

"Come on, Mom. You never interview people at home."

"Dr. Locke happened to be around."

To cover her unease, Kate dropped into the kitchen chair where Tracy sat earlier and ran her finger over the handle of the half-empty teacup. "From a few things Dr. Locke said in her lectures, I understood her point of view sometimes deviates from the official stance on certain...certain topics you're interested in, too."

"What are you trying to say?"

Kate rose, her disquiet gone, and said, "Be careful, Mom. That's all."

It hit Rebecca full-force how her daughter was all grown up, a person in her own right. *So tall and graceful now. So pretty even with that haircut.* She sighed. *Time passes so quickly.* A pang of regret made her look away for a moment. *It seems like only yesterday the children were little and always wanted something. How did I ever get any work done or meet a deadline? Please be quiet, Mommy is trying to write. How many hundreds of times did I say that? Now all I have is time, more than I can fill, and so many voids where meaningful things once were.*

She called after Kate, who was on the way to her room. "There are a few leftover pieces of lasagna in the fridge if you're hungry."

"Perhaps later Mom. I'm in a hurry right now." A minute later, she emerged from the room, book in hand, and hurried out the door.

Rebecca walked to the window in time to see Kate cross the street and, seconds later, turn the corner. She stood there for a long time, watching the

traffic and the people hurrying along before she glanced back at the telephone.

*I should call Tracy now. There are so many things I want to ask her, discuss with her. But Daniel will be home soon. I don't want him to know about her, get involved. We're prying into an ugly secret and just knowing about it could cost us our careers. More. "Huh." Why aren't I afraid? Because I have to know? Have to get at the truth and bring it out? I do. I owe it to myself and to people like Natalie and Mrs. Stocking, to everyone who knows and is afraid to speak up.*

She bowed her head.

*And I owe it to Benjamin.*

~ ~ ~

The next morning, after Daniel went into the office and Kate to her classes, Rebecca dialed Tracy's number. She hoped to arrange for another meeting, but Tracy sounded harassed, urgent.

"I can't talk now, Rebecca. There are some arrangements I must make right away. I'll get back to you... perhaps tomorrow, alright?"

They never spoke again. That night, while watching the news, Rebecca was horrified to hear an impassive newsreader telling of "...a terrible accident on road 405. A pickup truck hit the private vehicle of Dr. Tracy Locke, a renowned researcher and valued member of the Public Health Office. Dr. Locke's colleagues are stunned and grieved to hear of this unexpected tragedy, the circumstances of which are being investigated as we speak."

Rebecca sat stiff and upright in her armchair, unable to move. A large photograph of Dr. Locke filled the screen. She looked professional, unsmiling, but very elegant in a dark-grey pantsuit and pearly-white blouse.

"Terrible." Daniel shook his head, but he was detached, unaware of the effect this announcement had on his wife. "That road takes a completely disproportional yearly death toll. I don't know why nobody's doing a damn thing about it."

Still, it was nothing personal to him. The name of Tracy Locke would soon be forgotten. He reclined comfortably in his seat, sipping his evening tea. Kate, on the other hand, threw her mother an anxious look.

"You know it was no accident, Mom," she said quietly, once her father went to bed and the two of them were left alone in the kitchen. Rebecca just stared, feeling too much to protest. "I don't know exactly what you and Dr.

Locke had in common, but the fact is, two days after she visited you she was killed."

"I called her this morning. She didn't say much, but she sounded... anxious."

"Locke knew something, didn't she? Something that made her a threat to someone important. So she was removed. And I'm afraid..." She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid, Mom, that you might be going the same way."

How did it happen that the roles were reversed? Why did she suddenly feel like Kate was the mother and she the child? She did not know, but she went ahead and said: "Tracy Locke was doing some...private research on the Zero Growth policy."

Something shifted in Kate's face. She no longer looked brisk and efficient. She seemed softer, sadder, more mature. "I had a hunch it would be something like that."

"Dr. Locke told me something important and I believe she was going to say even more. I think she didn't want to talk in front of you. I figured we'd meet again, but..."

Kate's lower lip quivered. She took her mother's hand and whispered, "I don't think I ever told you how much I loved him."

Rebecca only stared, unable to speak.

"Benjamin," Kate said, voicing the name she and her older brother had not uttered in almost twelve years. "He was everything that was sweet and innocent. I could cuddle him for hours, remember? I loved the smell of his hair when it was freshly washed. I loved how he'd grab one of my fingers with his tiny hand. He was so soft, so beautiful. I was too young to understand why we couldn't tell anybody about him. And then there was that horrible day when we woke and he was gone, just gone, and you looked dead on your feet and told us in this terrible hollow voice that other people would take care of Benjamin from now on. I asked whether we'd ever see him again, remember? You said you didn't know, but I knew it meant no. I could see it in your face. And for years after that, I lived in fear that perhaps, if Jordan and I weren't good, you'd decide to give one of us away too."

A painful jolt coursed through her as tears prickled the corners of Rebecca's eyes until she could hold back no longer. For the first time in her life, she was crying in front of her daughter.

"I'm sorry," she said, choking off a sob. "I'm so, so sorry honey. Your father argued that it would be easier for you to understand if we just told you that Benjamin had died. But I...I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Kate gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Once, when you weren't home, Dad sat Jordan and me on the sofa and gave us a talk. He said you are going through a difficult time, but that you would be alright, and that you'd recover sooner if we don't mention Benjamin again. Did you know that?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"So we never talked about him again, even just between us. And in time, things almost went back to normal. But I could see you had changed. There used to be a light in your eyes, a sparkle, but it left together with Benjamin. You were never happy again. And though we went on as usual, there were all those questions I couldn't let go of. There was nobody to ask, so the only thing left was to grow up and start figuring things out by myself. And once I did, once I was old enough to understand why you had Benjamin in secret, and why you were forced to give him up, I've never felt sorrier for anyone in my life."

Blinded by tears, Rebecca was too choked up to speak. She groped for the stack of napkins on the kitchen table and dabbed at her eyes and cheeks. "I don't deserve to be pitied," she finally said. "I'm a coward. I should have held on to him, no matter what. I regretted what I did the moment it was done. I even applied for an adoption permit, you know? I figured we could get Benjamin out of the orphanage by adopting him. But we were denied a permit. We had two healthy children, we were told. There was no reason whatsoever for us to adopt a Class B child."

Kate shook her head. "I don't know what to say, Mom."

"Wait here," Rebecca said as she rose and went to the bedroom, where Daniel was already snoring peacefully. From a bottom drawer in the closet she retrieved her treasure chest, a small wooden box containing all the items Mrs. Stocking smuggled out for her during the years. There were several photographs of Benjamin, a pair of his baby shoes, some first samples of his childish, uneven writing, and Mrs. Stocking's letters about his progress.

"The matron of the orphanage is a kind-hearted woman," Rebecca said, taking out the small stack of photographs. "She let me know how Benjamin was doing, and told me where to come so I could get a glimpse of him once in a while. It's over now, though. Benjamin grew too old for school. He was...sent on."

Kate took one of the photographs, taken about five years ago. It showed a small, thin boy working on a simple carpentry project, making a shelf or perhaps a bird feeder. It seemed as though he was not aware he was being photographed. Kate looked back at her mother. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"We've already lost so much, Mom," she whispered. "We can't afford to lose you too. You see what happened to Dr. Locke. There are powerful people up there, people who are no match for you. They won't hesitate to get rid of you if they suspect you're digging too deep. And we need you. *I* need you. Please...*please* promise me that you won't put yourself in danger, that as hard as it is, you'll let this go. Promise me, Mom."

---

---

---

Time passed. Seasons rushed forward, year following year. There was a lot of camping outside the city in spring and summer and early fall, a lot of hunting, fishing, and gathering and storing food for the cold season. Later in the fall, they would return to the crumbling city to prepare for the winter. The Grey Eagles repaired and improved the building, making it warmer, safer, and sounder, more like a real home. They scavenged the abandoned stores for canned and dried food, warm clothes and shoes, blankets and fuel, though the latter was getting scarce, and they were forced to rely more and more on wood burners. Things got lean at times, but working as a team, the group survived and grew.

The young couples produced more children. Gabby and Mac now had four, two boys and two girls. Whenever someone in the group, and often in other groups gave birth, Gabby served as midwife. She had helped Edeline, who now had a boy and a girl, and also Jen, who had some difficulty birthing Michael's daughter, Marleen. Thankfully things worked out and Marleen was now a robust two-year-old.

"You have both talent and experience, Gabby," Elisa said with appreciation one rainy autumn evening, while they sat together in front of the fire. Elisa was sorting through some bunches of dried herbs and Gabby was darning an old pair of Mac's pants. "I think you should invest more in learning, though."

"Learning?" Gabby, sounding surprised, lifted her head from her sewing. "You mean, like out of books?"

"Of course," Elisa nodded. "I've collected all sorts of books, you know. I can lend you some on anatomy and biology – and there are also medical guides made for doctors and nurses. It will help you with your work."

Gabby shook her head. "I'm not much of a reader, Elisa. I do have this stack of tattered paperbacks I keep next to my bed, but other than that..."

"But this is different." Elisa tucked a strand of her golden hair behind one

ear as her eyes sparkled with conviction. "It's about knowledge that might help you, one day, save someone's life. We have no doctor around here, Gabby. We've been lucky with no serious illnesses in all this time, and the babies born healthy. But other groups have been less fortunate."

"Yes," Gabby's voice wavered. "I've never lost a mother, but the babies... It happened twice in other camps. The baby just didn't make it."

She fell silent as Elisa nodded. She remembered it well. There was nothing Gabby could have done, and nobody blamed her. On the contrary, she helped grieving mothers by attending to and comforting them. But she was so shattered by the losses she took to her bed, vowing never to attend a birth again. Only Mac's gentle persistence and the group's combined assurances of there being nobody better suited, made her step up to the task again.

"Then there was that poor guy who lost a hand through infection. Now, if we had a doctor..."

"But I'm no doctor, Elisa. I could never be one, even if I read all the books in the world."

"Of course. Still, we must make do with what we have, and something is better than nothing. With more knowledge, and with all the stuff we got from pharmacies, you could be, well, almost like a nurse. Think about it."

"I will. I promise."

Gabby kept threading her needle through fabric while the fire crackled and a pot of stew bubbled on it, spreading comforting smells. Edeline got up to stir it, and a cloud of vapor rose above the lid.

"Anybody seen Ron and Lauren?" she asked.

Gabby snorted. "I think I haven't seen them for at least a week. They spend all their time outside. Who would have thought?"

Normally shy Ron had been persistent in courting Lauren, and for the past three months the two had been going steady.

"I think we should start making some sort of...ceremony for couples who are serious about each other," said Edeline.

"Like a wedding?" Gabby asked. "I always wished Mac and I had one, you know. Like in the novels." Her eyes misted with romantic possibility. "There are even some wedding dresses in downtown stores."

"You and Mac don't need a ceremony," Elisa said. "You've been together

for ages. You have four children."

Gabby sighed. "I know. But Mac is so...so reserved most of the time. And when he does speak, it's always to the point. Well, you know him. 'The roast turkey is really good, Gabby. I've put new tiles on the floor in our sleeping space, Gabby.' He's a good, loving man, and he's really great with the children. Last month when Jill had a cold, he stayed next to her bed for hours, reading to her and entertaining her until she felt better. But sometimes...just sometimes, you know, I wish he'd do or say something to make me feel really special." She offered an apologetic smile.

Edeline opened her mouth to respond, but her words were lost in a stampede of children's feet. Gabby's children, seven-year-old Darren and five-year-old Jill came running, followed by Edeline's son Ryan.

"Can we go out and play, Mom?" asked Darren, the oldest of the bunch.

"Supper's almost ready," said Gabby.

"Oh, come on, Mom. We won't be long."

"Is someone keeping an eye on the baby, then?" Gabby fixed her son with a beady stare.

"Shauna is watching all the little ones."

"Well, that's very nice of Shauna, but I asked *you* to watch her. Last time she rummaged through all the drawers in my sewing cabinet. It's really hard to get anything done that way."

"Oh, Mo-om," whined Jill.

"Shauna said it's no trouble. We'll come back and eat real soon. Bye, Mom!" Darren grabbed his sister's hand, gave Ryan a nudge, and the trio stormed out.

"Leslie will soon catch up with that gang," said Edeline, putting an arm around her toddler who, for the time being, was content to sit near her mother.

"It's a good thing Darren took to reading lately," remarked Gabby. "It keeps him occupied and quiet for at least part of the day. I'm so grateful Mac took it upon himself to teach him. I don't think I would have had the patience."

"Speaking of our men," said Jen, who walked over to the group with Marleen in her arms. "I wish I knew they'd be back soon. Then we would wait with supper. Anybody know where they went today?" She bent and let her plump, red-cheeked toddler sit next to Leslie.

Everyone was silent until, Elisa reluctantly admitted, "I think they went to the West side."

Worried glances were exchanged. She did not need to elaborate. Everybody knew the West district was the home of the Fat Bears.

~ ~ ~

"At this rate, we won't have anything to wear for the winter." Michael Fox frowned as they walked. "We'll soon be doing what Mac suggested, curing hides."

"Nothing wrong with that," Mac said. "I have a pair of deerskin pants I made myself which are real comfy. And the pelt from that puma who was unfortunate enough to think I'm dinner? It makes for a great cloak."

Michael waved his hand in dismissal. "Yeah, yeah. I mean, who *wouldn't* want to spend weeks making a single item of clothing when you can just go downtown and find something in one of the stores?"

Andy, Ron and a few of the others chuckled. Mac appeared unfazed.

"There's nothing like what you make with your own hands. And besides, when you have less, you appreciate it more. There's less upkeep involved, too. Gabby has been complaining of the work it takes to haul all our clothes down to the river and wash them every week."

Michael grunted. "Sure she complains. You have four kids. But I'll tell you what the problem is, Mac. I'll tell you why it's gotten so hard to find stuff lately." He jabbed a finger into his friend's chest, getting more and more heated as he spoke. "It's not because this city hasn't got enough for all the camps, because that's bullshit and you know it. The problem is Barry and the way he hoards more than he can use. Space, fuel, ammo, clothes...anything useful. You know he does that to spite us."

"Is that why we're going to the West side?" Ben asked. He was seventeen now, taller than Michael, taller than most men at the camp except Mac and Andy, and was not afraid to speak his mind. "So you can settle your score with Barry?"

"No. We're going there to show Barry he doesn't own this city. Somehow, there's this unwritten rule only the Bears can go into some districts. And in case you haven't noticed, these districts are multiplying with each year that goes by. Soon we won't be able to set a foot anywhere without trespassing on what Barry calls his. Well, *I* won't have it."

Ben held his tongue. He knew it would do no good to keep arguing. Much changed in five years, but Michael remained the same fearless, quick-tempered, easy to laugh, sometimes cynical, always loyal person he was when they first met. Everything he did, he did for the camp. Ben had to give him credit there. But he could not help thinking *he* would have done some things differently, if only he had the chance.

They walked on. There were more people in the city these days, fresh outcasts who joined other camps, or set up their own, and sometimes the Grey Eagles ran into them while raiding the city. From time to time, several camps would meet for a get-together, an exchange of local news, and some trade. But never here. They were now deep in Fat Bears territory, and Ben wondered why nobody yet tried to stop them. The mystery was soon resolved when they entered a narrow street. Several figures appeared ahead of them, and footsteps sounded behind as well. Michael stopped and spun around, then looked forward. Ben did the same. *Yes, we're cornered and outnumbered, and there's no way to escape.*

"Well, hello there, Michael," Barry the Bear said as he stepped out from the shadow of a building in front of them. His hard smile belied his pleasant tone. "Fancy seeing you here."

Michael remained cool. "Don't know why you sound surprised. We used to hang out here a lot last year."

"Last year," repeated Barry, "was last year. Now this street is mine. I thought you had enough brains to learn that, Mike."

Michael's hands coiled into fists, and he looked ready to pounce. Ben knew that was not a good sign and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"We were just walking, OK?" he called out to Barry. "Let us pass and we'll go due north. The Wild Cats' camp is there. Or do you have a problem with that as well?"

"No," said Barry. "The Wild Cats aren't stupid enough to cross paths with *me.*"

"Alright, then," said Ben. "We'll be going now."

"The hell we will!" Michael shrugged Ben's hand off his shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Too damn right you aren't," said Barry, his voice deadly calm to accompany his now sickening little smile. "Enzo," he called across his

shoulder, "Luc."

Barry's two chief sidekicks stepped forward, rubbing their knuckles. Simultaneously, those at the back started advancing toward the Grey Eagles. They all looked almost as big and bulky as Barry himself, and outnumbered the Eagles at least two to one, but Michael was either too angry to be frightened or simply good at hiding his terror.

"Step back," he told Enzo and Luc, raising his finger. "Step back. I'm warning you."

Someone's fist jammed into someone's jaw, and all hell broke loose. There was no choice. Together with everyone else, Ben kicked and punched and wrung arms, trying his best not to harm anybody from his own camp in the ensuing chaos. On his right, he saw Jimmy taking on Enzo, using his head as a battering ram to punch his enemy's stomach so hard Enzo came sliding down a wall, all wind knocked out of him.

Barry himself did not take part in the fight. He stood a little aside, his arms crossed, watching it all with an expression of high amusement. This seemed to drive Michael mad, and he broke forward, kicking both friends and foes aside to get to his arch-enemy.

"Careful, Michael!" warned Barry. "Trust me. You don't want to do this."

There was something in Barry's voice that made everyone stop and stare. Fists froze in mid-air and fell down without reaching their target. Slowly, Barry lifted the thing he was holding in his right hand and pointed it at his adversary. Michael found himself looking into the black barrel of a gun.

It can be said to his honor that he did not flinch, though everybody else did. There was a collective intake of breath. Nobody seemed in a mood to fight anymore.

Barry slowly nodded. "That's right. If you know what's good for you, Michael, you'll head back to your camp as quickly as you can. You'll say sorry first, though. And next time, try not to piss me off."

"You're a real piece of shit, aren't you, Barry?" Michael shook with suppressed rage. "Put that thing down. Are you forgetting the pact?"

The pact was long-standing and simple: no matter what conflict arose in the city, no one would use firearms against a fellow human being. Guns were for hunting only. This agreement was honored by every member of every camp. Until now.

"No. Say you're sorry and go home nice and quiet, and no one needs to get hurt. This is only a little lesson I'm teaching you. No one messes with the Bears."

"You're trying to frighten me, Barry?"

"Well...yeah." Barry nodded, apparently pleased with being understood. "That's the general idea."

"It ain't working, then, you asshole," growled Michael. "I'm not afraid of you or your little toy. I bet it isn't even loaded."

Everybody else looked anxious, though, both among the Eagles and the Bears.

"I think he got it, Barry," said Enzo. "He's trying to seem cocksure, but next time he'll think twice before coming into this block. Just let them go."

"First he'll say he's sorry," said Barry, not taking his eyes off Michael. His hand did not move an inch.

"No," said Michael. "First you'll put that damn thing down."

Barry gave a lopsided grin. "Oh really? And who'll make me do that? You?"

Michael leaped forward and threw himself at Barry with the strength and agility of a young puma. Though Barry was much heavier, the impact sent him straight down to the crumbling sidewalk. Michael's hands tightened around his throat.

"Let go, you idiot," Barry hissed as his face was turning steadily purple. "Let go, I'm putting it down, I'm putting..."

Michael removed one hand from Barry's throat and made a sweep at the gun. There was a scuffle, a blur of arms and legs and fists, and then the short, terrible sound of a gunshot pierced the air. For a moment it was not clear what happened. Then Barry pushed Michael off him and got up. Michael rolled down to the ground and lay still. A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth.

Everybody froze in horror. Barry stood there and looked down. "I didn't mean to do it," he said calmly, but Ben could see his hands were trembling. He let the gun fall down to the sidewalk. "It was an accident."

Then the moment of spellbinding shock was over, and the Eagles roared in pain and outrage. Mac and Andy ran to Michael, while Ben, Ron, Jimmy,

and Tom ran forward to throw themselves at Barry. They were stopped by a living barrier made of at least two dozen Fat Bears.

"Come here, you coward!" yelled Ron, mad with rage and grief, straining to get to Barry. "You wouldn't face Michael without thirty other people and a gun, huh?"

"You killed him," said Ben, looking into Barry's eyes. He stopped his attempts to get at the leader of the Fat Bears. It was no good. There were too many people between them and Barry.

"Michael was a fool," said Barry, regaining composure. "Whatever happened here, it was his fault to begin with. And you, kid..." He pointed a finger at Ben. "Remember what I told you and your friends years ago? I warned you to think carefully about which side you choose. You didn't listen. You chose to stick with that loser, Michael Fox. Just like..." Barry stopped and shook his head. "Never mind. From now on, things will be different in this city. Pacts or not, everyone will respect Barry."

Surrounded by his pack, Barry turned away.

"No," Ben called after him, finally finding his voice. Rage coursed through his body, making the blood pound in his temples.

Barry glanced over his shoulder, looking mildly curious. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"Nobody will respect you. At most, people will fear you. But it won't last forever, Barry. One day, you will pay for what you did."

Barry gave him a mocking smile, but Ben could see that his words penetrated some inner shell of selfishness and arrogance. "You ain't frightening me, kid."

"I didn't intend to. I don't need to do a thing. You'll bring your own end upon yourself."

Barry shook his head. "I have no time for this shit. Don't do anything stupid, eh? Stay in your district and we're good. Step out of line, and more of you might just end up the same way as Fox."

And, jammed tightly between his cronies, he walked away.

Ben joined Andy and Mac, who were still bent above Michael. Mac's face was filled with anguish, Andy's contorted with suppressed tears.

"He's still alive," Mac said. Ben did not miss the *still*. "I crossed the

Boundary thirteen years ago." His soft voice began to tremble. "I've seen all sorts of things. I've seen people die. But not like this. Not at the hands of each other."

Michael's eyelids fluttered and he opened his eyes. "Ben," he said in a hoarse whisper. Though Ben was not sure he heard correctly, he came closer and went down on his knees.

"I'm here, Michael."

"You were right." Michael coughed. Each word seemed to be costing him an enormous effort. "Barry...he isn't worth...any of this. This has gone too far. We should have looked...for a new place...for us."

"Quiet, Michael," whispered Andy. "Save your strength. We'll figure out a way to get you home."

Michael closed his eyes and managed a weak, sad smile. "Home. We need a new home." He opened his eyes again and looked at Ben. "You take care of them. Of Jen and Marleen, and everybody else."

"Me?" Ben did not understand. "Why me?"

"I'm...counting...on you."

Those were his last words. His eyes rolled in his head as he shivered for the last time, and was still.

Ben could hardly remember the way back to camp. They broke into a fabric shop nearby, took a roll of canvas, and created a makeshift stretcher on which they placed Michael's body. As they approached the warehouse, Ben recalled the first day they entered the city, five years ago. They were a little apprehensive, sure, but there was also a great feeling of security in becoming part of an established group. That security was now gone forever.

"Wait," Mac said, stopping in his tracks. "Stay outside for a bit, alright? I'll go in and tell Jen."

"Don't you want us to go in with you, Mac?" asked Andy Steel.

"No. Give me a couple of minutes. I know she won't want too many people to see her at once."

This was the worst part of all. Mac went inside alone, so Benjamin did not see Jen's face when she received the news, but he heard her cry, a high, piercing, desperate cry full of grief and sorrow. It chilled his blood. He braced himself for the moment when he would have to face her.

She walked out of the building a few minutes later, supported by Mac on one side and Edeline on the other. Lauren overtook them, ran straight into Ron's arms and broke into sobs.

Jen swayed as she moved forward, like a sleepwalker caught up in some sort of terrible dream. When she approached the stretcher, she fell to her knees as if all strength left her at once. She ran her trembling hands over Michael's face, his body, his closed eyes, his cold hands.

"He and Barry could never stand each other," she whispered. "Not since I left Barry's camp and got together with Michael."

Ben had averted his eyes out of respect for her grief, but now he could not help but give her a startled look.

"You know it wasn't about that anymore, Jen," said Mac. "Not for a long time now. Barry won't tolerate people who stand up to him. This is his way."

Jen's shoulders were shaking. "Marleen," she said in a choked voice. "How...how am I going to explain to her...?"

"Shh," Edeline said, her tone soothing. She knelt and took Jen into her arms. "You don't have to do anything yet. Gabby has Marleen. She's taking care of her."

~ ~ ~

The camp was quiet that evening. Nobody felt like talking. Elisa found last night's cold leftovers and arranged them on a tray, together with some dried fruit and nuts, for those who had appetite enough to eat. Mostly people just picked listlessly through their food. At nightfall, Ron, Will, and David went outside to keep first watch while everyone else slid into bed.

Benjamin remained sitting by the fire in the common room with Tom, Mac and Andy. For a while they sat silently, staring into the flames. From behind one of the partitions, Ben could hear Jen's stifled cries and the soothing murmur of Elisa's voice.

"This can't be the end," Mac said, his expression somber.

"You bet it isn't," Andy said. "Barry will pay. I will personally make sure of that. By the time I'm through with him, he will regret being born."

"That isn't what I meant. Until now, we had a red line nobody crossed. We were all in the same boat. All outcasts, all sent here to shift for ourselves or die. We might have had our differences, but it was understood that on some basic level, we are all supposed to help each other in order to survive. Now,

sure, Barry challenged this rule a long time ago. But he wasn't... I thought he was pesky, annoying, full of himself, but never a murderer. Now that we've started killing each other, I'm afraid to think of what happens next."

~ ~ ~

At daybreak, they carried Michael's body to the outskirts of the city. The men and boys all took turns carrying the stretcher. Mac and Andy carried spades over their shoulders, and once they found a spot by the river where the ground was soft, they started digging the grave.

Gabby and Shauna stayed behind with the children, but the rest of the camp was there. Michael's body was lowered gently into the grave, and for a moment they all stood silently around it, their heads bowed. Then Mac lowered himself down upon his knees and picked up a handful of moist black earth. "It's time," he said softly as he rose to his feet and let the soil slide between his fingers and into the grave. The rest followed his example while Jen stood there, silently crying, her head on Elisa's shoulder. Soon there was a mound of earth at the gravesite, and the smell of mulch and fallen leaves lingered in the air.

Mac cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, Jen, I'd like to say a few words. Michael was the first friend I made after being alone for a very long time, and..."

He was stopped by the sound of approaching footsteps. He looked over his shoulder as did everyone else. Someone was coming. In a minute, the intruder stopped right there in front of them.

"Enzo." Mac's voice was as cold as the friend he just buried. "What the hell are you doing here? What do you want?"

"The ugly slimeball wants to get himself pounded raw, that's what," growled Andy, his face reddening with fury. "And I'm about to grant his wish."

"Andy, wait!" Elisa called out, while Tom and Will grabbed Andy's arms. Enzo seemed more discouraged than frightened by this display of hostility. He stood rooted to the spot, hands in pockets, unable to speak. He looked everywhere but at the fresh mound of earth that now covered Michael's dead body.

Ben broke the silence. "So, what other message does Barry have for us? Does he think this isn't enough?" He gestured toward the freshly dug grave.

"I..." Enzo struggled to find the right words. "I didn't come here because

of Barry. I'm... I'm leaving Barry's camp."

Enzo had everyone's attention, but no one spoke. He swallowed hard, shook his head, and went on. "You have to understand. I was just a scared kid when I first came here, one of the few who survived in our group. Barry picked me up, gave me a safe place to be, showed me what I needed to do in order to make it. 'Stick with me and you don't need to worry about a thing,' he said. 'Be loyal to me and you won't regret it.' And I haven't... until yesterday."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Elisa. "Join another group? I don't imagine Barry's going to like that very much."

"Never mind what he's going to do," barked Ben. "I'm a tad more concerned about *our* future, if you know what I mean."

Mac nodded. "I do know. If you have something to say, I'm ready to listen. I think we all are. Michael asked you to take care of the camp, didn't he? So tell us what *you* think we should do."

Ben took a deep breath. "I think it's time for us to leave this city. There's nothing left for us here. Tom, Elisa, and I talked this through last night. We're planning to leave and we hope everybody will come with us."

Andy was furious. "You're running away! You're afraid of Barry, so you'll leave with your tail between your legs."

Mac raised an arm, silencing him. "Go on, Ben. What do you have in mind?"

"We'll find ourselves a farmhouse by the river and fix it up. It will be easier to look for food this way, and we'll be able to grow things, too. Sure, we'll raid cities and towns in the area to get what we need, but first of all we need a home of our own, a place well away from here, away from Barry and his..." He shook his head and sighed.

Elisa's eyes glowed as Ben spoke. "It will be much better for all of us," she said, looking at each member of the camp in turn. To her surprise, some averted their eyes and shuffled their feet, as if they were not so sure about the idea.

"Well, Gabby and I will be coming with you," Mac said. "We've talked about this too. We would have left earlier, only we didn't want to be on our own."

A wave of relief swept over Ben. Mac's vote of support made him feel a lot more confident.

"We have our children to think about. Every time Darren and Jill go out, I'm afraid some building might crumble over their heads. I'd like the kids to grow up in the open, not in these ruins."

"Say what you will, but I'm staying," Andy said. "I'm not letting Barry gloat over getting away with what he's done. And he's not taking over our camp. No way. Not with all the effort it took us to build it up. I would have thought you'd care more about the camp, Ben."

Ben felt blood rushing to his face, but kept his voice steady as he said, "The camp is just a place. People matter more, Andy. I give up revenge. I choose life."

Edeline walked over to Andy and took his hand in hers. "If you're staying, so am I."

"What about you, Jen?" asked Mac.

She turned away from the mound of black earth and wiped her cheeks. "I'm thinking about what Michael would have wanted," she said, her voice trembling. "He loved the camp, and he'd hate to let Barry win, but he cared more for us, for Marleen and me." She turned to Ben. "He trusted you. Lately, he often said that perhaps he ought to listen to you more. I'm coming with you."

"So am I," said Jimmy, blushing when he realized that everybody's eyes were upon him. "Remember the orphanage? Remember how I begged to stay, because I was afraid of changes and wanted to stick with the familiar, even if it was lousy? But after some time, I was happy to be out. I reckon it will be the same now. We'll make a good life for ourselves. I'm going."

"Thanks, Jimmy," said Ben.

Ron looked torn. He chewed his lip for a long time before he said, "I'm staying with Andy. I don't think we should stay forever, just until we settle the score with ol' Barry. Then I'm all for moving out into the open."

"I'm staying too," said Will. "This camp is our home. I see no reason why we should leave. Things were good for us here until Barry stuck his foot in."

"I'll come with you," Enzo said. "If you'll have me, that is. And I'll understand if you don't want me."

Mac did not look pleased. "I'm warning you, Enzo, if you're trying to play some kind of trick..."

"No tricks," Enzo assured him. "Look at this from my point of view. I

don't want to stay in Barry's camp, so I need to find another camp, preferably as far away from Barry as possible. That means I need to get out of the city. But I don't want to do it alone. You're going out. You'll have to work hard to make it. You'll need every extra hand and I'm willing to pitch in with anything that needs to be done."

Ben thought about it, sizing him up. *It could be a trap. It would be just like Barry to try something, and Enzo's been his sidekick for a long time. But I don't think Enzo's a good enough actor to tell lies or pretend to be something he's not. And he's right. We'll need every pair of hands for the work we'll have to do setting ourselves up in a new home.*

Finally coming to a decision, Ben extended his hand, and Enzo took it. The handshake was awkward, but it seemed to cement something. A new path was formed, and they were going to walk it together.

Finally coming to a decision, Ben extended his hand, and Enzo took it. The handshake was awkward, but it seemed to cement something. A new path was formed, and they were going to walk it together.

---

---

---

Thank you for reading the beginning of *Wild Children*. I hope you enjoyed it.

To read the rest of the story, please use one of the links below to order the full Kindle edition or a copy of the print edition from me, Amazon, or the publisher. You can also find or order the print edition at your local bookseller world-wide.

[Kindle edition](#).

Print edition [from my Amazon Createspace store](#).

Print edition [from Amazon's main site](#).

Print edition [from the publisher and get FREE shipping](#).

~ ~ ~

I love to hear from readers, so please let me know what you think about this sample, the whole story, the characters, or anything else on your mind. You can reach me by email to: [hannahrossbooks@masonmarshall.com](mailto:hannahrossbooks@masonmarshall.com) (Your email address will be kept strictly confidential) or stop by *Wild Children's* Facebook

page: <https://www.facebook.com/wildchildrenmmp/>

Thank you!

~Hannah