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Opening extract from **The Disappeared**

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‘What do you think it’s like to kiss a girl?’ Wilson says as he scans his holocard and steps on to the metro train.

‘It’s not unpleasant,’ I say, following him.

‘Yeah, right! You’ve never kissed a girl,’ Wilson says, in an unnecessarily loud voice.

‘Shh!’ I look round at the construction workers and shoppers on the train. They don’t seem to be listening. ‘You don’t know everything about me,’ I say.

‘Jackson, we’ve been living at the same school since we were five. I do know everything about you.’

‘Actually, in the past eleven years there have been a number of occasions when you haven’t been present. There was that intimate evening walk with Mel Ross . . .’

‘You were eight! And the only reason she wanted to talk to you was to break the news that she’d accidentally sat on your genetic mutation experiment.’

He’s right of course. Wilson is my best friend, but sometimes I hate the fact that we live in each other’s

pockets. When the kids in our district take the Potential Test at age five, only those with the highest scores get into our Learning Community: it's one of the top schools in the country and they keep the classes small. Which means everyone knows everything about everyone.

'You're not exactly a girl magnet yourself,' I say.

Wilson waggles his eyebrows at me. 'Don't you remember my Biology project with Leela Phillips? We spent a lot of time in that lab together.'

'We all know that she only chose you for a partner because you're the biggest Science brainer in the school,' I say.

'No, you're the biggest Science brainer. Actually, you're the biggest *brainer* full stop.' He gives me a kick. Quite a hard kick.

I smother a smile. It's useful being smart. Everyone wants to be in my work group and on Fridays my name is always on the high achievers list, which means extra privileges.

The train pulls into the Business Sector and two women in suits crowd into our carriage.

'Maybe we need to meet a different kind of girl,' Wilson says. He looks around as if he suddenly expects to see a selection of teenage females. Unsurprisingly, there aren't any.

We're not likely to meet a 'different type' of girl. We're not supposed to be friendly with anyone outside of school. In fact, we're not even supposed to think about anything outside school. The children who get into top-rated

Learning Communities like ours leave home at five years old and from then on our teachers are always going on about how we're the elite and we're being trained for important Leadership work and how we need to focus on our studies. Anyone who doesn't work hard is a disgrace. I don't mind the hard work, but I do mind never being allowed out. We go home for just two weekends a year and we rarely leave the school grounds. I'd like to see my mum more. Wilson says he never really thinks about his parents, but I speak to my mother on the communicator a lot. She's cool. My dad died when I was baby so it's just us.

Wilson pokes me in my side to get my attention. Then he punches me in the arm. He's a bit wired because we're out on a trip. It's the first time in ages that we've been given a pass out. Our teacher, Facilitator Johnson, gave it to us so we could deliver a package for him.

Wilson jabs me again. 'Do you think we could get an evening pass out? Maybe we could go to an entertainment centre and meet some girls.'

'They don't like us going to entertainment centres. They're full of kids from Second Class Learning Communities.'

'So?'

'I don't know, maybe they think if we mix with average kids it will rub off on us. Anyway, do you really want to date some girl who's going to end up as a nurse or a secretary? What's wrong with the girls at our school? They're the academic elite. We're talking the finest teenage minds in the country.'

‘Maybe it’s not their *minds* we should be interested in, my friend.’ Wilson lets go of the hand grip to reach out and pat me on the shoulder. The train jerks to a halt and he ends up falling on to the man in front of us.

Wilson pats him on the shoulder instead. ‘Sorry! Sorry about that,’ Wilson says.

The man stares down at Wilson’s hand. Wilson pulls it back and folds his arms. The man eyes our school badges and tuts.

I drag Wilson a little further down the carriage. The train slows and we pull into our stop. We hop off and take the high-speed lift to surface level.

‘I don’t know if I’d even want to meet an outside girl. Have you noticed the general public aren’t exactly keen on us?’ I say.

We step out of the lift and head into the long, sheltered avenues of shops. The winter sun is shining, but the wind is biting.

‘They’re jealous,’ Wilson says. ‘They think we’re living a life of luxury at a top Learning Community. They’ve got no idea how hard we work, or how much pressure there is on us to get into the Leadership and sort this country out.’

‘Jealous or not, all this stuff about us being geniuses and the future of our nation doesn’t make us popular.’

‘I reckon we’d be popular with Academy girls. I heard they’ll do anything you want,’ Wilson says grinning at me.

If you don't score high enough in the Potential Test to get into a Learning Community, even a Second Class one, they send you to an Academy.

'What are you saying, Wilson? The only girl who'd go out with you would have to be too stupid to know any better? How many Academy girls do you think would understand your latest research?'

'I'm sure we'd find something else to talk about,' says Wilson, working his eyebrows again.

In a minute he'll be winking at me. I give him a shove. 'What would you have to talk to a girl about anyway?' I say.

'Just, y'know, stuff.' He shrugs his shoulders.

I don't know what I'd talk to a girl about. I can't imagine that they'd be interested in the things that Wilson and I discuss. We talk about Science. And sex. And sci-fi films. Preferably ones with sex in. And sometimes Wilson rambles on about the novel he's writing about a world ruled by dragons and gnomes.

Wilson is staring at me.

'What?' I say.

He eyes me up and down. 'That red jacket doesn't really go with your hair,' he says.

'My hair is black, how can it not go?'

'But there's so much of it.'

My mother is always telling me to cut my hair. It's thick and curly and grows quickly, but I like it when it's just starting to hang in my eyes.

‘I like my hair and I like my jacket,’ I say. ‘Even Facilitator Johnson told me it was striking.’

‘You’re a bit long and skinny for it.’

Suddenly I get it. Wilson is just as long and skinny as me. He is also obsessed with finding the perfect outfit that will make him irresistible to females. I shrug off my jacket and hand it to him.

‘You could have just asked,’ I say.

He hands me his own plain black jacket. ‘I never like to miss an opportunity to tell you that your fringe makes you look like one of those dogs with all the hair in its eyes.’

I kick him in the shins.

We walk quickly down a parade of the expensive kind of shops. The screens in the windows change constantly. They flash up footage of models or music videos or arty shots of the latest communicator. I nod my head towards the greeter at the door of one of the shops. ‘That’s the kind of place Second Class Learning Community girls end up working,’ I say.

‘Does it really matter where a girl works?’

He’s trying to wind me up. ‘Shut up, Wilson, don’t give me all that anti-Leadership crap. Of course it matters where you work, it’s supposed to be “individuals working to their potential for the good of all” remember?’

He covers his ears. ‘Don’t start spouting The Leader’s speeches at me.’

‘I’m just saying: everyone’s got their place and that’s why it works.’

‘And I’m just saying I don’t see why kids from different schools can’t get . . . friendly.’

I shake my head at him. I don’t believe he’d really go near a Second Class Learning Community girl and definitely not one from an Academy. He’s just obsessed with the thought of girls full stop.

We take a right, then a left. As we approach the edge of the shopping sector the stores get shabbier and smaller. There’s a row of three digital poster screens; each one is cracked but you can still see The Leader delivering a speech. It’s one of his most famous ones.

‘If we want to survive, we must work. If we want to prosper, we must work. If we want to keep our enemies at bay, we must work. We must work with our minds and with our hands to build a better nation. The power lies with you.’

Wilson likes to joke, but even he has to admit that after the Long War, when this country was in a mess, it was The Leader who got us back on our feet. He’s the one that got kids doing the Potential Test and now, unlike the olden days, everyone is matched to the work they’re best suited to. And that’s how we’ve become a force to be reckoned with again.

Whenever I hear that work speech I make up my mind to do better in my next assessment. Everybody says that I’ll be chosen for one of the top Leadership positions when I’m twenty-one and leave school, but I want to make sure.

Sometimes I wonder what my dad did before he died. I like to imagine he had an important job in the Leadership. My mother hasn't told me much about him. I think it makes her too sad. Yesterday, I finally got up the courage to try to hack into the National Register to see if there was anything about him on my official notes. But I couldn't fully access my records. I suppose the point is that I really want to do something that would have made my dad proud.

Wilson is watching me. 'You've gone all gooey eyed.' He looks up at the digi posters. 'You can't wait to get into the Leadership, can you? You love all that "strive to serve" stuff that Facilitator Johnson goes on about.'

'It's going to be great,' I say. 'The way I see it, we've spent the last seventeen years recovering from the Long War and now the Leadership is really getting into its stride. It's going to be our generation making the decisions that make this country great again. We're going to be so important.'

'Yeah.' Wilson grins. 'I suppose we will be, won't we?'

It's easy to find the factory workers' accommodation block we're looking for because it's in the shadows of a huge factory which towers above the other buildings. The factory and the block are surrounded by high fences. In front of the main gate we find a scanner. When I walk through it the gate clicks open for me. We pass through two more gates like this. As we approach the factory I nod my head towards it. 'And that's where Academy girls end up,' I say.

‘All right, snobby, stop going on about it.’

‘I’m not a snob. That’s just how society works. If you want to work in the Leadership then you can’t mix with Academy kids or factory workers.’

Wilson smirks at me and points at the package in my hand. ‘Facilitator Johnson knows someone in a factory accommodation block,’ he says.

‘That’s different.’

Wilson is quiet for a minute. His face is more serious now. ‘Do you ever wonder what it would be like though? If you went to an Academy and ended up in a factory?’

‘If your Potential Test suggested that you should be a factory worker then that’s the best place for you.’ I don’t know why he’s questioning the system. It works perfectly. Everyone has a role and everyone knows their place.

We’ve reached the accommodation block. Wilson looks up at it. ‘I suppose so.’

‘Come on, we want the fifth floor,’ I say.

We make our way up the metal staircase clinging to the side of the grey concrete block and quickly overtake an old man carrying a battered shopping bag.

‘Why isn’t he at the factory?’ I whisper.

We watch the man’s quivering hand reaching for the banister. ‘I don’t think he’s fit for work any more,’ Wilson says.

‘But he still gets to live here? That’s nice, isn’t it. See? Everyone is provided for.’

Wilson shrugs.

We don't see anyone else on our way up the stairs. I guess they're all at the factory.

'You can see the Wilderness from here,' Wilson says.

I lean on the rail and look out behind the block. A few hundred metres away is a familiar style of tall fence made of strips of metal and topped with barbed wire. You see them wherever the district borders the Wilderness. Beyond the fence is a wasteland littered with rubble that stretches, without a hint of greenery, as far as I can see.

'Do your duty, do your best, or you'll be sent to the Wilderness,' Wilson whispers in a creepy voice.

'Shut up.' I haven't heard that rhyme since I was a kid.

'Remember what happened to Facilitator Amonetti?'

Facilitator Amonetti disappeared from the Learning Community at the same time as a rebellious boy called Fisher. The rumour was that Fisher had wound the facilitator up to breaking point and that she had strangled him and then been sent to the Wilderness as punishment. 'There was never any proof of all that,' I say.

The Wilderness is a huge area of desolate land that was created by bombing during the Long War. Being sent there is worse than going to prison. They say it's roamed by packs of feral people who will tear you limb from limb. The rumours about the Wilderness are enough to keep anyone's murderous rage under wraps.

I shudder; just looking at the place gives me the creeps. I turn back to the steps.

'They should get a lift,' Wilson says. 'Imagine living

on the twenty-fifth floor. I wouldn't want to climb these every day.'

'Factory workers are trained for physical work,' I say.

'I'd like to see how "physical" a factory lady could be.' Wilson squeezes the air in the region where a very short and very wide lady's breasts would be.

When we reach the fifth floor we stop in front of a set of fire doors that lead to a corridor. Through the misty glass I can see someone.

'Hey Wilson, maybe this is your factory lady.'

We push open the door. I stop dead. Wilson bangs into me from behind.

It's not a lady.

It's a man with a gun.