CALM

REPORT
RESISTANCE



DON'T TRUST
DISCONTENT

S.J. BAKER

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For Laurie and Janet Gavin, who told me my first stories.

1.

Owyn

The sun scorched his back through the classroom window. The air was stuffy in the summer heat, and for the first time in his life Owyn Caldwell felt scared.

At least, he thought it must be fear. Mustn't it? His palms were slippery on the hard plastic of his chair. He wiped them on his jeans and swallowed hard. The sound filled the empty classroom.

How long would she make him wait?

He breathed out, shakily. He wanted to swallow again, but his mouth was too dry.

Outside, he could hear the quiet murmuring of his classmates gathered around the calmaspring as they slaked their thirst between lessons. He should be out there with them. He had been, until five minutes ago. When the summons came.

They'd said it was urgent. *How much longer?*

On the wall behind the teacher's desk, the security camera hung like a bulging insect eye. Thom had told him it was ancient—more than twenty years old, pre-dating the Great Calm, even. Like so much else, it didn't work, Thom had said. What would it see, anyway? Just good-citizens-in-training.

Owyn fidgeted in his chair. A pile of exercise books lay on the teacher's desk in front of him. On the wall a poster reminded him, "Speak Up! Silence is Lying." A fly buzzed lazily against the window.

How long—?

Miss Kennedy's heels echoed sharply behind him on the stone tiles, their staccato beat setting his heart pounding. She swept past him on to the slightly raised platform where the teacher's desk stood, angling the chair towards him, smoothing her skirt, sitting with an easy confidence that made Owyn tuck his sweaty palms under his thighs.

The air jangled with the silence between them. He wouldn't speak first.

Miss Kennedy rested her elbows on the desk, her fingers steepled under her chin. *I haven't done anything wrong*, he thought.

She held his gaze. Owyn pressed his lips together, and she tilted her head, just a fraction.

The words burst out of him. "Why d'you want to see me, Miss?"

Her expression didn't change, but her eyes darkened slightly. "You remember, Owyn, that asking *why* is rarely the right question? We focus on what *is*. We are content with what we have. *Why* is unhelpful." Her smile failed to touch her eyes. "You would do better to put it aside." She reached down and took a water bottle out of her bag, placing it on the desk before her.

"It's hot, isn't it?" she said. "Have a drink, Owyn."

He shifted uncomfortably on the plastic chair and shook his head. She raised an eyebrow.

"Courtesy in All Things, Owyn. You know that."

He replied, shakily. "Er—sorry. No, thanks. Miss. I'm fine."

"Have a drink, Owyn," she repeated. She had not taken her eyes off him.

He reached forwards and took the bottle. A few drops spattered onto the floor between them as he fumbled with

the tight lid. He raised the bottle to his lips; she watched him, unmoving, as he took a mouthful and swallowed.

He tried to keep his face completely still, but as the increasingly familiar jolt of Resistance ran through him, he knew it was visible in his eyes.

She folded her hands on the desk. "How long has this been going on, Owyn?"

"Er—a month or so. Not very long." His mouth was dry, his stomach tight. *Definitely fear*. He fought to keep his face blank.

"You didn't think to…tell anyone?"

He knew he should have. There it was on the noticeboard behind her: *A Problem Shared is a Problem Solved!* And alongside it, more directly: *Report Resistance Right Away!*

"Er—no, Miss." Then, as the silence lengthened, "I thought it would go away."

"Quite," she said. Another pause bloomed. Behind her, high on the classroom wall, the security camera hummed alive, its bulging eye swiveling towards him. *So it does work*, he thought, *which means—*

"Owyn Caldwell," Miss Kennedy said. "You will not return to lessons after the lunch break. You will report to the Council this afternoon. You may visit your dormitory to pack a small bag for an overnight stay. You will not communicate with anyone other than myself. Is that understood?"

The words hung in the air between them as he stared at her in shock. "What—what have I done wrong, Miss?" he asked.

"Failure to report Resistance is a serious matter, Owyn," she said coldly. "You know that. Compliance is the cornerstone of our society. You need to be…re-focused."

The camera hummed again, resetting itself, back to covering the whole room. Fleetingly, Owyn imagined Thom's

face when he told him later it actually worked… His stomach twisted with that unfamiliar lurching he was learning to call fear. He wouldn't be telling Thom anything, would he? Not if Miss Kennedy meant what she'd said.

The teacher stood up and waited for Owyn to do the same. He clambered to his feet, his chair scraping harshly on the tiled floor. As he moved towards the door, she shifted to stand between him and the camera, then pressed a scrap of paper into his hand, at the same time as pushing him on so that there was no break in his stride.

The paper burned in his hand. When he was safely outside, he risked a glance at the fragment.

Leave now, it said. *If you stay, you'll be lost.*

2.

Tiegan

The text from her mother came in the middle of a Good Citizens lesson, so Tiegan couldn't check it until the end of the day. *Pick up Joel,* it said. No *please;* no explanation. That wasn't like Mum.

Joel was waiting in the Junior yard with the other little ones and took her hand obediently enough, trotting beside her through the busy shopping area until they reached the quieter streets. Then the questions began: "Why's Mum not here?" he asked. "Where's Dad?"

Tiegan shrugged, only half-listening, as they rounded the corner into the street of terraced houses where they lived. And then stopped.

Two blue Servant vans were parked in the road. A neighbour in trouble? No: it was *their* front door which stood open. A curtain twitched in the house next door as blue-uniformed strangers moved in and out of their house, calling out to each other, carrying papers and books.

"Why are those vans—?"

Tiegan squeezed Joel's hand, hard, and he stopped talking with a little yelp.

"I don't know," she said. "We've got to be careful. Keep quiet when we get inside." But how did you stop a five-year-old from asking awkward questions?

In the hallway, a Servant Cadet was on his knees, wiping something off the wall. Something red. Tiegan's throat tightened and she clamped her mouth shut, steering Joel past, willing him not to see, not to understand. Their mother sat at the kitchen table, pale-faced, answering questions from a softly-spoken woman.

So it was Dad they'd taken.

"And you had no idea of your husband's Resistance?"

"None. It must be recent, he…"

"Had his behaviour altered?"

"Not that I'd noticed, but…"

"Did he read these books?"

"No, I'd have noticed that—they're just…"

"He didn't seek help in any way?"

"I—well, not from me—I…"

"Has he had much access to the children in recent weeks?" The Servant looked straight at Tiegan now, who kept her face blank and resisted the urge to make eye contact with her mother.

"Dad?" Tiegan said. "Not really. We don't talk much."

Watch me do the face, Dad, she thought. *Just as you always taught us. You'd be so proud of me.*

*

When the Servants left, Tiegan ran upstairs to her parents' room and threw herself on their bed. Her father's pillow still smelled of his aftershave and she burrowed her face into it, her hot tears soaking into its fabric. She curled up under the covers and, between sobs, tried to breathe in his scent, holding on to him with all her senses.

"Tiegan, get up." Her mother's hand touched her shoulder. "They'll be back before long to check up on us. If they find you like this, they'll arrest us all. Get up. Dry your face."

When the doorbell rang two hours later, Tiegan answered the door at her mother's nod, and the soft-voiced Servant was there.

"Just checking you're all right, Tiegan," she smiled. "This sort of thing can be a shock for families."

"No," said Tiegan, meeting her gaze frankly. "We're fine."

"That's good," the woman answered. She took a step closer to Tiegan, her eyes sympathetic, and took her hand. Tiegan forced herself not to pull away. "You can always get in touch if you need someone to talk to," the woman continued, her voice gentle and inviting. "Or if you…remember anything else. That would help us."

"Of course. But we're fine," repeated Tiegan, politely. "Thank you for checking." She dropped the woman's cool dry hand and watched her walk back to the blue car before carefully and quietly shutting the front door.

*

By the time he was eight, Joel had learned, like Tiegan, to stop asking questions, at least in public—had learned to smile obediently at teachers' jokes, to drink thirstily from the calmaspring, to walk home sedately at each day's end. They both spent more time on their phones, playing mind-numbing games, in case their online activity was being monitored. They grew used to a home that no longer boomed with their father's voice: grew used to his not being there.

At first, her mother tried to find out where her husband was being held, what was happening to him, how long the re-focusing would take.

She was met with soothing responses that told her nothing, but also—increasingly—a raised eyebrow here, a puzzled expression there. "You do know, Mrs. Archer, that we're doing everything we can to make him well again?" they asked her. When they moved on to, "Are you sure you knew nothing of his Resistance?" her questions had to stop.

"Who's in charge of the Servants? Isn't there anyone else you can ask?" begged Tiegan, the grief at her father's absence a savage pain.

Her mother held her close, hugged her tightly. "I don't know, Tiegan," she murmured, stroking her daughter's hair. "There's a government somewhere, of course—but—well, you've heard the slogans. *Let the Servants take the Strain*." She smiled, without humour. "It's hard to believe, now, but when I was your age, we could vote for our leaders. And we could shout it out loud if we didn't like them." Her voice became dreamy. "I went on a protest march once. I was about eighteen. Thousands of us, filling the streets, carrying banners, raising our voices. Standing up for what we believed in. Imagine that!" Her mother's voice broke. "Not at all like now. We're told everything's so wonderful, after all. Why would anyone want to complain?"

But for Tiegan, now fourteen, not complaining was getting harder, which made no sense after so many years of practice. Feelings of irritation, of frustration, of fury, bubbled inside her so intensely that surely anyone nearby would feel the heat rising off her; it took more and more of her energy to stop her anger erupting and overflowing at school. Often it was only by conjuring up her family's faces—her mother's, weary and

lined with worry; Joel's, pale and inward—that she managed to discipline the muscles of her own.

At home, they rationed their talk about Dad. It wasn't safe to speak of him. But when Tiegan fretted and chafed, it was her father's words that helped her hold things together. "They also serve who only stand and wait," he used to say, quoting his beloved poetry. "Come on, Tiegan, my love. One day at a time—like Patience on a monument." His books were all gone—confiscated by the Servants—and she'd missed her chance to read the stories he had loved, though she still recited some of his favourite lines to herself as she lay in bed at night.

But a whiff of the right aftershave from a stranger passing in the street could crumble her carefully built defences.