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Opening extract from

The Declaration

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Chapter One 

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My name is Anna.

My name is Anna and I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't exist.

But I do.

It's not my fault I'm here. I didn't ask to be born. But that doesn't make it any better that I was. They caught me early, though, which bodes well. That's what Mrs Pincent says, anyway. She's the lady that runs Grange Hall. We call her House Matron. Grange Hall is where I live. Where people like me are brought up to be Useful – the 'best of a bad situation', Mrs Pincent says.

I don't have another name. Not like Mrs Pincent does. Mrs Pincent's name is Margaret Pincent. Some people call her Margaret, most people call her Mrs

Pincent, and we call her House Matron. Lately I've started to call her Mrs Pincent too, although not to her face – I'm not stupid.

Legal people generally have at least two names, sometimes more.

Not me, though. I'm just Anna. People like me don't need more than one name, Mrs Pincent says. One is quite enough.

Actually, she doesn't even like the name Anna – she told me she tried to change it when I first came here. But I was an obstinate child, she says, and I wouldn't answer to anything else, so in the end she gave up. I'm pleased – I like the name Anna, even though my parents gave me that name.

I hate my parents. They broke the Declaration and didn't care about anyone else but themselves. They're in prison now. I don't know where. None of us knows anything about our parents any more. Which is fine by me – I'd have nothing to say to them anyway.

None of the girls or boys here has more than one name. That's one of the things that makes us different, Mrs Pincent says. Not the most important thing, of course – having one name is really just a detail. But sometimes it doesn't feel like a detail. Sometimes I long for a second name, even a horrible one – I wouldn't care what it was. One time I even asked Mrs Pincent if I could be Anna Pincent, to have her name

after mine. But that made her really angry and she hit me hard across the head and took me off hot meals for a whole week. Mrs Larson, our Sewing Instructor, explained later that it had been an insult to suggest that someone like me could have Mrs Pincent's name. As if she could be related to me.

Actually I do sort of have another name, but it's a pre-name, not an after-name. And everyone here has got the same one, so it doesn't really feel like a name. On the list that Mrs Pincent carries around with her, I'm down as:

Surplus Anna.

But really, it's more of a description than a name. We're all Surpluses at Grange Hall. Surplus to requirements. Surplus to capacity.

I'm very lucky to be here, actually. I've got a chance to redeem my Parents' Sins, if I work hard enough and become employable. Not everyone gets that kind of chance, Mrs Pincent says. In some countries Surpluses are killed, put down like animals.

They'd never do that here, of course. In England they help Surpluses be Useful to other people, so it isn't quite so bad we were born. Here they set up Grange Hall because of the staffing requirements of Legal people, and that's why we have to work so hard – to show our gratitude.

But you can't have Surplus Halls all over the world for every Surplus that's born. It's like straws on a camel's back, Mrs Pincent says. Each and every Surplus could be the final straw that breaks the camel's back. Probably, being put down is the best thing for everyone – who would want to be the straw that broke the back of Mother Nature? That's why I hate my parents. It's their fault I'm here. They didn't think about anyone except themselves.

I sometimes wonder about the children who are put down. I wonder how the Authorities do it and whether it hurts. And I wonder what they do for maids and housekeepers in those countries. Or handymen. My friend Sheila says that they do sometimes put children down here too. But I don't believe her. Mrs Pincent says Sheila's imagination is far too active and that it's going to be her downfall. I don't know if her imagination is too active, but I do think she makes things up, like when she arrived and she swore to me that her parents hadn't signed the Declaration, that she was Legal and that it had been a big mistake because her parents had Opted Out of Longevity. She insisted over and over again that they'd be coming to collect her once they'd sorted it all out.

They never did, of course.

There're five hundred of us here at Grange Hall. I'm one of the eldest and I've been here the longest too.

I've lived here since I was two and a half – that's how old I was when they found me. I was being kept in an attic – can you believe that? The neighbours heard me crying, apparently. They knew there weren't meant to be any children in the house and called the Authorities. I owe those neighbours a great deal, Mrs Pincent says. Children have a way of knowing the truth, she says, and I was probably crying because I wanted to be found. What else was I going to do – spend my life in an attic?

I can't remember anything about the attic or my parents. I used to, I think – but I'm not really sure. It could have been dreams I was remembering. Why would anyone break the Declaration and have a baby just to keep it in an attic? It's just plain stupid.

I can't remember much about arriving at Grange Hall either, but that's hardly surprising – I mean, who remembers being two and a half? I remember feeling cold, remember screaming out for my parents until my throat was hoarse because back then I didn't realise how selfish and stupid they were. I also remember getting into trouble no matter what I did. But that's all, really.

I don't get into trouble any more. I've learnt about responsibility, Mrs Pincent says, and am set to be a Valuable Asset.

Valuable Asset Anna. I like that a lot more than Surplus.

The reason I'm set to be a Valuable Asset is that I'm a fast learner. I can cook fifty dishes to top standard, and another forty to satisfactory. I'm not as good with fish as I am with meat. But I'm a good seamstress and am going to make someone a very solid housekeeper according to my last appraisal. If my attention to detail improves, I'll get an even better report next time. Which means that in six months, when I leave Grange Hall, I might go to one of the better houses. In six months it's my fifteenth birthday. It'll be time to fend for myself then, Mrs Pincent says. I'm lucky to have had such good training because I Know My Place, and people in the nicest houses like that.

I don't know how I feel about leaving Grange Hall. Excited, I think, but scared too. The furthest I've ever been is to a house in the village, where I did an internship for three weeks when the owner's own housekeeper was ill. Mrs Kean, the Cooking Instructor, walked me down there one Friday night and then she brought me back when it was over. Both times it was dark so I didn't see much of the village at all.

The house I was working in was beautiful, though. It was nothing like Grange Hall – the rooms were painted in bright, warm colours, with thick carpet on the floor that you could kneel on without it killing your knees, and huge big sofas that made you want to curl up and sleep for ever.

It had a big garden that you could see out of all the windows, and it was filled with beautiful flowers. At the back of the garden was something called an Allotment where Mrs Sharpe grew vegetables sometimes, although there weren't any growing when I was there. She said that flowers were an Indulgence and frowned upon by the Authorities. Now that food couldn't be flown around the world, everyone had to grow their own. She said she thought that flowers were important too, but that the Authorities didn't agree. I think she's right – I think flowers can be just as important as food, sometimes. I think it depends what you're hungry for.

In the house, Mrs Sharpe had her radiators on sometimes, so it was never cold. And she was the nicest, kindest woman – once when I was cleaning her bedroom she offered to let me try on some lipstick. I said no, because I thought she might tell Mrs Pincent, but I regretted it later. Mrs Sharpe talked to me almost like I wasn't a Surplus. She said it was nice to have a young face about the place again.

I loved working there – mainly because of Mrs Sharpe being so nice, but also because I loved looking at the photos she had all over her walls of incredible-looking places. In each photo, there was Mrs Sharpe, smiling, holding a drink or standing in front of a beautiful building or monument. She said that the photographs were mementos of each of her holidays. She went on an international holiday three times a

year at least, she told me. She said that she used to go by aeroplane but now energy tariffs meant that she had to go by boat or train instead, but she still went because you have to see the world, otherwise what's the point? I wanted to ask 'The point of what?' but I didn't because you're not meant to ask questions, it's not polite. She said she'd been to a hundred and fifty different countries, some more than twice, and I tried to stop my mouth dropping open because I didn't want her to know that I hadn't even known there were that many countries in the world. We don't learn about countries at Grange Hall.

Mrs Sharpe has probably been to four hundred and fifty-three countries now, because it was a whole a year ago that I was at her house. I wish I were still her housekeeper. She didn't hit me even once.

It must be amazing to travel to foreign countries. Mrs Sharpe showed me a map of the world and showed me where England is. She told me about the deserts in the Middle East, about the mountains in India and about the sea. I think my favourite place would be the desert because apparently there are no people there at all. It would be hard to be Surplus in the desert – even if you knew you were one really, there wouldn't be anyone else around to remind you.

I'll probably never see any desert, though. Mrs Pincent says it's all disappearing fast because they can

build on it now. Desert is a luxury this world can't afford, she says. And I should be worrying about the state of my ironing, not thinking of places I'll never be able to go to. I'm not sure she's exactly right about that, although I'd never say that to her. Mrs Sharpe said she had a housekeeper once who used to go with her travelling around the world, doing her packing and organising tickets and things like that. She had her for forty years, she told me, and she was very sad to see her go because her new housekeeper can't take the hot temperatures, so she has to leave her behind when she goes away. If I could get a job with a lady who travels a lot, I don't think I'd mind the hot temperatures. The desert's the hottest place of all and I'm sure I'd love it there.

'Anna! Anna, will you come here this minute!'

Anna looked up from the small journal Mrs Sharpe had given her as a parting gift and quickly returned it, and her pen, to its hiding place.

'Yes, Mrs Pincent,' she called hurriedly, and rushed out of Female Bathroom 2 and down the corridor, her face flushed. How long had Mrs Pincent been calling her? How had she not heard her call?

The truth was that she'd never realised how absorbing it could be to write. She'd had Mrs Sharpe's journal for a year now. It was a small, fat book covered in pale pink suede and filled with thick, creamy pages that looked so beautiful she couldn't ever imagine ruining

them by making a single mark on that lovely paper. Every so often she'd taken it out to look at it. She would turn it over in her hands, guiltily enjoying the soft texture of the suede against her skin before secreting it away again. But she'd never written in it – not until today, that is. Today, for some reason, she had taken it out, picked up a pen, and without even thinking had started to write. And once she'd started, she found she didn't want to stop. Thoughts and feelings that usually lay hidden beneath worries and exhaustion suddenly came flooding to the surface as if gasping for air.

Which was all very well, but if it was discovered, she would be beaten. Number one, she wasn't allowed to accept gifts from anyone. And number two, journals and writing were forbidden at Grange Hall. Surpluses were not there to read and write; they were there to learn and work, Mrs Pincent told them regularly. She said that things would be much easier if they didn't have to teach them to read and write in the first place, because reading and writing were a dangerous business; they made you think, and Surpluses who thought too much were useless and difficult. But people wanted maids and housekeepers who were literate, so Mrs Pincent didn't have a choice.

If she were truly Valuable Asset material, she would get rid of the journal completely, Anna knew that. Temptation was a test, Mrs Pincent often said. She'd already failed it twice – first by accepting the gift and now by writing in it. A true Valuable Asset wouldn't

succumb to temptation like that, would they? A Valuable Asset simply wouldn't break the rules.

But Anna, who never broke any rules, who believed that regulations existed to be followed to the letter, had finally found a temptation that she could not resist. Now that the journal bore her writing, she knew that the stakes had been raised, and yet she could not bear to lose it, whatever the cost.

She would simply have to ensure it was never found, she resolved as she raced towards Mrs Pincent's office. If no one knew her guilty secret, then perhaps she could bury her feelings along with the journal and convince herself that she wasn't evil after all, that the little fragment of peace she had carved out for herself at Grange Hall was not really in jeopardy.

Before she turned the corner, Anna took a quick look at herself and smoothed down her overalls. Surpluses had to look neat and orderly at all times, and the last thing Anna wanted was to irk Mrs Pincent unnecessarily. She was a Prefect now, which meant she got second helpings at supper when there was food left over, and an extra blanket that meant the difference between a good night's sleep and one spent shivering from the cold. No, the last thing she wanted was any trouble.

Taking a deep breath, and focusing herself so that she would appear to Mrs Pincent the usual calm and organised Anna, she turned the corner and knocked on the House Matron's open door.

Mrs Pincent's office was a cold, dark room with a wooden floor, yellowing walls covered in peeling paint and a harsh overhead light that seemed to highlight all the dust in the air. Even though she was nearly fifteen now, Anna had been in that room enough times for a beating or some other punishment to feel an instinctive fear every time she crossed its threshold.

'Anna, there you are,' Mrs Pincent said, her voice irritable. 'Please don't keep me waiting like that in future. I want you to prepare a bed for a new boy.'

Anna nodded. 'Yes, House Matron,' she said, deferentially. 'Small?'

The incumbents at Grange Hall were classified as Small, Middle and Pending. Small was the usual entrant size – anything from babies and toddlers up to five-year-olds. You always knew when a new Small had arrived because of the crying and screaming which went on for days as they acclimatised to their new surroundings – which was why the Small's dormitories were tucked away on the top floor where they wouldn't disturb everyone else. That was the idea, anyway; in reality, you could never get away from the crying completely. It pervaded everything – both the wailing of the new Smalls and the memories the sound invoked in everyone else; years of crying which hung in the air like a ghost with unfinished business. Few ever truly forgot their first few weeks and months in the new, harsh surroundings of Grange Hall; few enjoyed the memory of being wrenched

from desperate parents and transported in the dead of night to their new, stark and regimented home. Every time a new Small arrived, the others did their best to close their ears and ignore the memories that inevitably found their way into their consciousness. No one felt sorry for them – if anything, they felt resentment and anger. One more Surplus, ruining things for everyone else.

Middles were the six-year-olds up to about eleven or twelve. Some new Middles arrived from time to time, and they tended to be quiet and withdrawn rather than cry. Middles learnt faster how institutional life worked, figured out that tears and tantrums were not tolerated and were not worth the beating. But whilst they were easier to manage than the Smalls, they brought their own set of problems. Because they arrived late, because they had spent so long with their parents, they often had some very bad ideas about things. Some would make challenges in Science and Nature classes; others, like Sheila, secretly held on to the belief that their parents would come for them. Middles could be really idiotic sometimes, refusing to accept that they were lucky to be at Grange Hall.

Anna herself was a Pending. Pending employment. Pending was when the training really started in earnest and you were expected to learn everything you'd need for your future employers. Pending was also when they started testing you, starting up discussions on things like Longevity drugs and parents and

Surpluses, just to see whether you Knew Your Place or not, whether you were fit for the outside world. Anna was far too clever for that trick. She wasn't going to be one of the stupid ones who leapt on the first opportunity to speak their mind and started to criticise the Declaration. They got their two minutes of glory and then they got shipped out to a detention centre. Hard labour was what Mrs Pincent called it. Anna shuddered at the thought. Anyway, she did Know Her Place and didn't want to argue against science and nature and the Authorities. She felt bad enough about existing without becoming a trouble-maker to boot.

Mrs Pincent frowned. 'No, not Small. Make the bed up in the Pending dormitory.'

Anna's eyes opened wide. No one had ever joined Grange Hall as a Pending. It had to be a mistake. Unless he'd been trained somewhere else, of course.

'Has . . . has he come from another Surplus Hall?' she asked before she could stop herself. Mrs Pincent didn't approve of asking questions unless they involved clarification of a specific task.

Mrs Pincent's eyes narrowed slightly. 'That is all, Anna,' she said with a cursory nod. 'You'll have it ready in an hour.'

Anna nodded silently and turned to leave, trying not to betray the intense curiosity she was feeling. A Pending Surplus would be at least thirteen. Who was he? Where had he been all this time? And why was he coming here now?