Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Wither

Written by

Lauren DeStefano

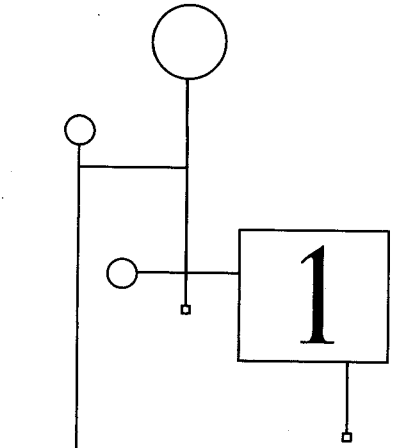
Published by

Harper Voyager

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



1

I WAIT. They keep us in the dark for so long that we lose sense of our eyelids. We sleep huddled together like rats, staring out, and dream of our bodies swaying.

I know when one of the girls reaches a wall. She begins to pound and scream—there's metal in the sound—but none of us help her. We've gone too long without speaking, and all we do is bury ourselves more into the dark.

The doors open.

The light is frightening. It's the light of the world through the birth canal, and at once the blinding tunnel that comes with death. I recoil into the blankets with the other girls in horror, not wanting to begin or end.

We stumble when they let us out; we've forgotten how to use our legs. How long has it been—days? Hours? The big open sky waits in its usual place.

I stand in line with the other girls, and men in gray coats study us.

I've heard of this happening. Where I come from, girls have been disappearing for a long time. They disappear from their beds or from the side of the road. It happened to a girl in my neighborhood. Her whole family disappeared after that, moved away, either to find her or because they knew she would never be returned.

Now it's my turn. I know girls disappear, but any number of things could come after that. Will I become a murdered reject? Sold into prostitution? These things have happened. There's only one other option. I could become a bride. I've seen them on television, reluctant yet beautiful teenage brides, on the arm of a wealthy man who is approaching the lethal age of twenty-five.

The other girls never make it to the television screen. Girls who don't pass their inspection are shipped to a brothel in the scarlet districts. Some we have found murdered on the sides of roads, rotting, staring into the searing sun because the Gatherers couldn't be bothered to deal with them. Some girls disappear forever, and all their families can do is wonder.

The girls are taken as young as thirteen, when their bodies are mature enough to bear children, and the virus claims every female of our generation by twenty.

Our hips are measured to determine strength, our lips pried apart so the men can judge our health by our teeth. One of the girls vomits. She may be the girl who screamed. She wipes her mouth, trembling, terrified. I stand firm, determined to be anonymous, unhelpful.

I feel too alive in this row of moribund girls with their eyes half open. I sense that their hearts are barely beating, while mine pounds in my chest. After so much time spent riding in the darkness of the truck, we have all fused together. We are one nameless thing sharing this strange hell. I do not want to stand out. I do not want to stand out.

But it doesn't matter. Someone has noticed me. A man paces before the line of us. He allows us to be prodded by the men in gray coats who examine us. He seems thoughtful and pleased.

His eyes, green, like two exclamation marks, meet mine. He smiles. There's a flash of gold in his teeth, indicating wealth. This is unusual, because he's too young to be losing his teeth. He keeps walking, and I stare at my shoes. *Stupid!* I should never have looked up. The strange color of my eyes is the first thing anyone ever notices.

He says something to the men in gray coats. They look at all of us, and then they seem to be in agreement. The man with gold teeth smiles in my direction again, and then he's taken to another car that shoots up bits of gravel as it backs onto the road and drives away.

The vomit girl is taken back to the truck, and a dozen other girls with her; a man in a gray coat follows them in. There are three of us left, the gap of the other girls still between us. The men speak to one another again, and then to us. "Go," they say, and we oblige. There's nowhere to go but the back of an open limousine parked

on the gravel. We're off the road somewhere, not far from the highway. I can hear the faraway sounds of traffic. I can see the evening city lights beginning to appear in the distant purple haze. It's nowhere I recognize; a road this desolate is far from the crowded streets back home.

Go. The two other chosen girls move before me, and I'm the last to get into the limousine. There's a tinted glass window that separates us from the driver. Just before someone shuts the door, I hear something inside the van where the remaining girls were herded.

It's the first of what I know will be a dozen more gunshots.

I awake in a satin bed, nauseous and pulsating with sweat. My first conscious movement is to push myself to the edge of the mattress, where I lean over and vomit onto the lush red carpet. I'm still spitting and gagging when someone begins cleaning up the mess with a dishrag.

"Everyone handles the sleep gas differently," he says softly.

"Sleep gas?" I splutter, and before I can wipe my mouth on my lacy white sleeve, he hands me a cloth napkin—also lush red.

"It comes out through the vents in the limo," he says. "It's so you won't know where you're going."

I remember the glass window separating us from the front of the car. Airtight, I assume. Vaguely I remember the whooshing of air coming through vents in the walls.

"One of the other girls," the boy says as he sprays white foam onto the spot where I vomited, "she almost threw herself out the bedroom window, she was so disoriented. The window's locked, of course. Shatterproof." Despite the awful things he's saying, his voice is low, possibly even sympathetic.

I look over my shoulder at the window. Closed tight. The world is bright green and blue beyond it, brighter than my home, where there's only dirt and the remnants of my mother's garden that I've failed to revive.

Somewhere down the hall a woman screams. The boy tenses for a moment. Then he resumes scrubbing away the foam.

"I can help," I offer. A moment ago I didn't feel guilty about ruining anything in this place; I know I'm here against my will. But I also know this boy isn't to blame. He can't be one of the Gatherers in gray who brought me here. Maybe he was also brought here against his will. I haven't heard of teenage boys disappearing, but up until fifty years ago, when the virus was discovered, girls were also safe. Everyone was safe.

"No need. It's all done," he says. And when he moves the rag away, there's not so much as a stain. He pulls a handle out of the wall, and a chute opens; he tosses the rags into it, lets go, and the chute clamps shut. He tucks the can of white foam into his apron pocket and returns to what he was doing. He picks up a silver tray from where he'd placed it on the floor, and brings it to my

night table. "If you're feeling better, there's some lunch for you. Nothing that will make you fall asleep again, I promise." He looks like he might smile. Just almost. But he maintains a concentrated gaze as he lifts a metal lid off a bowl of soup and another off a small plate of steaming vegetables and mashed potatoes cradling a lake of gravy. I've been stolen, drugged, locked away in this place, yet I'm being served a gourmet meal. The sentiment is so vile I could almost throw up again.

"That other girl—the one who tried to throw herself out the window—what happened to her?" I ask. I don't dare ask about the woman screaming down the hall. I don't want to know about her.

"She's calmed down some."

"And the other girl?"

"She woke up this morning. I think the House Governor took her to tour the gardens."

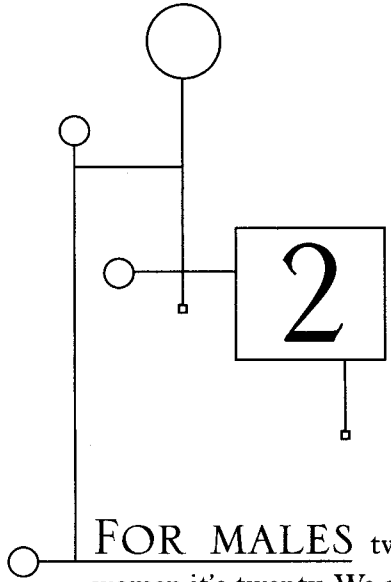
House Governor. I remember my despair and crash against the pillows. House Governors own mansions. They purchase brides from Gatherers, who patrol the streets looking for ideal candidates to kidnap. The merciful ones will sell the rejects into prostitution, but the ones I encountered herded them into the van and shot them all. I heard that first gunshot over and over in my medicated dreams.

"How long have I been here?" I say.

"Two days," the boy says. He hands me a steaming cup, and I'm about to refuse it when I see the tea bag

string dangling over the side, smell the spices. Tea. My brother, Rowan, and I had it with our breakfast each morning, and with dinner each night. The smell is like home. My mother would hum as she waited by the stove for the water to boil.

Blearily I sit up and take the tea. I hold it near my face and breathe the steam in through my nose. It's all I can do not to burst into tears. The boy must sense that the full impact of what has happened is reaching me. He must sense that I'm on the verge of doing something dramatic like crying or trying to fling myself out the window like that other girl, because he's already moving for the door. Quietly, without looking back, he leaves me to my grief. But instead of tears, when I press my face against the pillow, a horrible, primal scream comes out of me. It's unlike anything I thought myself capable of. Rage, unlike anything I've ever known.



2

FOR MALES twenty-five is the fatal age. For women it's twenty. We are all dropping like flies.

Seventy years ago science perfected the art of children. There were complete cures for an epidemic known as cancer, a disease that could affect any part of the body and that used to claim millions of lives. Immune system boosts given to the new-generation children eradicated allergies and seasonal ailments, and even protected against sexually contracted viruses. Flawed natural children ceased to be conceived in favor of this new technology. A generation of perfectly engineered embryos assured a healthy, successful population. Most of that generation is still alive, approaching old age gracefully. They are the fearless first generation, practically immortal.

No one could ever have anticipated the horrible aftermath of such a sturdy generation of children. While the first generation did, and still does, thrive, something