Lily wasn't prepared for the temperature outside. The sun spread across the sky in a river of bleached light and the whole world shimmered in a haze of heat.

She knew she didn’t have much time. Her parents would probably contact the Committee when they realised she’d escaped. Although Pym and Megan didn’t like her much anymore, they still seemed weirdly passionate about keeping her.

_They were obviously waiting for the best time to send me away, like Daniel_, she thought.

Lily had a fleeting urge to go back inside, get into bed and pull the duvet over her head. The idea of freedom suddenly overwhelmed her. She’d been trapped inside for so long.

Pushing those fears away, she craned her head to see around the corner of the house to the front garden. All she saw were the top branches of the fig tree. Holding firmly to the contents of her bag, Lily headed towards the side gate. She breathed a sigh of relief to find it open. There was no going back now.

As soon as she was through the gate, she heard a low rumble to her left. Lily pressed into the indented space between gate and wall and peered around. Blacktroopers were heading down the nearest cross street, about to enter hers. There was a whole squad of them, about twenty on foot. Their heads glowed where their visors caught the sun and their weapons glinted and flashed as they marched in unison. They gave the impression of being welded together; a dark, harsh mass. Behind them was a high vehicle that looked like an angular beetle on wheels.

Lily flattened herself against the wall, holding her breath. She knew she was exposed, but she couldn’t go back for fear her parents had already woken up, and she couldn’t run out into the street. She was trapped.

An unwanted image of Blacktroopers beating people in the streets flashed through her mind. In only seconds, that could be her.

But the troopers continued on, crossing Lily’s street rather than entering it. The sound of their footfalls diminished and then disappeared entirely.

Lily’s palms were slippery on the handles of her bag and her hair was plastered to her sweaty forehead. She wasn’t safe yet, not by a long shot. The Blacktroopers hadn’t seen her, but she knew there would be more. From her bathroom-window surveillance, she had learned that the streets were never empty for long. She had tried to work out if their patrols followed a regular pattern, but her surveillance had been too sporadic. She would just have to stay alert and hope for the best.

Her plan to go over the Wall was pretty flimsy, but it was the best thing Lily could think of. Once over, she would decide what to do next. Staying inside the Wall was far too dangerous.
with the Blacktroopers everywhere and she was certain she had made herself a target by hacking the central data system. She had to at least try to find people over the Wall who might be able to give her more information.

Lily hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and darted out from the safety of the gate. Keeping close to the high house walls that lined the road, she began to jog. She would have to pace herself. She was unfit from so many years confined to the house and the heat was close to unbearable. Already, her skin felt raw. She fished out a cap and sunglasses from her bag. She was glad she'd kept her sunglasses from way back in the days when they were allowed out, even though they were now too small for her.

Reaching the corner, Lily was relieved to find the street was still empty. She glanced back at her parents' large, austere house, then put her head down again and headed towards the Wall.

It was hard to believe now that there had been a time when the Wall hadn't existed. Or that Daniel and Lily had actually been excited about it when it was being built.

Lily reached the road that ran beside the immense Wall. The first thing she had to do was find a place to cross over it. If she was wrong and there was nothing and no one on the other side, she would have to try and return or die out there. And right now, she thought she would rather die than go back.

Although the street was still empty, there was no cover here this side of the road and Lily felt vulnerable. She ran back across the street, flattening herself against someone's front fence, wishing it would absorb her into the brickwork. Her eyeballs were dry and her lips were cracking from the intense heat.

Lily felt a tiny shift in the air. The hairs on her arms stood up. The troopers were coming. She sprinted along the street, examining the Wall for some notch or hole to scurry into. There was nothing—just an endless smooth expanse. Black clouds writhed under the heavy sun as the morning closed on midday. Feeling increasingly exposed, Lily leapt the fence that barricaded one of the empty-looking houses facing directly onto the Wall. She'd been avoiding these houses. They gave her a creepy feeling, as though if she got too close one would open its jaws and swallow her. She crouched down just as she felt the vibration of heavy vehicles and the steady thump of feet.

This was a bad spot. The tree above her was sparse and its bark looked split and diseased. It was obviously about to die and the rest of the garden was no better. Hydrangeas flailed against the front wall, but they were almost leafless; the few buds deformed. The fence was low, offering hardly any protection.

Lily assessed her options. She couldn't get around the side of the house because of the high walls that cut off the front garden from the back. She looked at the boarded-up windows. No luck there. She would have to scramble back over the front fence and make a run for it. There was no other choice.
The troopers were coming from the direction of her parents' house so Lily ran the opposite way. The Wall was on her left, houses on her right. It was like she was in a tunnel with the troopers herding her from behind. They must have spotted her earlier. If more came at her from the front, she would be trapped. The tramping of their feet grew louder. She glanced over her shoulder and saw them in the distance at the other end of the long, straight street that ran beside the Wall. Lily wondered if her parents had alerted them already or if surveillance cameras were tracking her. The cameras could be clamped to walls or buildings. Well, there was no way she was going to let them catch her.

There was a huge crash of thunder and the air temperature seemed to drop suddenly, which was a relief. Lily ran flat out, her legs pumping. She chanced a look behind her and was shocked to see the troopers much closer. They were jogging in unison, a thick mass, their visors glinting. One of the bug-like vehicles followed behind. Lily pushed herself harder. She didn't want to see the inside of it.

The troopers' movements were methodical. It was like they had all the time in the world, like they knew they would get her, eventually. Well, they wouldn't, not if she could help it.

Lily realised that she was making it easy for them by moving in a straight line. If they had surveillance they would probably track her wherever she went, but she was at least going to try to throw them off.

The troopers were so close now Lily could hear their grunting, a terrifying sound. A sob rose in her throat, but she gritted her teeth, forcing it down.

Suddenly, like unplugged bathwater, it began to rain. Then came great smashing chunks of hail. Lily had heard these flash hailstorms and seen them from her bathroom window, but she'd never been out in one.

Huge balls of ice bounced off the road. Lily held up her arms and used her bag to protect her face. The hail stung her upper body and made running harder. Bits of leaves and twigs showered down. She saw that the road ahead curved very slightly. She sprinted around the gentle corner and made a split-second decision to turn down a narrow side street that ran downhill at a right angle to the Wall. Lily hoped desperately that the troopers hadn't spotted her. They'd probably work out pretty quickly what she'd done but, slim though it was, this looked like her best chance to evade them.

The day had gone from bright sun to gloom as more thick black clouds rolled in. Every so often forked lightning flirted the street, but the rest of the time Lily could barely see her hands in front of her face. On top of that, the street was littered with hunks of ice, making it hard for Lily to keep her footing. Still, she welcomed the extra coverage the storm gave her and she knew she'd better make the most of it before it gathered up its cloud folds and left only blue-sky heat behind.

Lily decided to find a place to hide until the troopers gave up. Casting around, she chose a house with a white picket fence because it looked friendly. Unkempt bushes nodded over the
top of the fence. She vaulted the gate, stumbled through the bushes and onto the verandah. The storm up there sounded even louder as the hail bounced off the verandah's tin roof.

She was still visible from the street so she edged around the corner of the house. Her heart sank. The verandah, which ran down the side of the house, ended in a brick wall, from which another wing jutted out. She was at a dead end.

Lily spotted a partially opened window right at the end of the verandah at the same time as she heard the faint but unmistakable grunt of the Blacktroopers. She crouched down instinctively. If they came through the gate and around the corner, they would spot her instantly. Her only chance was to get inside the house.

Moving quickly, Lily stood and pushed aside a gauze curtain that hung in the window. She slid her legs over the edge of the sill, hitting the floor with a thump and ducking beneath the inside window ledge. She couldn't hear any sound in the house over the noise of the storm. The wet gauze curtain clung to her face and she struggled to catch her breath. She was unfit. The gym in her parents' house with its walking, rowing and cross-training machines and its bicycle that went nowhere was a total no-go zone for her. Her parents insisted upon it constantly and Lily would rather have had a heart attack than risk meeting them there. Looking at their smooth limbs with the toned muscles sliding underneath made her want to vomit.

Gradually, the thumping in her ears subsided. She pulled herself up and carefully eased the window shut. The storm was ending as abruptly as it had begun. A watery sun was emerging and there was a silvery quality to the thinning rain. The hailstones were rapidly turning to slush.

With the window shut, there was no sound. Lily hoped the Blacktroopers had moved on down the street and she hadn't bought herself some time. She looked around and saw that she was in a bedroom. There was a four-poster bed with high pillows and an old-fashioned dressing table with silver hairbrushes and perfume bottles arranged in front of the mirror. Brass hooks lined the back of the partially open door, but nothing was hanging there. Lily stepped gingerly onto the carpet in the centre of the room, avoiding the dusty wooden floors.

She crept to the doorway. She was sweating even more heavily in this oppressive atmosphere than she had been in full sun. Her aim was to make her way to the back of the house without disturbing anyone living here, find a way to climb the fence, maybe travel through some rear gardens, before slipping back into the street. She had to return to the Wall and search for a place to cross it. Lily knew it was unrealistic to think the Blacktroopers would just abandon their search for her, but she didn't really have much choice other than to push on.

Lily peered down the passageway, relieved to find there was no one there. Treading lightly, she moved down the hall. She passed one dark doorway and then another, resisting the urge to sneeze as her footsteps raised dust.
The hallway opened into a large living space. Beyond the French doors at the end of the room was a garden surrounded by high walls. On the left side of the room was a messy cluster of chairs and sofas. As Lily moved towards them, she saw a flickering screen behind one of the high-backed wing chairs. No sound came from the screen; there was just the image of a girl. With a start, Lily realised the girl was her. She was being filmed. Only then did she see the tiny shape sitting in the chair. Lily’s first instinct was to run, but she made herself stand still.

The person was shockingly old. Lily had never seen anyone so elderly and it struck her that her computer screen, which had been Lily’s only window to the world, had contained images of anyone above the age of about forty. Lily thought the old woman looked sick and close to death. Her skin was powdery and her bones protruded.

‘Don’t be afraid.’ The woman raised an almost translucent hand. ‘I won’t hurt you.’ Her voice was like dry leaves scraping on glass. Lily stared.

‘Are you hiding from them?’ the woman said.

‘Yes.’

The woman shifted slightly in her chair. ‘I can’t protect you here. I’m waiting for them myself, watching for them.’ She gestured at the screen.

Lily’s stomach lurched with fear. Then she saw that the woman was wearing a bracelet. It was different from Lily’s and Alice’s. Hers was thick, black and ugly. Who had put it on her? Panicked, Lily looked around, but there was no one else in the room.

‘At least come and sit with me until they arrive,’ the woman said.

‘I can’t. I need to go,’ Lily said.

But her shock at the woman’s age was fading and Lily was curious so she perched on the edge of a small chair, keeping an eye on the closed-circuit screen. It seemed to scan the hallway and the front door. At least they would have some warning if the Blacktroopers came in that way.

‘Bring your chair closer so I can look at you,’ the woman said. She narrowed her eyes to see Lily better and her old face melted into a smile.

‘You’re beautiful, just like . . .’

‘Like who?’ Lily said.

The woman’s eyes were the palest blue, stunning despite the effects of old age. Still, the woman repelled her a little. This must be how we age, Lily thought, slowly shedding moisture.

‘I’m sorry, I have to go before the Blacktroopers track me,’ Lily said.

‘You’re like my own daughter who I lost because of my greed,’ the woman interrupted. Lily sat back down abruptly. She had to hear this. The woman held out her hands and Lily forced herself to take them. They were dry and papery.

‘I gave her away,’ the old lady continued. ‘My son, too, and when it was too late, I came to my senses. I stopped taking their drugs and their serum and now I just wait. Either my
children will come back to me...’ She looked down. ‘Or more likely, the Committee will put me outside the Wall or I’ll die.’

Lily was confused. Drugs? Serum?

This woman seemed ashamed. She winced and Lily let go of her hands, glancing at the TV screen.

‘They haven’t come yet,’ the woman said. ‘Maybe you’ll be lucky. Tell me your name.’

‘Lily. My brother Daniel’s gone and I’m here because I, my parents...’ She couldn’t say it. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Meredith.’

‘Why did you let your children go?’ Lily said.

‘Because I couldn’t bear to think I’d be nothing one day. I wanted the serum they gave me that made me young, kept me young. I didn’t want my body to just shrivel up. I didn’t want to grow old and die. I would have done anything to stop the ageing.’ Meredith said, shaking her head.

‘What was the serum?’ Lily asked. ‘Is it connected to the pills that the Blacktroopers bring?’

‘Yes,’ Meredith mumbled. Lily had to lean forward to hear her. ‘If you want the serum, you have to take the pills.’

‘But what is the serum?’ Lily insisted. It was no use. Meredith went off on a tangent.

‘When my children left, did I tell you their names? Terrence and Rose?’

... Lily realised there was no use trying to push the woman. She just had to let her talk. ‘Yes, go on,’ Lily said.

‘Terrence went first and then Rose. One straight after the other. No, I should say it properly – I gave them away. At first I was happy they were gone. Can you imagine? But then I fell ill. I couldn’t even get out of bed and I almost died. I lay there terribly sick and when they came with the drugs, I couldn’t swallow them; at first because I was too sick to do it and then because of the transformation. Eventually, my fever went away. I was weak, but that’s when I realised. Oh dear, that’s when I knew...’

Tears ran down her face. Lily touched Meredith’s hand to prompt her to keep talking, but Meredith just shook her head, her whole body trembling. Lily wanted to shake her by her frail shoulders. The woman was sobbing now, ancient hands pressed against her face.

‘Oh, I gave them away for nothing, for nothing. I gave them away without even knowing what I was doing. I want them back. I want to change what I’ve done, but I can’t.’ Meredith’s voice was rising.

‘You’re not making sense, Meredith, listen...’

‘It was the drugs, don’t you see? If only I’d known earlier, I wouldn’t have taken them. I’d have tricked those bastards, I would have found a way...’

‘Meredith, I don’t understand. Please try to explain it to me. I need to know. What about the drugs?’

‘They wanted us to give away our own children. They wanted us to forget how to love our own children. Can you believe such cruelty? That’s what those people have done to
me. That's why I no longer have my children.' Tears rolled down her creased cheeks and dropped onto her lap.

Forcing herself to stay calm, Lily took Meredith gently by the face and made her turn her head. 'Please try and explain what you mean about the drugs and the serum.'

'I see they attached that to you, too.' Meredith looked at Lily's bracelet.

'Did you try and get them back, your children?' Lily asked.

'They said I'd donated my children of my own free will. They said my children were the price I had to pay. I told them I didn't want it any more, their poison. I just wanted my children back. I wanted to go and find them and bring them home. So they put this thing on me to keep me trapped.'

She raised her wrist. Lily could see the copper wires inside the black bracelet; even thicker than the ones in Lily's bracelet.

'And then they stopped talking to me. They wouldn't even tell me if my children were still alive. They said if I wouldn't take their drugs and I didn't want their precious stuff, I was on my own and they would leave me to die.' Meredith said.

Lily tried to make sense of what she was saying. She patted the old woman's hand soothingly. Meredith leaned towards Lily and whispered, 'Do you know how they get the serum? They get it from children like you.' Then Meredith started laughing. It was grotesque. Lily thought she mustn't be quite insane.

'Let me show you something,' Meredith said. 'Over there ... on the little table ....'

There was a photo in a silver frame and Lily got up and brought it back to Meredith. Lily checked the TV screen. Still clear. In the photo, a youngish woman was sitting on a cream sofa. A teenage boy and girl sat beside her.

'Are these your children?'

Meredith nodded wearily.

'Who's this woman here?'

'That's me, taken two months ago.'

Lily looked from the photo to the shrunk person in front of her. 'It can't be.'

'It is. I'll be forty next year, but I look eighty. It happened quickly once I stopped taking their serum. I'm dying. There's nothing I can do about it and nothing I want to do about it. If I can't have my children I want to die.'

Lily's brain struggled to catch up: 'Are you saying the Blacktrooper drugs made you give away your children?'

'I gave them away. I did it, no one else.'

Lily checked the screen again. It was clear, but she thought she saw a shadow slide past the front door. It was hard to see down the gloomy hallway. Lily remembered how quietly the Blacktroopers moved when they wanted to.

Meredith had seen it, too. 'Go,' she said quietly. 'Don't be caught here. Save yourself.'

Lily desperately wanted to run, but she couldn't bring herself to leave this frail woman.

'Go out the French doors, they're not locked,' Meredith said. 'See if you can scale the wall into the garden next door.
Then make your way to the wall on the far side—there's a gate there that the neighbours don't lock. They never used to, anyway.'

'No, I'm not leaving you here. What'll they do to you?' Lily darted across to the kitchen and grabbed a knife from a block on the counter. 'I'm staying,' she said.

'No!' Meredith's voice rose thinly. 'You have to go. I'm not going to be responsible for another child. Leave now.'

Lily shook her head, tightening her grasp on the knife handle. The front door knob turned with the faintest crunch of metal.

Meredith pushed herself upright, staggering slightly, and took four rapid steps across the room. Before Lily could stop her, Meredith opened the French doors and stepped outside. She fell to the ground instantly as the bracelet siren began its unearthly screeching. Lily dropped the knife and sprang after her, throwing herself down beside the woman, but it was too late. This bracelet was different from Lily's. It had already tightened like a vice, instantly severing Meredith's hand. Her dark blood ran thickly from her wrist and soaked into the ground. Meredith's eyes went wide, her body stiffened and convulsed once, twice and then she went quite still, her eyes already glazed over. The bracelet, having completed its gruesome task, fell silent.

Lily was horrified.

'Meredith!' She felt for a pulse, but there was nothing. Lily recoiled, scrambling backwards.

She heard the troopers enter the house.

Lily took off across the garden, which was a green and sodden tangle. She felt removed, as if this was all happening to someone else. She looked back at Meredith's tiny husk of a body. If only she'd left when Meredith had told her to; if only she'd listened.

She stumbled between some brimming pots and tunneled through a creeper that was growing against the neighbour's wall. The rainwater on the leaves drenched her. At least here she was hidden from the house. Using the protruding rivets that attached the creeper's support to the wall, she climbed irrationally, sobbing, her arms and thighs burning.

One of the rivets ripped out of the wall and Lily gasped, swinging out, wrenching her wrist and yelping. Idiot, she berated herself. She needed to be more careful. Any minute she expected a rough hand to grab her ankle and haul her down. Finally she saw the top of the garden wall. She threw the leg over, grazing the skin on her stomach and inner thigh before toppling down the other side.

Only then did Lily remember she'd left her bag beside Meredith's chair. The remote control for her bracelet was in it. Now there was no way to prevent the bracelet from tightening