

Fifth form are working on detailed drawings of the State crest, their five-pointed stars measured perfectly. There's no sign of the drama of the other day, apart from the silence that comes from the English room, the screen that's been erected around its door, and the empty seat where Keiren should be. The children seem more subdued than usual, a little more seriousness in their faces, though I could be imagining it. If only Oliver would tell me what's happening with Keiran, though I've given up hope of getting to see him. My access pass keeps me confined to the few rooms that make up the school.

As I walk between the desks, checking the children's work, Rue, a nine-year-old who's barely said a word the whole week I've been here, shields an arm around his work. I pause for a closer look. His star emanates with intricate patterns – little bursts of linework that expand and curl back in on each other. His is the only creative streak in the entire class and I can't support it. Penny still hasn't returned since Oliver took her drawing away on my first day. 'Don't get too carried away,' I say. Rue sinks a little in his seat, and I start to move on, but the injustice of it won't let go of me, so I crouch beside him, lower my voice. 'Actually, forget I said that.' I tell him to continue but to make sure he gives it to me when he's done.

It isn't until lunch that I get to Oliver's office, the hope of making a small difference firing me. I accept the cup of coffee he offers but I cut off his usual politely pointed questions by putting Rue's picture on his desk.

'Tell me what's wrong with this.'

Oliver examines it. 'Well it has overdone the symmetry, Grace. And there is too tight a control on the stroke, no fluidity in the movement.' He puts it back on the desk. 'May I ask the purpose of your question?'

'The answer is nothing. There's nothing wrong with it. It's just a kid using their imagination.' I pick it up, wave it at him. 'Would this earn the child who did it a visit to Integration? Because it shouldn't, Oliver. Art is about creativity and expression and this is... this is stifling. I know you're trying to help them but it's destroying them.'

As I speak, he moves so that he's in front of me, takes the drawing from my hand, then places it on the desk. 'You are looking at it the wrong way, Grace. We are teaching them the value of the surface. A valuable survival skill, given the times we live in.' He lights a cigarette, a half-smile on his lips. 'Tell me, are you busy this evening?' Though it pains me to lie, I tell him I am and he frowns. 'Can you not postpone it?'

He looks so troubled by the thought that I almost consider it, but now that Dwaine knows about the Orphanage, I can't risk telling him I'm spending another night with Maggie. 'I promised my brother I'd help him with something.'

He studies me for what feels like a long time. 'Perhaps when you are done?'

'I'm... I'm sorry,' I say.

He nods to himself. 'No, you are quite right to be strong. Though I fear your absence shall do nothing to quell my desire for your company.' He flicks me a smile. 'We shall make up for it another evening.' The phone on his desk buzzes and he answers it, then looks at me as if weighing something up. 'Forgive me, Grace, I must attend to this. Please finish your refreshment and then show yourself out.' He gives me a small bow and leaves the office.

When I'm sure he's not coming back in, I check to see if there are any cameras, then try the tablet on the desk, but it's locked. But that's okay. Because beside it is a pass, exactly like mine except for the small writing across the top. *Access all areas*. I slip it into my pocket.

I have twenty minutes before class. The corridor seems to go on forever, one set of double doors after another. I'm on the ground floor, have slipped through a door beyond the classrooms that I've seen people in white uniforms enter. It seemed a good place to start. The rooms that run off it are all the same – small and sterile, with single desks or chairs and tables. One of them is a small kitchen. It's all so clean and functional. A couple of the doors are locked but through the glass I can see desks, filing cabinets, workstations. Nothing useful. I come to a lift with wide steel doors like in a hospital. I glance back down the corridor. Something's not right. Silence clings to the corners, and there hangs the vaguely unnerving scent of disinfectant and that floral scent I noticed on my first day; there's nothing happening here. Still, I hesitate, staring at the lift buttons and then I realise... it doesn't just go up, but down.

Before I can think about it, I scan the pass and press the button, and the cables spring to life with a groan. Will the sound raise suspicion? There's no telltale ding when it arrives, just the slide of doors and as they open my excuse is on my lips – I'm looking for Belle – but there's no one to tell it to. I slip into the lift, taking a deep breath. I scan the pass and push the button marked B. Nothing happens. I do it again and a green light flashes by the door, then with a shudder, the lift starts moving. It's probably just a basement, piled with old desks and supplies. Or maybe it leads to the car park and I'll see Oliver's car, the one with the blacked out windows he's sent me home in before, the one with no lock release in the back seat. It left me cold, getting out of that car, thinking of how many children have sat in those seats before me. Because that's what he does, for all his charm and sophistication, he takes children from their families, and the sooner I get out of here, the better. I've just got to make it count. If Dwaine ever finds out I let Oliver kiss me, well, at least he'll see it was worthwhile.

That scent is worse here, it hits me as soon as the doors open – less disinfectant and more floral, like flowers on the verge of putrefication. It's just as quiet, though. I step into the corridor and when I'm certain there's no one around, I try a couple of doors.

They're locked. A sliding noise makes me spin around but it's only the lift doors closing. I check my watch, I've got fourteen minutes. I won't go far, I'll check out a couple of rooms and head back up.

Door after door is locked, but one finally gives. There's no desks, just rows of small drawers. They're labelled but it's all in another language, Italian or Latin or something. Inside, small envelopes are filled with seeds. Maybe they grow their own food here. I slip some into my pocket, just in case, thinking of the way Dwaine carefully collects the seeds from his tomatoes. Every drawer I open has more envelopes, some of the seeds are tiny like grain, others round and fat, another drawer is packed with bulbs. I stash a few more seeds in my pocket and return to the corridor, that scent hitting me anew. It seems to be coming from further down. This floor might look the same as upstairs, but the air feels different down here, not more cloying as I expected from being beneath the ground but more alive. There's a steady hum coming from a room further along, like the fizz of electric lights. The globes above me are silent. I check my watch again. Ten minutes left.

I come to a solid door. I can either give up or open it like I'm meant to be here, so I take a deep breath and give it a push and the scent of flowers hits me with full force. Except it's no longer sickly, but sweet and welcoming and transports me instantly to the cottage, the bunches of flowers my aunt used to have spilling from vases, filling the house with their perfume. There are rows of them here, mass plantings in troughs lined up beneath humming blue lights, the soft pink flowers closest to me in full bloom. There must be hundreds.

'Close that door!' I bite my lip to stifle a cry, my heart pounding, and the door slips from my hand. It takes a moment to spot the owner of the voice amongst all the flowers – an old man in overalls huddled over a bench near the far wall. 'How many times do I have to tell you people to keep it closed?' He shakes his head.

'Sorry.' Now would be a good time to flee back to the lift, but I can't believe what I'm seeing. I came looking for dirt and all I've found are flowers. And the band of colour that emanates from them is beyond anything I've seen, the low, pink swell wrapped in a greenish glow, connecting flower after flower. I long to hold out my hand, to feel the buzz of it against my fingertips.

'Have you got the boys?'

'Boys?' I take a step back.

He stands up straight, squinting at me. 'I haven't seen you before.'

'I'm looking for Belle.'

'What section are you from?'

'I thought she might be here.' I grip the door handle.

'You're not one of those section D recruits, are you?'

'Yeah. New intake.' I open the door. 'It's okay, I'll go back to her office.' I'm out the door before he can ask another question. I

rush to the lift and press the button, exhaling as they rumble into gear, one eye on the corridor in case the old man appears. I've got two minutes. As the doors open, I almost leap inside, swiping the pass and pressing the button to go back to the ground floor. The doors close and I let out a sigh. But nothing happens. I scan the pass again, press the button, waiting for the green light to flash. Nothing. I do it again. Shit. I swipe and press, swearing under my breath. One minute. I'm going to have to find the stairs.

I search for an exit sign but can see none, and all the doors I try are locked. I push into the next section of corridor, scanning every door with the pass in hope of finding a way out, and then I spot the words 'exit' and an arrow, at the end. I'm almost breaking into a run, and as I near the corner a door bangs shut. I freeze, unsure which direction it came from. There are voices, further around the bend, getting closer. I push at a door and it gives. What happens if the children show up and I'm not in class? Will someone raise an alarm? I hold my breath, listening for footsteps and that's when I become aware of breathing - a shallow, ragged sound, faster than mine but unnaturally even. And it's in this room.

Behind me, in the middle of the room, is a bed, a small body on it, an oxygen mask over their face. My stomach sinks as I get closer, recognising that small, unconscious face. Kieren. There's a strap over his middle, another over his legs, his chest rising and falling in a mechanical rhythm. Oh god, I should have stopped him, I should have done something, anything. I could undo the straps now, try to wake him up, but I don't know how to get myself out of here, let alone a child. I brush his hair back, thinking of his face pressed to my skirt as the other children cried at the chaos around us, and of how trustingly he took the receptionist's hand at the promise of seeing Belle. 'I'm so sorry,' I say. I couldn't stop it then and I can't do anything about it now. I was supposed to be in class five minutes ago.

And just as I'm thinking this, the door opens. There are two security guards, eyeing me with suspicion. I can only stare at them, a lick of red tugging at my insides.

'What are you doing in here?' They're both thickly built, though the one in front is taller, his eyes sharp.

I straighten to my full height. 'I was just... I was checking on the boy.'

'You're not authorised to be here.' He looks at me the way the officers in the street do, with barely disguised malevolence.

'I was told he would be here. You can check.'

He steps further into the room, his comrade sidling up behind him. 'By who?' They're watching me too closely. The red entwines in the edges of my fear and I push it down, concentrating on my excuses.

'Belle. She asked me to...'

'Where's your clearance?'

I hold out the access pass and he takes a small device from his belt, runs it over the plastic surface. He looks at the other guy and something I don't like passes between them. 'It's not activated.' There's no surprise in his voice.

'What do you mean?' They're on either side of me, closing in. He holds out a hand. There's nowhere for me to go. I don't want to hurt anyone.

'You'll need to come with us.'