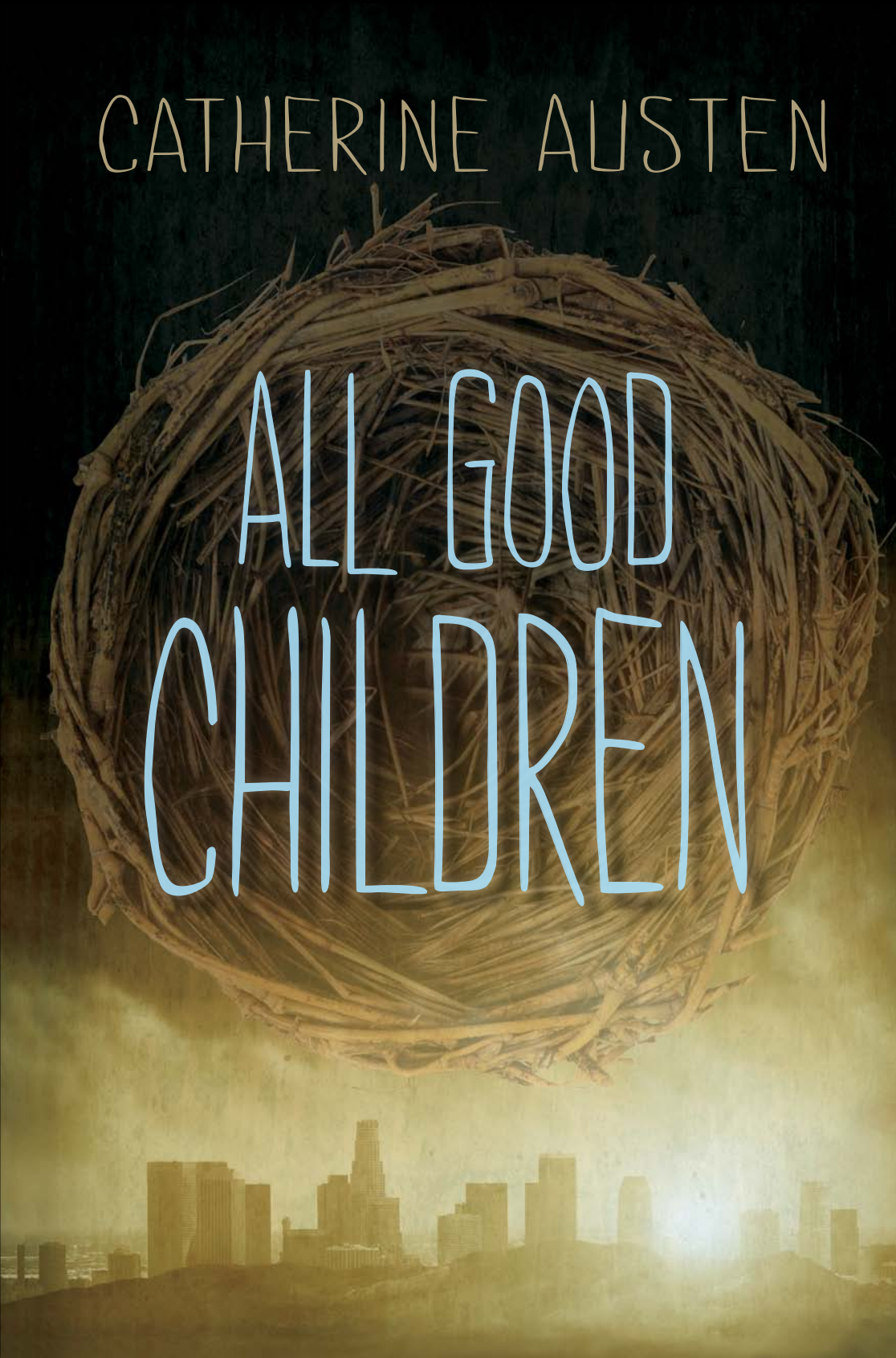
CATHERINE AUSTEN



ALL GOOD CHILDREN

ALL GOOD CHILDREN

CATHERINE AUSTEN

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Austen, Catherine, 1965-
All good children [electronic resource] / Catherine Austen.

Type of computer file: Electronic monograph in PDF format.
Issued also in print format.
ISBN 978-1-55469-825-7

I. Title.
PS8601.U785A64 2011A JC813'.6 C2011-903489-1

First published in the United States, 2011
Library of Congress Control Number: 2011929259

Summary: In the not-too-distant future, Max tries to maintain his identity in a world where the only way to survive is to conform and obey.

Orca Book Publishers is dedicated to preserving the environment and has printed this book on paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council®.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Design by Teresa Bubela
Cover photography by Getty Images

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 5626, Stn. B
Victoria, BC Canada
V8R 6S4

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 468
Custer, WA USA
98240-0468

www.orcabook.com
Printed and bound in Canada.

14 13 12 11 • 4 3 2 1

To Sawyer and Daimon,
who are not in this one,
and to a boy named Pierre,
who haunts these pages as Xavier.

When the children have been good,
That is, be it understood,
Good at meal-times, good at play,
Good all night and good all day—
They shall have the pretty things
Merry Christmas always brings.

Naughty, romping girls and boys
Tear their clothes and make a noise,
Spoil their pinafores and frocks,
And deserve no Christmas-box.
Such as these shall never look
At this pretty Picture-Book.

From Heinrich Hoffmann's
Struwwelpeter: Merry Stories and Funny Pictures
(1845)

PART ONE

TREATMENT

ONE

The airport security guard is not amused when I drop my pants in front of her. Actually, they fall down when I remove my belt. I don't want to look like a recall, so I play along: fold the pants, strip off my T-shirt, cue my charming adolescent smile. "I'm ready for my pat-down now."

The guard stares at me, blank and bored, hands planted on her fat hips. Broken body scanners, delayed flights, exhausted travelers, near-naked teens—they all blend in her muddy eyes. "Are you carrying any liquids or electronics?" she asks.

Beside me, my sister Ally giggles through her own pat-down. She runs across the room to find her shoes and teddy bear. Our mother shields her from the sight of me.

"Lady, I'm almost naked," I say. I point to my shorts and add, "I could take these off, too, if it'll get me through faster. I know it looks like I might be hiding something."

The guard frowns, blinks, reaches her gloved hands up to my neck as if she's going to throttle me. She probably hears that joke twice a day. "Did you place your electronics in the bin?" she asks. Her fat fingers scurry over my bare shoulders, down my breastbone, around my back, as if contraband could be hiding beneath my skin.

My mother's voice booms across the room. "Why is that woman touching my child's body? Is she blind? He is fifteen years old. He's a citizen—" And on and on until every traveler stares at me and my molester.

I pretend this is a normal encounter. I nod to passersby. "My mother confiscated my electronics last week," I tell the guard as she strokes my naked thighs. "I'm grounded. Actually, I'm about to be airborne. But metaphorically I'm grounded. I was a bad boy."

She groans to her feet, pats my ass none too gently and motions me onward. I dress in front of a thousand eyes that glitter like glass under the terminal lights.

I follow my angry mother to the boarding gate. New chairs, same wait. Same blend of stale gum and subtitled news: New York City is still drowning; Phoenix is still parched; transnational corporations are still profiting from disaster. I withstand it all.

I would strip again if it got me home faster, but we're stuck for another hour. Five hundred heads lean into five hundred projections: reading, playing, messaging, leering. Not me. My RIG lies at the bottom of Mom's purse, a Realtime Integrated Gateway to a world my mother won't let me access.

Mom and Ally chant together face to face—"Rock! Paper! Scissors!" and "Wild Wild West!"—feeble finger-plays Mom

learned on the bus to kindergarten when she was young. Now and then she glances at me and asks, "What were you thinking?" as if she really wants to know.

Our flight is called at last. I grab the window seat as a reward for withstanding so royally. My heart pounds in anticipation. This will be the second flight of my life, and it'll be even better than last week's, because it's taking me home.

A giddy sense of freedom washed over me when that first plane lifted off the ground. I held my RIG to the window and watched dead grass and pavement recede into an abstract of greens and browns scarred by rivers and roads. Ally squeezed my leg and squealed, "It's like we're riding a pterosaur!" Even our mother smiled.

My world was shining then, as we blazed toward Aunt Sylvia's funeral, all expenses paid. I didn't pretend to be sad—I barely knew my aunt. I was ecstatic, literally on top of the world. I flew away from the first week of school, left my dull gray uniform in New Middletown and rose above a planet that looked like God's own palette.

It was glorious until cruising altitude, when Mom received a notice about a prank bomb threat sent to my school from our apartment complex that morning. She snatched the RIG right out of my hand. "You logged in as Lucas?" she shrieked.

"What makes you think it was me?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes and huffed, as if no other child would break a rule.

"It was a joke," I told her. "He left his RIG in the lobby. His password is *Lucas1*."

"You used to be that boy's friend!"

I shrugged. "He's a throwaway."

I shouldn't have said that. It's what all the academic students call the trade kids, but I would have gotten my RIG back last week if I'd just held my tongue. Mom dragged me through funeral homes and legal offices, down the unguarded streets of an ungated city, with my RIG bouncing blindly in her handbag, recording nothing.

Atlanta was the first city I'd ever visited outside of New Middletown. It was beautiful in its crazy patchwork sprawl, but seriously marred by poverty. Winds whipped down the avenues into alleyways where people lived in paper boxes. Beggars and thieves lurked around corners or banged on the windows of limousines jammed in traffic until police officers dragged them away. It was hostile and hopeless and deeply unnerving.

But behind the cars and crowds was the most amazing graffiti I've ever seen—huge, vibrant, angry. Ally snuck me her RIG so I could record a few images: a tidal wave crashing into a lopsided skyline, a line of prisoners with empty eye sockets, a salt flat littered with honeybee carcasses.

One day I'll paint a piece like that.

My mother took her time burying her sister. By the third day, not even the art could make the noise and dirt and stink bearable. My cousin Rebecca should have settled everything, but she immigrated to Canada ten years ago and wasn't allowed back. She inherited a small fortune from her mother, but the government seized it. They gave Mom nothing but funeral expenses—hence the family airplane ride, the week of hotel breakfasts, the evenings stretched out like years on Atlanta's lilac sheets.

Now we're heading home with boxes of worthless fragments from Rebecca's childhood—hand-written letters,

framed photographs, report card printouts. It's like inheriting a recycling bin. But among the memorabilia were sixteen color markers packaged in plastic and three gray scrapbooks I've already filled from seam to corner with abstracts of Earth. I'll post a collage when I get my RIG back: *Out of School Withstanding on a Perilous Planet*.

Ally grips my hand when our plane takes its turn at the top of the runway. The fuselage rattles, wing flaps flutter, wheels blindly spin. We grip our armrests and fall silent. It doesn't feel close to fast enough. The plane screams and roars. It seems almost silly to try to get off the ground. But suddenly, improbably, we rise. I laugh out loud. We rise above the patchwork city into a pure white blazing light. I wish I could tell my friends, "Look up. See that silver speck slicing the sky? That's me!" But I'll have to wait until I'm home to post about it. By then, no one will care. Once you're in the past tense, you're history, and no one has time for history anymore.

There's a complimentary snack in my seat pocket. The chips taste like mold. I eat them fast, more disappointed with every crunch. Mom passes hers and I eat those, too, until I'm deeply miserable. "Can I have my RIG now?"

"No."

Ally unfolds her seat tray, lays down her chips and rests her teddy's head on them.

"Aren't you going to eat your snack?" I ask.

She grabs the bag fast as lightning and stashes it on her lap.

"I'll eat them if you don't want them," I say.

A fat man across the aisle ogles my mother and says, "Kids. They're never satisfied."

When I see men like this, I'm thankful for genetic testing. Whatever my future may hold, I'll never end up a fat bald white man. This one takes up two seats and he's still crammed tight. I point to the chips resting on his belly. "Are you going to eat those?"

"Please ignore him," Mom tells the man.

He covers his chips with his fat white hands and winks at her.

Ally taps my shoulder and asks, in a voice soft and high, "If you're not going to look out the window, can we trade places?"

"No." I fake a stretch and sneak the chips from her lap. I keep my eyes on the clouds as I crack open the bag. I dip into it languorously and pop a few in my mouth. Ally doesn't notice. "Want a chip?" I offer.

"No, thank you. I have my own." She reaches under her tray. A look of panic floods her face. She lifts her teddy, feels her legs, scans the floor, gropes the filthy carpet.

"Lost something?" I ask.

"I can't find my chips!"

"What did they look like?"

She stuffs her hand down the back of her seat. "They were in a red bag!"

I move the chips to the center of the window frame. "With white writing?"

"Yes! Did you see them?"

"Give her back her chips, Max," Mom says.

Ally looks from Mom to me to the chips in my hand.

"Here. Have these," I offer.

"Are you sure?" Ally asks. "We could do Eenie Meenie for them."

"Nah. Just take them."

She smiles at the half-eaten bag. "Thanks, Max. You're nice."

My mother sighs.

The fat man clears his throat. "Lovely children. Are they your own?"

Mom's face is five shades darker than mine and Ally's, and now it turns darker still. She looks him up and down and rolls her eyes. That should end the conversation, but the man is deeply defective. "And their father?" he asks, leering at my mother's breasts.

"Our father's dead," I say. "He died in the flu epidemic three years ago. Drowned in his own body fluids."

"Max, please," Mom says.

"So she's single now," I add.

The fat man squirms and mumbles something about being sorry.

The man in the seat beside him peeks around his gut. I groan. It's Arlington Richmond, my best friend Dallas's father. He hates me. He hates my whole family. He didn't mind us when Dad was alive, but his feelings cooled when half our income died. I salute him and turn back to the sun.

I wish I could message Dallas that his dad is surveying me at thirty thousand feet. But I can't connect with anyone without my RIG. On the upside, I can't access my homework. "We were lucky to miss the first week of school," I whisper to Ally.

She frowns. "I like school."

Mom kisses the top of her head. Ally takes Mom's face in her hands and kisses it back—her cheeks, her nose,

her eyelids, over and over until the sweetness turns unsettling. "Enough, pumpkin," Mom says.

The *Freakshow* theme song rises out of the airplane chatter ahead of me. I jerk to attention and peer between the seats.

A teenage boy whips his head around and grunts. Either I have very strong chip breath or he has supreme peripheral vision. He slips in his earpiece and holds my stare. He has *ultimate* written all over him. Even sitting down, he looks like a giant. His parents must have tested a dozen eggs before they found him.

I am not an ultimate. I'm a best-of-three. Only the rich keep at it until they get a perfect embryo. There are a lot of rich people in New Middletown, so I'm used to competing with ultimates like this kid. They usually win.

Most people are freebies, conceived and birthed at home with just the barest screening for deformities. They talk about ultimates and best-of-threes like we're genetically engineered, but we're not. We're conceived in fertility clinics, but there's no splicing or even much planning involved. It's more like gambling than engineering. Parents pay for a certain number of random embryos. They don't know what they'll get until they read the genes and choose one to grow in the womb. The unhealthy are terminated and the unchosen are put in cold storage to sneak out sometime in the future when infertility reaches crisis proportions. Or maybe they're sold or experimented on or grown for parts—depending on which conspiracy theory you believe—but they're not genetically engineered.

I'm the cream of a crop of three. It's hard to get cocky about that. The kid ahead of me is the cream of a much

richer crop. His eyes sparkle as he surveys me over his shoulder. "If it isn't the stripper," he says, snickering. "Nice shorts, recall."

I salute him rudely and lean back, kicking his chair out of spite. "Sorry," I say. Then I kick it again. The security guard glares from his station.

"Be good, Max," Ally says. My sister is not an ultimate or a best-of-three. She's a freebie, naturally conceived six years ago by my baffled parents. Mom says she's a gift from God. Ally has a big heart and a small brain, which suggests that God should take a good look at creation before he hands out any more gifts.

"We can't all be you," I tell her.

Dr. Richmond snickers.

Mom glances across the aisle. "Arlington? What a surprise. How are you?"

The fat man turns from Mom to Dr. Richmond as if he has a stake in their conversation.

"I'm fine, Karenna. I'm just heading back from the Global Ed Conference in Texas. I was supposed to take the speed rail, but Mexicans bombed the station. Did you hear about it? Are you coming direct from Atlanta? You have family there, don't you? It must have cost a fortune to take the kids for the weekend."

"Not at all," Mom says, not bothering to explain about the funeral or the lost week of school.

"You should take Dallas to your next conference," I say. "He'd love flying."

Dr. Richmond frowns. "They get so lippy at this age. At least you won't have to put up with it much longer."

Mom checks her watch. "Twenty minutes? That was fast."

"I mean it won't be long until we get Maxwell's behavior straightened out at school," Dr. Richmond says.

I snort but not loudly. Mom holds a stiff smile.

"The new support program's coming," he adds. "I'm sure you saw the results with your little girl last week. It provides the motivation lacking in kids like yours."

Mom's smile vanishes. "Kids like mine?"

The fat man shakes his head at Dr. Richmond and waits for an apology.

"I'm sure they're good children," Dr. Richmond says. "They're just different, aren't they?"

A recording tells us to buckle our belts, store our baggage, raise our seat trays. Dr. Richmond leans back out of view. Mom stares hard at the place where he used to be. The fat man tucks his chips in his breast pocket.

I slip my empty packages onto Ally's tray, then store my own tray, pushing it into the seat ahead of me until the ultimate growls.

"Where did these come from?" Ally asks, holding my chip bags.

I shrug. "They must be yours."

She turns them over, puzzled, before tucking them in her seat pocket. Then she leans into my chest and holds her teddy up to the window.

I kiss her head and love her like crazy, my gullible goodhearted sister.

The plane tilts in preparation for landing. I see the military escort beside us and the runway lights below. It looks like we're heading to prison. "Holiday's over," I whisper.

It's a half-hour shuttle from the Bradford Airport across the National Forest to New Middletown, but Mom still won't give me back my RIG. I'm stuck staring at the beauty of the Pennsylvania Wilds. I kick Ally's foot just for something to do.

"You will never get that RIG back if you don't stop right now," Mom says so loudly that other passengers look our way. I stare out the window like I'm not involved.

There are no cars for rent at the New Middletown station, so we take a taxi home. The driver's ID reads *Abdal-Salam Al-Fulin*. I've barely buckled up before he asks, "Did you hear about the speed-rail bombings in the southwest? Over three hundred dead. There's nowhere safe anymore."

We show a guard our IDs and drive through the gates of my glorious town. "I feel pretty safe right here," I say, but I know I'll feel a lot safer once I get out of this taxi.

Ally watches a wildlife show in the backseat beside Mom, who stares out the window. Mom was RIG-addicted before Dad died. She uploaded our lives as they happened. Now she lets the world blur by.

"I love driving in this city," the driver tells me. "Every road is a straight line."

"It's energy efficient," I tell him. "New Middletown is the most environmentally smart city in the northeast. But they chopped down ten square miles of forest to build it. We're big on irony here."

"I don't like the forest," the driver says.

I shrug. "It's beautiful." I've never actually stepped foot in the forest, but I like driving by and seeing all the different

shades of green. New Middletown is monotonous. Everything in town is the same age, same style, same color. What we lack in personality we compensate for with security. Half the city is bordered by forest and the other half is walled. There are only six roads into town and all of them are guarded. We don't sprawl. We stand tall and tight. There are no beggars or thieves in New Middletown. If you don't have a place to live and work here, you don't get in. This driver probably hates the forest because he has to live there in a tent.

Over the past twenty years, Chemrose International has built six cities just like this to house the six largest geriatric centers in the world. Everyone who lives or works in New Middletown pays rent to Chemrose. The whole town revolves around New Middletown Manor Heights Geriatric Rest Home and its 32,000 beds.

"I never get lost here," the driver says as he joins a line of cars traveling north along the city spine, past hospitals, labs and office towers.

"I'm surprised you get much business," I say.

The city spines are entirely pedestrian, and each quadrant is like a self-contained village, with its own schools, clinics, gardens, rec centers, even our own hydroponics and water treatment facilities. We don't have much call for taxicabs.

"I don't get much business," the driver admits. "Mostly I take people away."

"To where?"

He shrugs. "You go to school here?"

"Sure. Academic school."

"Lucky boy. What you going to be when you're grown?"

"An architect." I don't hesitate. We pick our career paths early in academic school.

"You going to build things like that?" the driver asks me. He points to the New Middletown City Hall and Security Center, which glimmers in the distance on our left. It stands at the intersection of the city spines, in the exact center of town, rising to a point in twenty-eight staggered stories of colored glass.

"I hope so," I say.

He snorts. "I don't like it. It looks like it's made of ice." He turns onto the underpass and City Hall disappears from view.

"That's the artistic heart of town," I say.

He snorts again. "I don't see any art in this city. Never. I don't hear any music. I don't hear any stories. I don't see any theater."

"You can see all that from any room in any building," I tell him. "We have our own communications network."

He sighs. "You like living here?"

"Of course. Who wouldn't? People line up to get in here."

"Like me," he says. "I line up and wait, I come inside, I drop you off, I leave."

"Times are tough," I say.

"Not for everyone," he mutters. He drives up to ground level and heads away from the core.

Chemrose spent eight years and billions of dollars building this city just before I was born. They laid down the spines and connecting roads like a giant spider building a web. People swarmed here. But they didn't all get in. Shanties and carparks spread outside the western wall,

full of hopefuls who come inside for a few hours to clean our houses or drive us home. They were hit hard by the Venezuelan flu, which wiped out half the elderly and 10 percent of everyone else in the city, including my father. The epidemic cost Chemrose a fortune in private funding and public spirit. Mom kept her nursing job, so we're fit. We moved from a four-bedroom house to a two-bedroom apartment that sits on the fringe of our old neighborhood. Ally and I are still in academic schools, so we have hope, which is a rare commodity these dangerous days. Most people are a lot more damaged.

"Maybe I will find a bed here when I am old," the driver says with another snort.

"Turn left here," I say.

We cruise through the northeast residential district, past the white estate homes where I used to live, through a maze of tan-on-beige triplexes and brown-on-tan row houses, and into our black-on-brown apartment complex. "Unit six," I say.

The driver circles the complex like a cop, slow and suspicious, passing five identical buildings before he gets to ours, the Spartan—as in the apple, not the Greeks. The apartments are memorials to fallen fruit: Liberty, Gala, Crispin, Fuji, McIntosh. "This is where you live?" the driver asks. He looks up, unimpressed.

The apartments reek of economy. No balconies, no roof gardens, no benches. Just right angles and solar panels and recycling bins. I used to mock the people who lived here. Now I withstand the mockery of others.

I hold out my hand to Mom. She stares at me curiously. "RIG," I say. She rolls her eyes but gives me what I want.

I power up, empty the trunk, drag two suitcases to the door. "Thanks for the ride," I tell Abdal. "Good luck."

"Good luck to you too," he shouts.

Before I even cross my threshold, my neighbor, Xavier Lavigne, heads down the dirty hallway toward me. "I told Mr. Reese that our history assignment is a lie," he says, "and I showed him a report from the free media, but he said I have to go to a disciplinary committee hearing now." That's Xavier's version of *hello*. He speaks nonstop conspiracy theory to anyone who doesn't walk away, and he speaks it in seventeen languages, including binary code. He gets caught every week for illegal Internet access, but only because he posts his hacked information into his essays. His brilliant brain is defective. He thinks I'm his best friend because I'm not cruel to him, just slightly mocking. Minimal standards of friendship are part of his defect. I don't invite him in, and he doesn't hold it against me.

"Hey, Xavier. Did you sign me up for cross-country like I asked?"

He nods. "I had to forge your attendance to get you in."

"You can do that?"

He leans against the doorframe and smiles. I take a step back.

The most abnormal thing about Xavier is that he smells delicious, like a human dessert. Today it's orange marmalade. He's a compulsive bather with expensive taste in soap. He's also the best-looking guy I've ever seen. I don't mean that in

a gay way, because I'm not gay. It's just a fact that still takes me by surprise. He looks like an adult. He's six feet tall, broad and sculpted from obsessive track-and-field practice. He has flawless white skin, shiny blond hair and turquoise eyes that sparkle with neurotic passion. His face is perfectly symmetrical. It's jarring against his damaged personality.

"It's easy," he says. "I forged Ally's attendance, too, to sign her up for soccer. I gave her a seventy-five in a math assessment she missed on Wednesday, and I filled out the nurse's forms for a vaccination she missed on Friday. You better tell your mom."

"Sure. Thanks."

"Did you take the speed rail? Did you see the bombings?"

"Nah. We flew."

"I heard it was the Mexicans. They sabotaged our trains because we sabotaged their desalination plants."

"That's crazy, Xavier. We *built* their desalination plants. It was a militia from Arizona that sabotaged them. They probably bombed the speed rail too."

"People are dying of thirst in Arizona."

"So they should bomb the reservoirs instead of the speed rail."

Xavier frowns. "My parents told me not to say that."

I laugh. "Afraid you'll get arrested?"

"Maybe. The state restricted the right to protest. Did you hear? You can only protest on your own land now. And they passed the universal ID."

"We already have a universal ID," I say.

"In New Middletown. Now it's coming everywhere. Faces and fingerprints."

I shake my head. "Everywhere? That'll never happen."

"Excuse us, Xavier," Mom says at the doorway. "How are you, dear?"

"They're testing pharmaceuticals on the prison population," he replies.

Mom nods, smiles, leads Ally to their bedroom to unpack.

While Xavier details the dirty deeds of Chemrose International, I filter seven hundred and thirty-five messages from my week offline. Ads, celebrity news, listserv chatter, history. I'm stunned to see a call from Pepper Cassidy. She's a member of *REAL: Reduced Electronic Activity in Life*. Her messages are rare and beautiful.

Pepper's face shines on my screen: brown eyes, pink mouth, cinnamon skin. "I need you, Max! We all need you!" The camera pans over a line of pretty pouty girls whispering, "I need you, Max." I couldn't dream it any better. Pepper leans in close, smiling. "There are only two boys in dance this term, and you know they have no rhythm. Please say you'll try out."

I save the call.

"The children in the trials are institutionalized," Xavier tells me.

"The dance trials?"

"Drug trials. Will you help me circulate a petition?"

I laugh. "I'm fifteen, Xavier. I can barely circulate peanut butter on toast."

I sort through ninety-eight messages from Dallas Richmond—that's one message for every waking hour I was offline. Ninety are single-sentence questions beginning with *Who do you think would win in a fight*. Seven are lists of

names and bra sizes for the girls in each of our classes. One is a compilation of insulting names Coach Emery called me because I missed football practice. "I'm a limpdick and an asswipe," I tell Xavier.

He nods without sympathy.

"Xavier! Dad wants you!" Celeste Lavigne glides down the hallway to fetch her brother. She's a softer, curvier version of Xavier. She and I are the only people in the entire complex who have younger siblings. I think that should draw us together. She disagrees.

"Celeste!" I shout. "We're back!"

She ignores me. "Come see what I did to Dad," she tells Xavier.

I consider myself invited.

Down the hall, Mr. and Mrs. Lavigne hover inside their doorway. You have to use your imagination to see how Xavier and Celeste turned out so beautiful. The Lavignes are unusually large, white and old, like Vikings gone to seed. They're pasty and spongy and they dress in woolen cardigans buttoned into the wrong holes.

Mr. Lavigne looks especially bad today because Celeste has been working on him. His face is scored with black and pink festering flesh, like a burn victim's.

"Royal makeup," I say. Celeste is a rising star in the special-effects department at the college she attends.

"Come inside, children," Mr. Lavigne says through crispy lips. "Don't talk in the hallway." He glances at the surveillance camera in the corner. No one ever talks in our hallway except Xavier. He compensates for a world of silence.

"You're back!" Dallas shouts into his RIG. He smiles—sparkling, mature, ultimate. Dallas and I were the same size until he turned twelve and his expensive genes kicked in. Now he's the tallest kid in grade ten. He's broad and brawny, with white skin, black hair and blue eyes. His parents spent a fortune conceiving him and his brother. He's from a sperm donor, which explains why he's shining. His older brother Austin is a beast, the true spawn of Dr. Richmond. "Who do you think would win in a fight?" Dallas asks me. "Zipperhead or Juice?"

He must be talking about *Freakshow*. Kids have crazy names these days, but not that crazy. "I haven't checked out the show yet," I say. "I just got my RIG back."

"I think maybe Juice would win, if he didn't bleed to death. Zipperhead's big but slow. Tiger could probably waste them both. I voted for him." Dallas always supports the feeblest freak with the phoniest life story. He has never won the local *Freakshow* betting pool, not in all the years we've voted.

"What did I miss at school?" I ask him.

"Tyler Wilkins got in a fight."

"No way. Is he suspended?"

"No. It was off grounds. With little Wheaton Smithwick."

"Good. Not for Wheaton, but good for me." Tyler Wilkins is the school psychopath. He slapped my sister across the face last June when she grabbed at a lighter he was holding to a tent-caterpillar nest. I hit him back, of course, but he pounded the crap out of my ribs. I chased after him and tackled him on school grounds, where he wasted my face

for an encore, and we both got suspended. It was embarrassing. I'm a stocky football player. Tyler is a wiry cigarette addict. But he's tall and has mania in his corner. The school took his parents to court when he was eight years old to force them to medicate him. It hasn't helped.

I gained fifteen pounds of muscle this summer and paid Dallas's brother to teach me how to fight—all so I can beat Tyler Wilkins half to death when I go back to school tomorrow. Austin is as much of a savage as Tyler, but he supplemented his savagery with Muay Thai and growth hormones. He's a supreme fighting instructor. A little light on top though—he's farting in the background right now, aiming at Dallas's head.

"I have to go," Dallas says.

Austin sticks his face in the screen and shouts, "Call's over, faggot!"

I sink into my leather couch and skim celebrity gossip on my RIG while Mom fries bacon for tomorrow's lunches. I love my rancid peeling home. It's cramped and flimsy and we don't belong here any more than the teak tables and oil paintings we carted over with Dad's ashes, but I am joyous to be back.

Ally stands at the living-room window, talking into her RIG. "I'm calling my best friend Melissa," she whispers.

"I thought your best friend was Peanut," I say.

She giggles. "I have lots of best friends."

I search student journals for sex and violence, but come up wanting.

Ally dissolves her screen with a frown. "They don't want me calling unless it's about school."

I shrug. "It's late. You'll see Melissa tomorrow. Eat your snack."

We take turns eating crackers with cream cheese until there's only one left. Ally points back and forth between us, chanting, "One, two, buckle my shoe. Three, four, shut the door—"

I eat the cracker.

"You didn't wait!"

"Whoever is number two is chosen in the end." I've told her this a thousand times, but she still counts out the rhyme until she's satisfied that fair is fair.

Mom slips her feet into ugly white orthopedic shoes. "I've been put on night shifts for a few weeks."

"You're going to work?" I ask. "We just got home."

She shrugs. "I'll be back in the morning. I'll sign out a car and drive you to school. Get breakfast and help Ally pack her bag, would you?"

"Fine," I say. I hate pouring breakfast and packing lunch.

I stick my head out the window and breathe in New Middletown's warm dust. It's eight o'clock at night and one hundred degrees—too hot for September. In this heat, in this apartment, it smells like rotting fruit. Down the street, a billboard announces the opening of another Chemrose hydroponics factory this winter, good times ahead, rows of young men and women in blue uniforms and pink smiles.

"Mommy's driving us to school tomorrow," Ally says. That's a thrill for her—two cars in two days. We probably can't afford the fuel.

Life is lean without a father. We could get a stepfather easily—with sperm so feeble after years of herpes, hormones and heavy metals, the useless men like to marry into children—but I couldn't withstand that. Mom says Ally and I are all she needs. As long as we have each other, we'll be okay.

"I hope we're not in trouble for missing the first week of school," Ally says.

I kiss her head. "Nah. It'll be fine. Grade one is premium. They'll love you there. Can't you feel it? It'll be great."

She nods to convince herself. "It'll be the best year ever."