

Welcome to Newton, a perfect town...
Where the kids get perfect grades… And everyone seems perfectly happy – all the time…

Except newcomer Henry Ward isn't buying it. With a pair of misfit friends, he's determined to expose the dark secrets lurking behind Newton's bright façade.

But asking questions about Newton and the corporation that owns it can be dangerous. The doctors in the sinister medical centre on the hill have a procedure called "adjustment" for kids who don't fit in...

And Henry and his friends have just gone to the top of the waiting list.



It's no fun being dead.

The cold steel of the mortuary table against your naked skin… A black, plastic sheet draped over your body from head to foot… Your arms and legs immovable as iron girders…

Is this it? Is this all there is?

But then the sound of people moving around the table… Metal objects clattering around in a tray… Trolley wheels on a tiled floor… Someone vigorously washing his hands… Muffled voices…

You take a breath. A terrible mistake has been made.

You're not dead.

You're alive!

You try to call out, but your lips won't form the words. Your tongue feels thick and useless, like a piece of raw meat in your mouth. You desperately try to raise your hand, but your limbs just aren't answering your brain's command.

Without warning the sheet is whipped to one side, leaving you exposed on the table. A brilliant light is shining in your face but you can't turn away. Can't even blink. Your eyes swim with tears, slowly becoming accustomed to the glare. In your peripheral vision you see sterile, white walls and a lamp angled

down, a scene reminiscent of every medical drama you've ever seen on TV. On a metal trolley to your left, instruments are laid out in a neat row: scalpels, clamps, curved suture needles, a drill…

You try to scream, but can't.

"So, how are you liking it here so far?" a man's voice says as two figures approach the table. They are both dressed in surgical scrubs. The taller of the two wears a green cap from which grey hairs protrude. The other man is completely bald. Their lower faces are obscured by masks.

"Very stimulating," the bald-headed one replies. "Different to Hope General, that's for sure."

(You want to cry out: Help! Help me! I'm alive!)

The grey-haired surgeon chuckles. "In a good way, I hope."

(Please! Help me!)

"Of course!" bald-head replies hurriedly. "This is the cutting edge. It's everything I've ever dreamed of." He turns his attention to the instrument trolley. "Are you going to use the laser scalpel?"

(Listen to me! Can't you see my eyes are open?)

"No," grey-hair replies. "Call me old-fashioned, but give me the electric saw any day."

You direct all your willpower towards making your lips form a word. And your body finally begins to obey…

"Puh…"

The effort required to form a single syllable is superhuman, but you can't give up. You mustn't give up.

"Puh… Puh-leeez…"

"Hey," says the bald-headed doctor, looking round in surprise.

"This kid's awake! Should I give him more sedative?"

"No need," grey-hair replies. He picks up something that looks like a power tool from the trolley: a handheld instrument with a circular cutting blade on the top. He presses a button on the side and the serrated edge begins to spin at high speed.

You want to leap from the table and run screaming for help… This can't be happening…

But there's no escape…

"Puh-leeeez… I'll be g-g-g…"

Grey-hair leans in, blocking out the light of the theatre lamp. The buzzing motor of the electric saw fills your ears.

The surgeon smiles down at you. "Yes. Yes, you will."

The blade of the power tool approaches. There is a squeal as it makes contact.

And then incredible pain…

And then darkness.

1



The gas station had a sad look to it: rusting pumps, a faded sign and peeling paint around the shopfront. At the grimy shop window, a white-haired attendant with a beard that touched his shirt front peered out, as a Toyota Land Cruiser piled high with packing boxes pulled up by the diesel pump.

"Would you look at those prices," said Jennifer Ward, a dark-haired woman in her mid-forties who was sitting at the wheel of the car, checking out the cost per litre chalked up on a board by the door. "Welcome to the country, kiddo."

Kiddo. In the passenger seat, Henry Ward sighed. "Mom, I'm fourteen."

Jennifer looked at her son and gave him an expression of mock hurt. "*Well, excuse me!*"

Despite himself, Henry laughed. That had been dad's line whenever he said something out of turn.

"Do me a favour and fill her up, huh?" Jennifer gave him a fifty from her pocket. "And get me a Diet Coke?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Henry opened the passenger door into the searing

September afternoon, a late summer heatwave. The air con in the rented Toyota had made him forget it was thirty-five degrees outside. He looked back at his mom through the window and pulled an agonized face. She waved at him to get on with it. Henry moved to the back of the car, flipped open the gas cap and then grabbed the diesel nozzle from its cradle. The thick plastic handle was almost too hot to hold, even though it had been in the shade. As Henry slotted it into the gas tank, the bell of the shop door jangled.

"What do you think you're doing?" the attendant snapped, hobbling across the forecourt as fast as his legs would carry him.

Henry froze. There was anger in the old man's voice. *What?* he thought, looking down at the pump in his hand. He had it inserted properly. When he pressed the trigger he could feel the gas beginning to flow. Perhaps the old geezer just didn't like how he looked. For his age, Henry was tall and over the last year had broadened out as a result of being on the swim team at school. Recently he'd noticed people beginning to look at him differently, especially old people when he was out and about – like they were sizing him up as some kind of a threat. Was that it?

"You see a *self-service* sign anywhere?" said the old man, peevishly snatching the pump from his hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Henry and took a couple of steps back.

"Well?"

"Uh…well, what?"

"How much do you want?"

"Oh, right. Fill her up." Henry held out the fifty.

"Pay at the counter."

Henry looked back towards the shop window and the empty seat by the till. The old man stared into space as he began to fill the tank. The numbers on the pump ticked up agonizingly slowly. Henry shuffled in the heat as a second vehicle, a sandy-coloured police cruiser, drove onto the forecourt. It pulled up by the shop and a trooper who seemed as tall and wide as a door emerged from the front. He wore a light-brown uniform and a wide-brimmed hat that gave him something of the look of a cowboy, albeit one without a horse. The biggest handgun Henry had ever seen rested in a holster on his hip.

"Be with you in just a minute, Dan," the old man said in an altogether more pleasant fashion than when he'd spoken to Henry.

"Take your time, Clyde," Trooper Dan drawled. "Ain't no hurry."

Henry became aware of the cop casting his professional gaze over the Toyota and bringing it to rest on him. The trooper stared right at him, like he could read thoughts. Henry looked back at the expressionless mouth and mirrored shades. The cop kept staring at him.

The moment stretched on…

I haven't done anything wrong here, Henry thought indignantly, but found himself looking away all the same. The trooper made a little noise, something like a snigger. From the corner of his eye, Henry saw him lean against the

hood of his cruiser and pop a stick of gum in his mouth. *Jesus,* Henry thought. *Could that guy be any more of a cliché?* The trooper started staring at him again.

"Do you have a bathroom?" Henry asked the old man for an excuse to get away from the cop's X-ray gaze.

"Yep."

It became clear the old man wasn't going to say anything else.

"Can I use it?"

"Yep. Round the back."

"It's not locked?"

The old man looked at him as if he was crazy. "Now why would I want to lock the toilet? You think there's somethin' in there worth stealin'?"

Henry shrugged. "I guess not."

"You guessed right."

The old man turned his attention back to the pump. Henry walked round the side of the shop, ignoring the cop's eyes following him all the way. Out back, a small building made of corrugated iron stood on the far side of a dirt yard. Someone had written *RESTROOM* on the side in big white letters.

Nice, Henry thought as he walked across the yard, scuffing up little clouds of dust as he went. *This dump has got real character.*

Six months before, when his mom had lost her job, she'd warned him that they might have to move from the city in order for her to find work. It was the recession – apparently people had to relocate. At the time Henry had imagined

another city, or at least a large town. She was the manager of an IVF lab, helping couples who couldn't have kids get pregnant. Then the job with Malcorp came up – a job that involved moving to live at its facility in the isolated north of the state. The nearest big town was thirty kilometres away from the place they'd be living for the next year at least…

Newton County. Aka Hicksville.

Henry had spent the weeks since his mom got the job praying that something else would come up. He didn't mind moving, even though it would mean starting all over again at a new school…new friends…new teachers… No, there was actually something exciting about that. He could keep in touch with his old friends online and visit from time to time. But the thought of being an hour's drive from a sports stadium or a games store was pretty hard to bear. And although Mom wasn't letting on, Henry knew she was thinking the same thing (no doubt wondering when she'd ever get another of those skinny lattes that she'd once bought every morning from the coffee shop directly under their city apartment).

But a different job hadn't come up. So here they were, driving through the sweltering heat to one of the most deserted parts of the state… Getting eyeballed by bored local cops and about to sample the delights of rural plumbing…

Henry pushed open the toilet door with some effort. The hinges had come loose, making the bottom scrape on the floor. Inside it was dark and hot. Flies buzzed and there

was an acrid smell of urine in the air. Wrinkling his nose, Henry reached out and flipped the light switch on the wall. A fluorescent tube in the ceiling flickered into life, revealing a single cubicle and a disgusting-looking urinal against the wall.

"Man, this is nasty," said Henry as he pushed the door shut behind him. But the decision of whether to use the urinal or risk the stall was cut short as something moved in the corner. Henry spun round, expecting to face anything from a trapped bird to a rat…

It was a girl. About his age.

She had long, blonde hair that looked as if it hadn't been brushed in a week. Her face was smeared with dirt, as were her clothes – a plain white smock and a pair of boots that were two sizes too big for her. She stood, pressed into the corner by the sink, unmoving and wide-eyed. Henry's gaze flicked to a plastic bracelet on her left wrist, the type they give you in hospital.

"Oh," he said a little stupidly as he backed towards the door. "I'm sorry…"

The girl's mouth fell open. "No!" she cried, rushing towards him. Before he could grab the handle, she placed herself against the door so he couldn't exit. "Don't leave me."

"Okay," Henry said, holding up his hands. This girl was strung out. "Are you alright?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"It's okay," he said. She was clearly in some kind of trouble. A runaway, maybe? She certainly didn't look as if

she belonged at the gas station. Beyond the mess of hair and the dirt on her face, Henry could see she was pretty. Beautiful, even.

"Really?" she said with an edge of pure desperation to her voice. "*Can I trust you?*"

He nodded. "What's your name?"

The girl looked at him blankly, as if confused by the question. He read the tag on her wrist.

"*Gabrielle Henson*," he read. "That's you, huh?"

"Yeah," she replied, holding his gaze intently.

"My name's Henry Ward…"

"Do you have a car?"

"Uh… Yeah."

"I need to get out of here."

"You're hitch-hiking?"

The girl rubbed her temple violently with the heel of her palm, revealing a series of needle marks along her inner arm. "I just need to get away. Will you help me? Take me with you?"

"Sure," Henry said, wondering at the same time what his mom was going to say when he turned up with a strange girl out of the blue. But of course she would see that the girl needed help and would know what to do. He wondered how long she had been hiding in the heat and stench of the gas station toilet. There were scratch marks on her exposed knees and lower legs, as if she'd been running through brambles.

"Thank you," said the girl. She placed a slender hand on his shoulder and leaned against him as if exhausted. "I don't

know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up."

"We're going to Newton," Henry said, "perhaps you can get a lift with us and then—"

"No!" she said, pushing away from him so forcefully he almost fell back. "Not Newton!"

"It's okay…"

She shook her head emphatically, backing into the darkened corner once more. "*Not Newton…*"

Henry was about to argue that if she wanted a lift, that was where they were headed, when a fist banged twice on the other side of the door.

"What's going on in there?" It was Trooper Dan's deep voice.

The girl stifled a gasp. She shook her head violently at Henry and held her hands together, as if praying for him to stay quiet. Suddenly everything began to make sense to him: *the hospital gown, the bracelet, the track marks on her wrist…* He'd known students like her at his last school. Usually rich kids in trouble with drugs who got shipped off to secluded and very expensive rehab clinics for months at a time. Was she an escapee from some private hospital hidden away in the woods? And if so, shouldn't he tell the cop so she could be taken back?

Please, the girl mouthed and there was something so desperate about her that he couldn't betray her trust. He'd get the trooper away from the toilet, and then talk to his mom about it… She'd know what to do…

Okay, Henry mouthed back at her and a pathetic look of relief passed over the girl's face.

The trooper banged on the door again. "Open up right now!"

"Alright!" Henry called through. "Just washing my hands!"

He gave the girl a final look. The sheer terror in her eyes was something he wouldn't forget for a long time. What was she afraid of? The cop? Getting dragged back to rehab? From what he'd heard, those places were glorified holiday parks – everyone sitting around the pool drinking juice. Henry pulled the door open, flicking off the light to hide her from view as he did so. The trooper towered in the opening, hands on his gun belt.

"Is there something wrong, officer?"

The trooper looked him up and down like he was a bug. "What's going on in there?"

Henry raised an eyebrow and said, "It's a toilet?" He'd been questioned by cops before – city cops, not some hick deputy either – and he wasn't about to fold like a little kid. Obviously this guy had come looking for him, hoping to find him up to no good in the outhouse. Well, he'd be out of luck there.

"Don't be smart, son."

"Sorry, sir," Henry replied, bringing it down a little. *Have to play him just right.* He moved forward, pulling the door shut behind him.

"Been smoking in there?"

"No, sir."

"Takin' drugs?"

"*No!*"

"Someone else in there?"

"Uh, no."

"You don't want to lie to me." Henry could almost feel the cop's eyes boring into his skull from behind those mirror shades.

"No one," Henry said and immediately regretted it…

The corners of the cop's mouth twitched and he moved forward swiftly, kicking the door open with his boot. Before Henry could protest, the trooper grabbed a little torch from his belt and started shining it around the darkened toilet.

"Well now, what's this?" the trooper said as the beam fell on the girl cowering in the corner. There was a grim satisfaction in his tone now he'd proved he'd been lied to.

"Hey, she's sick," protested Henry, stepping forward.

The cop pointed a finger in his face without even looking round. "Two paces back *right now* or I will put you *on your ass*."

There was something so hard in the trooper's voice that Henry found himself stepping back immediately. The man might be a small-town cop, but Henry didn't doubt he could knock him down with a flick of his little finger.

"Get yourself out here," the trooper commanded, aiming the torch beam right in the girl's face. When she didn't move, he added, "Don't make me come for you."

Ever so slowly, the girl walked towards the door, her head bowed. When she got within a metre, the trooper reached out and grabbed her arm, as if worried she'd try to bolt past him. Without another word, he began marching his prisoner across the yard towards the gas station.

"Where are you taking her?" Henry demanded, following after them. "What's she done wrong?"

"Stay out of this," the trooper snarled without looking back. "Or I'll have to take you in too."

They rounded the side of the building and the cop headed straight for his cruiser, pulling open the rear door with his free hand. By this time, Jennifer Ward was out of the Toyota and walking towards them. Henry ran over to her.

"She's in trouble," he said, indicating the girl as she meekly got into the back of the patrol car. Since the cop had banged on the toilet door, all the fight seemed to have drained from her. "We have to help!"

Henry's mother gave him a hand motion that said *cool down,* before turning her attention to the trooper. "Excuse me, officer. Is there a problem here?"

Trooper Dan slammed the back door of the cruiser shut and replied, "No problem, ma'am. Nothing for you to concern yourself over."

"That girl asked for our help," Henry persisted. "She's scared."

"Please," Jennifer Ward said to the cop, "what's going on here?"

"She's a runaway," said Trooper Dan, the bored tone in his voice making it clear he didn't have to tell them anything at all. "Danger to herself and others. I've been chasing her all over these woods for the last two days. Now I can take her back to her family. *No thanks to some people…*" He directed his gaze towards Henry.

Henry glanced at the girl in the back, wishing that she would try to get out of the cruiser or something, but she merely stared at her lap. He turned towards his mother. "She was hiding out back." Then added in a whisper, "*She's terrified of this guy.*"

Unexpectedly, the trooper reached up and whipped off his sunglasses, revealing a pair of piercing, blue eyes. He was an incredibly handsome man, like some kind of model or old-time film star, but Henry thought he'd seemed more human before he removed the shades. His blue eyes were now locked on Jennifer Ward. They had all the warmth of an iceberg.

"I asked your son a question pertaining to this troubled young lady," he said, "and he lied to me. That's a no-no in my book. Interferin' in a police investigation, we call it." He said the word *police* with heavy emphasis on the first syllable: *poh-leece.*

Henry began to protest, but Jennifer Ward placed her hand on his shoulder. "Henry, it's okay. She's going back to her family."

"Mom…"

"*Henry.*" Her tone left Henry in no doubt that the discussion was at an end.

"Are we finished here?" asked the trooper.

Jennifer Ward looked at him, annoyance flashing in her eyes for the first time. "I'm sorry, officer. Is answering a few questions too much trouble for you?"

Trooper Dan's blank expression didn't waver. "You've got a full load there, ma'am," he said, staring at the boxes

piled in the back of the Toyota. "Are you moving to Newton County?"

"Yes," Jennifer said, obviously a little taken aback by his change of tack.

"Well, you'll find that around here, people follow the rules. And they teach their kids respect for authority." *Oh-thor-rit-taay.*

"Now, what is that supposed to mean…?"

But Trooper Dan was already climbing into the front of the cruiser. The door slammed and the engine roared into life. The cruiser peeled away, sending up a cloud of dust from the forecourt floor. The last thing Henry saw of the girl was her face looking at him through the back window of the car. She mouthed something, but he couldn't make out what it was.

Barely controlling her rage, Jennifer Ward said, "Well I never! That was one rude son of a—"

The shop bell rang as the white-haired attendant stuck his head out. "That'll be forty-seven dollars."

Jennifer took a deep, calming breath. "Pay him and let's get out of here, Henry."

As she returned to the car, Henry passed the fifty to the attendant, telling him to keep the change. It was only then he realized what the girl had mouthed to him as the cruiser sped away.

A single word.

Run.