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Opening Extract from...

AFTER THE FIRE

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AFTER THE FIRE

Will Hill

USBORNE

Go tell that long tongue liar,
go and tell that midnight rider,
tell the rambler, the gambler, the backbiter,
tell 'em that God's gonna cut 'em down.
Traditional



I sprint across the yard, my eyes streaming, my heart pounding in my chest.

The noise of the gunfire is still deafening, and I hear – I actually hear *– bullets whizzing past me, their low whines like the speeded-up buzz of insects, but I don't slow down, and I don't change course. The Chapel is burning out of control, its roof engulfed by roaring fire and sending up a huge black plume of smoke, and the amplified voice of the Government booms across the compound, repeating its deafening demand over and over again.*

"PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND COME FORWARD SLOWLY WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!"

Nobody is listening. Not the other Governments, and definitely not any of my Brothers and Sisters.

In the distance, back near the Front Gate, the tank rumbles forward, crushing the flimsy wire fence and churning the desert floor. Somewhere, over the engines and the endless rattle of gunfire, I can hear screams of pain and pleading shouts for help, but I force myself to ignore them and keep going: my eyes are fixed on the wooden cabins at the western edge of The Base.

I trip over something.

My feet tangle, and I go sprawling onto the cracked tarmac of the yard. Pain crunches through me as my shoulder hits the ground,

but I grit my teeth and get back to my feet and look round to see what I fell over.

Alice is lying on her back, her hands clutching her stomach.

Her shirt has turned red, and she's lying in a pool of blood that seems too big to have all come out of one person. She's still alive though. Her eyes are dim, but they find mine, and she looks at me with an expression I can't describe. There's pain there, a lot of pain, and shock, and fear, and something that looks like confusion, like she wants to know how things ever came to this.

I hold her gaze. I want to stay with her, to tell her it's all right and that she's going to be okay, but it isn't *all right,* nothing *is, and I don't know very much about bullet wounds but I don't think she is going to be okay.*

I'm pretty sure she's going to die.

I stare at her, wasting seconds that the still-functional bit of my brain screams at me for wasting, then run towards the west barracks. Alice's eyes widen as I turn away, but I don't see anger in them. I think she understands what I have to do.

That's what I tell myself, at least.

A figure emerges out of the swirling smoke and I skid to a halt, my hands raised. But it isn't one of the Governments, with their black helmets and goggles and guns. It's Amos, his eyes red and puffy, one arm limp at his side, a pistol trembling in his good hand.

"Where's Father John?" he asks, his voice hoarse and torn. "Have you seen him?"

I shake my head and try to circle around him, but he grabs my arm and pulls me close.

"Where is he? Where is The Prophet?" he rasps.

"I don't know!" I scream, because the tank has reached the yard

and the gunfire is heavier than ever and the fire is leaping from building to building faster than I can follow.

I push Amos as hard as I can, and he stumbles backwards. He swings the pistol towards me but I'm already moving. I hear shots behind me but none of them find their target before I plunge into the smoke.

It's instantly hard to breathe; I clamp one of my hands over my mouth and nose but the thick, bitter smoke slips between my fingers and I start to cough. I see my fallen Brothers and Sisters all around me as I run, dark shapes that I stagger left and right to avoid. A few are moving, dragging themselves across the ground or twitching and spasming like they're having a fit, but most of them aren't.

Most of them are still.

The west barracks appear in front of me, their walls and flat roofs wreathed in acrid smoke. The gunfire is constant behind me, and with so many bullets flying through the air it feels like a matter of time until the inevitable happens. But as long as I unlock the cabins before it does, I don't care.

I really don't.

I stumble out of the worst of the smoke and towards the nearest cabin, fumbling the skeleton key out of my pocket. I grab the padlock hanging from the door and there's a sizzling sound and for the briefest of moments I don't understand what has happened – until pain explodes through me and I wrench my hand away and most of my palm stays stuck to the metal lock. I fall to my knees, clutching my ruined left hand against my stomach, and a scream that doesn't even sound human bursts out of my mouth.

It's overwhelming.

The pain.

It feels like someone has pushed my hand into a jar of acid and

is holding it there, and as my brain tries to process the agony everything else fades away: the smell of the smoke, the heat of the fire, the noise of the guns. Grey creeps in from all sides, like the volume on my senses is being turned down. Then something shoves me from behind and everything comes hurtling back as I tumble to the ground.

One of the Governments is standing over me, its face hidden behind its mask, the gaping muzzle of its gun pointing between my eyes.

"Hands where I can see them!" It's a man's voice. "Show me your hands!"

They tremble as I hold them up above me. "Please," I say, my voice a raw croak. "Children. There are children in these cabins. Please."

"Shut up!" he yells. "Not another word!"

"Please," I repeat. "In the cabins. You have to help them."

The Government glances at the buildings. My head is spinning and my stomach is churning and I feel like I'm going to pass out from the pain screaming in my hand, but I force my eyes to stay open, force my reeling mind to focus on the dark figure above me.

"Padlocks," I whisper, and hold out the skeleton key. "Please…"

My strength fails me. The Government looks at the cabin. Looks down at me. Looks at the cabin.

"Shit!" he shouts, then grabs the key out of my hand and spins towards the door. I watch him grip the padlock with his gloved hand and slide the key home, and I wonder for an awful moment whether this is all going to have been a waste of time, whether there are some locks that even a skeleton key can't open. Then the cylinder turns, and the padlock springs loose. The Government hauls the door open and my coughing, spluttering Brothers and Sisters come flooding out, their eyes red and streaming with tears.

"Go to the Front Gate," I manage to croak. "Stay together. Put your hands up…"

At the back of the crowd I see Honey and I feel something in my chest that momentarily overwhelms the pain in my hand. Her eyes are swollen and puffy and her skin is pale, but her mouth and jaw are set in familiar lines of determination and she's breathing, if nothing else.

I wasn't sure she would be.

She helps the last few crying, panicking children out of the cabin and leads them south, towards the Front Gate. The Government races to the next cabin, shouting into his radio for backup, and I feel something break loose inside me, a surge of relief so powerful it's almost physical. It breathes new life into my exhausted muscles, and I drag myself up into a sitting position.

The children are making their way across the yard, their little hands raised in surrender, and then there's a rush of movement as Governments come sprinting out of the smoke and scoop my Brothers and Sisters up and carry them out through the gaping holes in the fence. I can hear them crying and shrieking for their parents and my heart breaks for them but they're alive, they're still alive, and that's all that matters, that's the only *thing that matters as the world burns down.*

I hear a scream, loud and high-pitched enough to cut through the gunfire and the roar of the inferno, and I turn my head towards it. Near the blazing ruins of the Chapel, two of the Governments have caught hold of Luke and lifted him off the ground by his arms and legs. He's thrashing in their grip, screaming and bellowing for them to put him down, to let him go with the others, to let him Ascend.

His voice, full of fury and fervour and desperate, frantic panic, is the last thing I hear before everything goes dark.

AFTER

…I DRIFT…

…my hand feels like it's been wrapped in fire. My eyes open and everything is white and there's a beeping noise and something looming over me that has no face and I try to scream but nothing happens and I'm so scared that I can't even think and my eyes roll back and…

…a man looks down at me and his face is just eyes above a white mask and he shows me a huge needle and I just stare at it because I'm too scared to move and when he pushes it into my arm I don't even feel it because the pain in my hand is still so huge that it blocks everything else out. I know what doctors are from when I was little and TV was still allowed but I've never seen one in real life until now and The Prophet is screaming in my head that doctors are agents of THE GOVERNMENT, that every one of them is a SERVANT OF THE SERPENT, and his voice rattles and shakes my brain and my stomach churns and I'm so scared that I can't even breathe while the doctor tapes the needle that's inside my arm to my skin and connects it to a tube that leads to a bag of milky white liquid. He says something I don't understand and then the liquid starts to flow and I watch it creep down the tube towards my arm but I can't move a single muscle and I manage to form a thought over the noise of Father John howling in my head and I wonder what is going to happen when the white liquid goes inside me and I wonder if I'm still going to be me the next time I wake up…

…the lights above me are blinding and the pain is much less and the plastic bag at the end of the tube is empty and I can just about raise my head far enough to see the big mitten of bandages that has been wrapped around my left hand. Sometimes a doctor stands next to my bed and stares at me and sometimes I hear raised voices in the distance and sometimes I start crying and can't stop. I'm too hot and too cold and everything is wrong and I really want to go home, because even that was better than this. A man wearing a hat and a uniform asks me my name but Father John roars in my head and I don't answer. He asks again and I don't answer again and he rolls his eyes and walks away…

…a woman in a uniform tells someone to sit me up and then hands reach underneath me and fingers press into my skin and drag me along the bed until I'm propped against a pillow. The woman in the uniform says "That's better" and I almost laugh because nothing is better, nothing is even *remotely close* to better. "Can you tell me who started the fire?" she asks, and I shake my head. "Who handed out the guns?" I shake my head. "Did you see John Parson after the shooting started?" I shake my head. "What happened inside the main house? What did you do in there?" I shake my head. She stares at me and when she speaks again her voice is cold. "People are dead, girl," she says. "A lot of people. You need to start talking." She leans over me and I don't know what's she's going to do so I turn my head

away and I see a gold badge on her belt stamped with the words LAYTON COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT and my heart stops dead in my chest and I hear myself screaming and the woman in the uniform jumps backwards, her eyes wide with shock, and I hear running footsteps and my heart starts back up and I'm thrashing on the bed and screaming and screaming and I feel hands pin my arms and legs and a doctor lowers another needle towards me and…

…the faces of my Brothers and Sisters swarm out of the darkness, people I've known my whole life, their hair on fire, their skin melting off their skulls, and they're screaming two words over and over and over again: "YOUR FAULT YOUR FAULT YOUR FAULT YOUR FAULT YOUR FAULT." I turn away from them and try to run but the ground turns to quicksand beneath my feet and I sink to my ankles as fingertips brush my shoulders and the back of my neck and I'm terrified but I can't scream because my mouth won't open. All I can do is wade through inky blackness, dragging myself forward, trying to find the way back…

…a man wearing a dark suit stands beside my bed and I'm soaked with sweat and my hand really hurts, like it's covered with biting insects, and I don't think I've ever been so tired. My body feels like it is made of lead and concrete and my eyelids are the heaviest things in the whole world. The man tells me I'm being moved and I try to ask where but all that comes out, as Father John bellows in my head that *you never talk to Outsiders*, *not under any circumstances*, is a rasping whisper. The man says he doesn't know and I summon up every last bit of strength

I have left and ask him who made it out of the fire. He grimaces and walks away…

…there's a paintbrush in my hand and it's dripping with cornflower blue and I know I'm dreaming but I don't care because I don't want to wake up. I paint the wooden wall in front of me and I hear the distant crash of waves at the base of the cliff and I smell smoke as it rises from the chimney and I know that if I look down I'll see green grass beneath my feet, but I don't look down. I paint the wooden board in front of me, and the one next to it, and the one next to that…

…a different man in an identical dark suit reads a list of names from a piece of paper. I hear Honey and Rainbow and Lucy and Jeremiah and I burst into tears of relief and the man gives me the first smile I've seen since I've been lying on this bed and he carries on reading out names but not for long and my relief gives way to grief and my tears keep coming because the list is so very, very short…

…the ceiling slides by as two doctors wheel my bed along a corridor and into an empty metal box that shudders and rattles and makes my stomach spin. I try to reach out for the walls to steady myself but one of the doctors pushes my arms back down onto the bed and my left hand howls with pain and I cry out and the doctor says "Sorry" but his eyes are cold and his mouth is hidden behind his mask. There's a beep and a jolt and a rush of cool air and then I'm moving again and I see a sliver of sky, as blue as the wall in my dream, before I'm lifted and rolled into another metal box, although this one has shelves full of boxes

and bottles and machines I don't recognize. There's a rumble beneath me as an engine starts up somewhere close by and it sounds a bit like the red pickup that Amos used to drive but it's much louder and it sounds angry…

…a woman with a kind face wearing a white uniform helps me up from the bed I've been lying on ever since I woke up and gently lowers me onto a different one in a square white room with a window set high up in one wall. She tells me to press an orange button next to the door if I need anything and a lump fills my throat and I ask her not to leave me and she hugs me and I start crying again and the voice in the back of my head gets really angry because I haven't cried this much since I was a little girl but I can't help it. The woman with the kind face shushes me and strokes my hair and tells me it's okay, everything is going to be okay, she'll be right there if I need her, then gently slides herself out of my arms and gives me a smile before she walks out of the room and closes the door behind her and as I lie down on the bed I hear a heavy metallic thud as a lock slides into place…

…I drift…

AFTER

I'M SAT ON A DARK RED SOFA and my legs won't stop shaking and my hand really hurts and I'm trying not to be scared but I can't help it because I don't know what's going to happen to me.

I don't even know where I am.

The room I'm sitting in is bigger than my room at The Base but it's still pretty small. The walls are pale grey and the floor is dark grey carpet and it contains the dark red sofa and a wide table with two chairs tucked under the far side, facing towards me. Everything is smooth and clean and there's a machine sitting on the table and a camera above the door. The woman in the white uniform with the kind face – *Nurse Harrow,* whispers the voice in the back of my head, *she told you her name was Nurse Harrow* – brought me in here five minutes ago and I saw the words INTERVIEW ROOM 1 printed on the door as she pushed it open.

She asked me if I wanted anything before she left. I didn't have any idea how to answer her.

I hear a lock turn and I hold my breath as the door opens and a man walks into the room. He's small, with a thick beard and thinning hair and deep lines either side of a pair of friendly eyes. He's wearing a white shirt and a tie and he has a leather bag over his shoulder. He pulls out one of the chairs and sits down, then takes a stack of notebooks and pens out of his bag