

Hogweed

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## ABSTRACT

Hogweed

Marina Hess

*Hogweed* consists of the first seven chapters of a novel in progress. Set in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, the story follows the quotidian adventures of eleven year-old Clare Lowy and her best friend, Florian Weatherup. Clare and Florian enjoy a middle-class existence that is relatively carefree, though not without the prick of family tensions and the harassment of the class bully, Kevin R. They spend their after-school hours playing games in the alley behind their street and spying on the Pamphleteer, the outspoken activist next door. As Clare's twelfth birthday approaches, her greatest concern is the loss of imagination that she believes characterizes the passage into adulthood. But when a fantastical growth of plants and trees threatens Toronto's very foundations, Clare must also contend with the environmental, political, and personal repercussions of the disaster. As the domineering Mayor Lash limits civil freedoms in response to the uncontrollable growth, Clare finds the motivation in her relationships and her own imaginative powers to help create a more sustainable city. The focus of these chapters is the development of character and place, but the larger work will explore notions of community, responsibility, and agency.

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Without a doubt, this is for Janice, Peter, and Andrea Hess

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## **Chapter One: Predator-Prey**

Before she turned twelve, Clare had never set foot in a forest. She'd only visited the countryside a couple of times. But that didn't stop her from imagining what the world just beyond her city looked like. Without a doubt, it was green and dull. Lots of grass. Small, boring animals skittering through the bushes. Trees standing very still. Nobody really living out there and nothing much ever happening.

Clare's mother, Patty, said that Toronto had everything a person might want, including the great outdoors. If you were sick of traffic, you caught a ferry to the islands, where you could buy a popsicle from a bike vendor and eat it on the beach while trying to glimpse New York across the lake. If you wanted shade and the scent of pine, you took a blanket to High Park, and maybe a picnic to share with the squirrels. Of course you couldn't go by yourself, or after dark. Strange men who abused children held court in the park at night. But there were wild things in the woods, too.

These wild things, bears and wolves and whatnot, were on Clare's mind as she and Florian walked up Pearson Avenue. Mr. Moscovitz was taking their class to the park in the afternoon to play some educational game about the food chain. Yesterday he'd spent an hour assigning everyone their roles, and then reassigning them when the original arrangement was met with complaints and threats. After a new chart had been drawn up and the class had settled down, Clare had discovered that in the great scheme of life, she was not a predator to be feared and avoided. She was a rabbit.

"This stupid game," she was saying to Florian as they made their way to school. "I can't believe Mr. Moscovitz made me a rabbit. What a jerk."

"I'd rather be a rabbit," Florian replied. "If you hide well enough, people might forget about you. At least you won't have to chase anyone."

He looked small and thin with the straps of his red backpack bulging above his shoulders. Clare felt sympathetic, but she was also a bit envious. Florian was to be Disease. It was the part with the most power: Disease could kill any animal, including Man, but could not be killed in return. It was one of the parts that Clare had coveted. Although she was glad it had been given to Florian and not one of the other kids, she suspected that he'd received the role because he was asthmatic and couldn't outrun their classmates. She felt guilty thinking this, but it was a possibility. Too bad Mr. Moscovitz hadn't considered that Florian would have to run *after* their classmates.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "We'll sneak away."

"Sneak away where?"

"To one of the playgrounds. It'll be the settlement."

"Oh yeah, the settlement. What's it called again?"

"L'Anse aux Meadows. It's a real place, you know. In Newfoundland. We're voyageurs from Norway, searching for our father. He went overseas to find gold and fight in a war, but his ship was lost in a thunderous gale and we haven't heard from him in ages. My name is Freya Franksdottir and yours is Leif Franksson."

Florian laughed. "Our dad's name is Frank?"

"Well, maybe it's Francis. Okay, Frank isn't perfect, but—"

"It should be Eirik, spelled *E-i-r-i-k*."

"Maybe—"

"But Eirik was a king or some kind of leader, and our father's just a warrior."



Clare didn't answer him. She knew that if she waited a few minutes, Florian would sort out the muddle in his head and agree upon the name she'd chosen. She gazed around her. The leaves were finally out, flipping in the breeze and catching the light. They looked like iridescent beetles hovering around the branches, like they might lift off and fly away as one shining flock. They seemed to belong to the tropical world of *National Geographic*, which was infinitely more interesting than the suburbs, exurbs and empty spaces of southern Ontario. They seemed very alive.

In fact, everything seemed very alive. Tulips with blossoms as big as bowls crowded front gardens. The stamp-sized lawns outside each house glowed green. The sound of jack-hammering poured down Pearson from Roncesvalles Avenue, disrupted only by a car roaring up the street, breaking the residential speed limit. The sun was not yet at the top of the sky, but Clare could already feel her dark hair heating up. She didn't really need her jacket. It was probably warm enough for short sleeves.

"I wonder," she began slowly, "what it would be like to grow up in a jungle. Florian, let's pretend you were born here, but when you were a teenager your parents sent you to school in England. So you're returning after twenty years away."

"What? The Vikings didn't colonize any jungles."

"Forget about the Vikings for now. Look, we're entomologists on a mission to find the last purple butterfly. The rarest species on earth, prized for its colour and, uh, the medicine that can be made from its wings. You're leading the expedition. You should be happy, you're taking us back to the place you came from."

"I don't know. It sounds like the opposite of *The Jungle Book*."

"No, it doesn't." Clare shuddered. "I hate that movie."

“You were scared of the snake. The hypnotizer, Kaa.”

“Anyhow, it’s pretty wild in the jungle,” Clare said, ignoring him. “All humid and noisy and dark. Jungles are extremely dark, because of the canopy. Do you know what the canopy is? It’s the treetops,” she continued, despite Florian’s assertion that he knew, “all linked together, like fingers, like this”—she showed him; he said again, “I *know*”—“blocking the light. You can’t see the sun or the moon or the stars. You can only see the eyes of lions and tigers, yellow and totally deadly.”

“Lions don’t live in jungles, they live on the veldt—hey, watch out.”

They’d turned onto Roncesvalles, absently following their usual route, and Clare had nearly bumped into a man unloading a tray of bread from a van. She mumbled sorry and he mumbled something in another language before disappearing through the open door of a deli. It was not yet nine and Roncesvalles was already restless. Streetcars shrilled past. Shopkeepers dumped fruit into baskets. The man with the St. Nicholas beard shouted from his favourite stoop. He shook a can with some coins inside; they rattled surprisingly loudly. Clare and Florian hurried along.

“But lions do hunt at night. Or in the early morning.”

“Tigers too?” Clare asked.

“I think so, but they live in Asia, not Africa.”

“Good thing you read the encyclopedia when you were little.” Clare grinned.

“Remember the reports we had to write last year, on non-fiction media? Most people did newspapers or the Internet, but you did the A section of the dictionary.”

Florian blushed. “It has a history. It’s very important.”

“And Kevin R. and those guys bugged you about it for days.”

"They can barely read. They're going to flunk out of high school."

"Probably."

They stopped at the next crosswalk. Clare pressed the button and automatically stuck out her arm. Almost immediately, recalling that she was nearly twelve and nearly finished with grade six, she yanked it back to her side. It was a conscious effort, undoing the safety lessons of many years, but it was necessary. You had to saunter across the street or risk appearing like a baby, or worse, a loser in grade four.

From a block away, the screams and chatter of the schoolyard rushed towards them. Yoga moms were kissing squirming kids and yelling at them to mind the nanny later. Clare and Florian followed a well-beaten path across the lawn, passing Rita Gupta and the other Kevin, Kevin J., on their way into the playground.

"Look, look, it's Einstein's freaky children. Brother and sister, boyfriend and girlfriend, joined at the hips and joined at the lips," called Rita.

"Shut up," said Clare.

"Brother and sister *and* boyfriend and girlfriend?" echoed the other Kevin, who wasn't as clever with words as Rita was. "You're sick."

"We're not related, idiot. And we're *not* boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Of course you're not. Go back to the sandbox, babies." Rita mimed sucking her thumb. "Sometimes I can't believe they're our age," she said to Kevin.

Clare made a face at Rita as she and Florian continued into the playground. When they were no longer in view, she mimicked Rita tossing her hair and wrinkling her nose.

"Sometimes I can't believe you're my age," she said to Florian.

"The funny thing is that you're actually older than her."

“She thinks that wearing mascara and lip gloss makes her mature. She talks about baby-sitting her brothers like it’s a job, even though she doesn’t get paid. And Kevin is completely hopeless.” Unfortunately Clare couldn’t say the same about Rita, who was one of the better students in their class, as well as a bullying loudmouth.

“I mean, you’re going to be twelve in two days.”

“Yeah.”

The number twelve flashed in Clare’s mind like a *Sesame Street* tutorial, bright and balloon-like. She loved her birthday, of course; she’d be lying if she claimed not to love the presents and cake and attention. But mixed in with her excitement was the sense that this year would be different, and not in a special way. This year was going to expect something of Clare. She and Florian would be starting grade seven at a larger, busier school in September, and they’d be taking the streetcar everyday, like her older brother, Jason. They’d be in high school in a mere two years, surrounded by alcoholics, drug dealers and people who had sex. And then they would be adults, off to university and work, and blind to their imaginations for the rest of their lives.

“Yeah, let’s go inside,” said Clare. “The bell’s going to ring soon.”

Mr. Moscovitz was wearing jeans. That was the first thing Clare noticed as she took her seat. A couple of her classmates noticed too: “Hey sir, nice pants!” they said, strutting into the room with the giddy power that accompanies all field trips, when the rules are finally different. Mr. Moscovitz smiled and pointed at their desks.

“Thank you Tommy, Farouk,” he replied. “I trust they’ll hold up longer than yours. Are those plaid boxers you’re wearing? How 1994. Now sit.”

A couple of girls laughed very noisily at this. Tommy and Farouk grunted to show they didn't care, but Clare noticed Tommy adjusting his belt.

"Before we go," Mr. Moscowitz said over the classroom babble, "before we go, I'd like to remind everyone that I will not tolerate any disobedience. No fighting. No unnecessarily loud swearing. Got that, Kevin? Yes, you, Kevin R. I don't want to hear from you at all. No running away from the group. Do not yell unpleasant things at any strangers in the park. I don't care if they're kissing. I don't care if they're urinating in the bushes. Stop giggling, Magda; it happens. Do *not* throw anything at any person or animal. Last winter we had a serious problem with 'snow bombs'—oh, I shouldn't even mention them. I don't want to give you any ideas. Are we ready?"

To Clare's disgust, the girl chosen to be Man tried organizing the line so that the class would travel as a food chain to the park. Florian was sent to the front to stand amid the wolves and foxes. Clare surveyed the rest of the prey. Many of them were the shy kids in the class, meek and obedient, well-suited to their roles. They even resembled rabbits, chipmunks and mice. The others were either bitter at their status, like Clare, or feigning disinterest in the game. "*So childish*," someone whispered.

"I'll give you your life cards as you leave," Mr. Moscowitz said. "The prey will have the most cards. It's all to do with population. Numbers, my dears."

The line dissolved as they snatched their lives from him and rushed outside. They occupied the streets as they walked, shoving each other onto the road and shouting crude versions of nursery rhymes at passers-by. The predators discussed their preferred hunting methods while the prey listened nervously. Mr. Moscowitz threatened them all with detentions every few minutes until they reached the gates to the park.

High Park was one of Toronto's largest parks, sloping down from Bloor Street towards the waterfront and stretching several blocks west. When Clare and her brother Jason were younger, their parents took them to play on the swings and throw bread into the murky duck pond. They swam in the outdoor pool, although their mother fretted about germs and lice, and bought soft ice cream cones from the concession cabins. Clare imitated the men and women practicing tai chi under the trees, to make her parents laugh. In winter, they had hot apple cider and gingerbread at the Victorian house atop the hill. She loved those trips, but at some point they stopped going as often as they once did, and eventually they stopped completely. Clare's mother said that the park had been overrun with unsavoury sorts. The newspapers said that Mayor Lash wanted to pass a by-law prohibiting unaccompanied children from even entering the park.

Mr. Moscovitz took attendance one last time before leading the class to a field bordered by trees. The trees were the boundary, he explained, and if anyone crossed that boundary they would be condemned to a month without recess, a three hundred-word essay atoning for their crime, and public humiliation in the form of an apology to the class *and* the school principal. A few kids grinned at the list and declared, "That's nothing. You're too easy, sir." But most were too busy talking, chewing gum, twirling their hair or illicitly trading their life cards to bother responding.

"Now that we've settled that," Mr. Moscovitz said, "we'll begin the game." He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and looked, Clare thought with surprise, almost eager. "I'm very pleased about this. You're a lucky group. It took several weeks of nagging the principal to allow us this field trip. What with the restrictions on spending and safety these days, not many classes have gone anywhere."

“So,” he went on. “You know the rules, right? Kill gently, please. Tag only on the arms and shoulders. I’ll be the food station and Ms. Fong over there”—he waved at a chaperoning parent—“will be the water station. If you tag either of us, we will give you an extra half-life. Once your life cards are gone, you’re dead. You must come sit here when that happens, but don’t fret, you may jeer at those left playing. We’ll see which animals are still standing at the end. Enjoy yourselves, okay? *GO!*”

With a collective shriek the bored, the bad, the dorky and the beautiful took off across the field. Hands reached outwards with hooked fingers and faces contorted into hideous masks as the hunters gave chase. The prey screamed or cursed when they were caught. The predators were boastful, holding their life cards aloft. A few people plunked themselves on the ground and refused to participate, but the noise and activity never ceased. Clare was killed twice, by a weasel and by Man herself, before she managed to creep over to Florian, who was hovering by the trees. She suddenly realized that they might actually be able to slip away from the group.

“Florian. Pretend to run around a bit. We’ll make our way over there—see?”

He nodded. Clare waited, dodging predators, until Mr. Moscovitz turned to settle a skirmish between two coyotes. Then she grabbed Florian’s arm and they raced as quickly as he could manage, over the boundary and into the shadows cast by the trees. She didn’t dare glance behind her, not until they were out of sight.

They both paused to catch their breath. Clare bent over, hands on her knees, and squinted at the ground. She couldn’t believe they’d done it. Would anyone notice they were gone? She straightened up. Florian was leaning against a tree, his narrow shoulders heaving. He smiled to indicate that he was alright.

“We can wait a few more minutes if you want,” Clare said.

“No, I’m ready.”

Clare spied a path. She suspected they might find one of the park’s playgrounds at the end of it. It wasn’t too far from the field, they’d still hear the class.

“Let’s go this way.”

They were careful to stay on the path. Mr. Moscovitz had told their class there was a very dangerous type of poison ivy in High Park that permanently disfigured those who brushed against it. He was obviously lying to keep them within bounds, but there was no harm in being alert. They also kept their eyes out for strangers.

“So what are we doing?” Florian asked. “The Vikings or the jungle thing?”

Clare paused to examine their surroundings. Sunshine speckled the path. The air seemed cleaner and cooler among the trees. It was easy to imagine they were returning from the seaside, from a morning spent hauling in nets and trading goods with other fishers on the shore. They were preparing for a voyage of many months. Now their hands and backs were weighed down with baskets of fish, salt cakes, sharpening stones, and kelp to twine into rope. Her arms felt heavy at the thought.

“The Vikings. The Norse,” she replied. “This would make a better settlement than jungle, I think. Look, someone else has been here.”

She pointed to some garbage on the path.

Florian snickered. “Marauders. Leading us right to their stash.”

“No, it’s a warning. They want us to know they’re nearby. We forget about them because our village is peaceful, but they’re always waiting to attack.”

“Yeah?”



"Let's say the marauders took our father. They need him, they're forming an army and they know he's an excellent warrior. So they kidnapped him."

Florian was silent for a moment. "I think he wanted to join them."

"No way, he's a good man. He looked after us before he went missing, he cooked and repaired things. Everyone in the village liked him." Clare could picture him exactly.

"He has a beard, kind of shaggy hair, a really friendly face."

"What about us?"

"My name is Freya. I'm the oldest—we can be twins if you want, but I'm still the oldest by a few minutes—and I have red hair. I'm the fastest runner for kilometres and kilometres, and I'm also the best at finding herbs. I have a special sense for that. Your name is Leif and you're the smartest person in the settlement. You can read the stars. We can't navigate without you. We can't go *anywhere* without you."

Clare waited for Florian to signal his agreement or offer another idea that she might incorporate into her plan, but he said nothing. She put her hands on her hips and pressed her fingers into her sides. Sometimes he was such a pain. Who said that girls were moodier than boys? They must not have known any boys. Lately she and Florian were spending most of their time talking or arguing about their ideas, instead of getting excited about them and making them real. It was extremely annoying.

"So are we going to start or what?"

He shrugged and dropped his gaze to the ground, and Clare groaned, louder than she'd intended. The rest of the park seemed to have gone mute too. Their classmates and the traffic on Parkside Drive were no longer audible. The cyclists and joggers you might expect to find on the trails were absent. Not even a dog barked or a bird whistled. But

the quiet lasted only seconds before it was broken by a crash of voices and footsteps. It was Kevin R., leading a couple of boys along the path. He was a turkey vulture, his face was red, and he was brandishing a fistful of life cards like a claw.

"Come on," Clare muttered, tugging at Florian's sleeve, but Kevin and his friends had already formed a semi-circle around them.

"Mr. Moscovitz sent us. You two are screwed, you know. He said you're going to be suspended for the rest of the year," said Kevin. He reached forward and grabbed for Clare's shoulder, nearly touching her.

"Get off!" she yelled, stepping away.

"Give me a life, I tapped you."

"No."

"I tapped you, you bitch."

"No you didn't," said Clare—and she started to run.

They chased her, hollering, "You're dead, you're *SO DEAD*." She followed the path without worrying where it might end. Her side hurt and her face grew hotter and hotter but she didn't slow her pace. No matter what, no matter how far she had to run, if she had to run back to school, no matter what she would *not* give Kevin R. any life cards, she would not give him *anything*, no she would *not*—

Clare halted, gasping and frowning. The path had led to a playground—and there, on a picnic table not ten feet away, was her neighbour, the Pamphleteer.

She was with a group of dreadlocked young men and women, all of whom lifted their heads and looked as startled as Clare was. Clare recognized a few of them: the girl with the green vines tattooed across her arms, shoulders and neck, and the guy who was

always wearing a sweatband around his head, as if he were forever on his way to an aerobics class. Their backpacks were piled in a messy heap of colours and fabrics on the ground, and several bikes were propped against one end of the picnic table. On top of it, large maps were spread out and pinned down with water bottles. Clare guessed it was some environmental thing. Florian had given the Pamphleteer her nickname because of the leaflets she was always sticking inside mailboxes and under windshield wipers, with messages like *POLLUTION IS DESTRUCTION AND CARS KILL. TAKE THE SUBWAY AND STOP DRIVING NOW!* And then Clare realized that she didn't know where Florian was, or if he'd even followed her. She turned to see Kevin jogging towards her, without his friends, but with a malevolent grin greasing his face.

"I got you, Clare," he said. "Give—me—a—life."

He stuck out a hand as he neared. Clare backed away, glaring at him.

"Hey," the Pamphleteer called. "Hey, you there. What's going on?" She strolled over to them. "What are you doing to her? Get out of here."

"It's a game. We're on a *field trip*. She's in my class, so get lost, okay?"

"Shut up," said the Pamphleteer. "I want to hear what she says."

"He was chasing me," said Clare. "I don't know him. He's lying."

"She's full of crap."

"Where's your teacher?" asked the Pamphleteer.

"I don't know, we don't have the same teacher because I don't know him, and—and I think he's going to hurt me," answered Clare, amazed at how easily the words formed themselves. "He said he would, I swear."

"You cow!" Kevin gaped at her.

“Is this true?”

“I don’t know him,” Clare repeated, looking only at the Pamphleteer. “I’m not in his class, I don’t even go to his school. I’ve never seen him before.”

“You’re dead,” said Kevin. “Like, not in the game.”

Clare panicked inwardly, but she kept her gaze fixed on the Pamphleteer and the papers she was clutching: *Tamar’s AlternaCity Guides T—O—*

“—So see you soon, you scabby bitch.” And Kevin disappeared down the path.

“Little jerk,” said the Pamphleteer. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You’re the girl from next door. Clare, right? How old are you again?”

“Twelve. I mean eleven, I’m eleven.”

“Yeah? Well, you shouldn’t be in the park by yourself.”

“Um, I’m on a field trip.”

“You too? Doing what?”

“Taking samples of pond water.”

“Hey, that’s great. Don’t fall in the water, you could get hepatitis. But remember what you see. All those toxins? They’re everywhere.”

“Oh yeah?” Clare didn’t even pretend to be interested.

The Pamphleteer snorted.

“Go find your class,” she said. “I’m sure you’re in plenty of trouble.”

Clare returned to the path without another word. Who did the Pamphleteer think she was, queen of the universe or High Park or something? A politician? A university professor? Her leaflets looked silly and amateurish. They used invented terms like

*PARK-ICIDE* and featured things like cartoon trucks spewing exhaust onto flowers with unhappy faces. *PARK-ICIDE IMMINENT. CUT CONGESTION NOW!* Clare's mother had found that one frozen to the car windshield after an early spring frost. "I know she means well," Patty had grumbled as she scraped the paper off the glass. "But couldn't she find a less intrusive way of saving the earth? We're going to be late." Then she'd dropped the bits of leaflet onto the road and hurried Clare into the car.

Predator-Prey was still in progress when Clare reached the field. From the edge of the trees, she could see Florian standing beside Mr. Moscovitz. He was gripping his asthma puffer. She scanned the field and spotted Kevin R., who sneered at her and then made his way over to Mr. Moscovitz, to whisper something in his ear.

On the way back to school, Mr. Moscovitz approached Clare and asked to speak to her later. He had a meeting that afternoon, he said, but he was available at lunch the next day if she was. She agreed grimly, not daring to imagine what he might want. Florian walked with her in sensitive silence. Clare apologized for leaving him behind and he said it was fine. She knew he wasn't angry; why did she still feel guilty? The entire trip had been unsettling: the game, Kevin R., the Pamphleteer ...

"Florian!" Clare couldn't believe she'd almost forgotten. "They had maps," she said, pouncing on the memory and pushing away her unhappy thoughts.

"Who had maps?"

"The Pamphleteer and her friends. She was holding some in her hand while she spoke to me. They had a whole bunch of them, like five or six, maybe even more. One of them said Toronto in really big letters."

"You mean tourist maps?"

"I guess so. Isn't that weird?"

"Yeah. She lives here." Florian looked thoughtful. "My dad says she's always coming down to city hall and causing problems. Once the people she was with threw garbage at the mayor, but it hit my dad and some other city workers instead."

"Really? Okay, we *definitely* have to find out what they were doing."

"What about our father? We still have to find him."

"Oh yeah, the game. Let's do that another time."

"He won't wait forever."

"Florian, this could be huge! We have to find the Pamphleteer first."

"Okay."

"We'll do the Viking stuff this weekend, I promise."

"I said okay."

"Okay, then."

"Fine."

They were almost back at school by this point, passing the kindergarten playground on their way to the junior yard. The kindergarteners, out on a late-morning break, threw themselves at the fence and hollered at the grade sixes trudging up the sidewalk. Clare heard Rita shout hello to a younger brother. "You forgot my dinosaur!" he yelled back. "You didn't give me my dinosaur!" A little girl in pink corduroy overalls pushed her arms between the bars and waved. As Clare raised an arm to wave back, the little girl curled her fingers into talons and let out a high-pitched howl.

## Chapter Two: The Victory Garden

The next morning Clare woke up feeling hot, even though she had kicked off her blankets in the night. She crawled to the end of her bed and opened her window. The air outside no longer smelled like spring, like cut grass and clean laundry. It stank like car exhaust and it was humid already, though it was only 7:30 in the morning and the middle of May. May 18th, to be exact. She sat back on the bed and felt the old, familiar excitement rising. Her birthday was just twenty-four hours away.

Sometime between now and tomorrow, Patty would buy a chocolate cake with vanilla icing. She'd arrange raspberries on top to form the number 12. There would be one large candle in the middle of the cake: that was the Lowy family tradition. They would order pizza, Clare would be allowed some sips of sparkling wine, and they'd open presents after dinner. Florian would come over. Before her birthday dinner, she and Florian might track down the Pamphleteer and her friends.

But then Clare remembered that she was in trouble at school, that Mr. Moscovitz had asked to speak to her at lunch and Kevin R. had more than hinted at revenge. Her anticipation shrivelled into a pellet of dread stuck somewhere in her chest. The muggy air thickened in her throat. She wondered if this was how Florian felt when he had an asthma attack. She touched her throat, breathed in deeply, and concluded with some disappointment that she was not in danger of dying.

Unable to count on illness to keep her home, she slid off the bed and stomped over to her dresser. She pulled open the top drawer with such force that the whole thing rattled and half the treasures she kept on top of it—soapstone animals, pieces of pink

quartz, bracelets, a bowl of foreign coins, a family of Russian dolls—they tumbled off, and she watched as they hit the floor and chipped or rolled under her bed, until all her frustration shaped itself into an enraged cry: “*MOM!*”

Patty didn’t mind the mess—because it wasn’t *her* room, as she brilliantly observed—but she did warn Clare to be more careful or risk damaging the things she loved, for no good reason. She also suggested that Clare have some breakfast to perk herself up.

In the kitchen, Patty poured orange juice into glasses while chattering about the unseasonable heat and what the meteorologists foretold. Clare glowered at her cereal and Jason concentrated on bending a spoon into an unusable mess. After serving their juice, Patty leaned against the counter and exhaled. Her face was shining.

“It’s like a greenhouse in here,” she said.

“School’s not air-conditioned. It’s going to be gross. Do I have to go?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not skipping work, am I?”

“You always say it’s an icebox in the summer.”

“They haven’t turned on the air-conditioning yet.” Patty fanned herself absently.

“We can go swimming for your birthday, honey, if it’s still like this.”

“Hey, it’s your birthday tomorrow.” Jason smirked at Clare. “I forgot.”

“So?”

“So you’re a prepubescent pop-tart now. So I guess I better buy you a present.”

“Jason. Don’t talk like that to your sister.”

“What? I just offered to buy her a present.”

“You know what I mean.”



Jason scratched his nose with the middle finger of his right hand.

“I see that.”

“I see that I don’t give a shit.”

“What did you say?”

Patty’s voice cut through the kitchen, as thin and sharp as the line of her mouth. Her lipstick made her expression uglier. Clare gazed at her mother with repulsion and irritation. And then her disgust changed to anger at her brother.

He leaned over Clare on his way out of the kitchen and whispered, “Pop-tart.”

“You’re a freak,” she replied, looking at him scornfully.

Jason just laughed, and then left the room.

Clare’s classroom was stuffy, even with the windows open. Kevin R. and his friends spent the morning drawing naked women on paper planes and launching the planes onto the playground when Mr. Moscovitz wasn’t looking. Not long after the class returned from recess, Mr. Moscovitz gave up teaching fraction multiplication and let them take trips in pairs to the water fountain. Before lunch, the vice-principal came on the PA system to stress that everyone should drink lots of fluids and avoid running around in the sun. Mr. Moscovitz said to the PA system, “Good luck.”

“Just don’t faint,” he told the class. “No fainting on my watch. Now scram.”

Clare didn’t want to appear as though she were trying to escape punishment, but she thought that if Mr. Moscovitz forgot to stop her at the door, he might forget about yesterday’s antics entirely. She caught Florian’s eye and motioned for him to wait. He lingered in the hallway while she walked over with her head down.

“Miss Lowy.”

Mr. Moscovitz’s chin was tucked in and his eyebrows were raised expectantly.

“I believe we have something to discuss. Florian, you may go. Don’t worry about your friend, she’ll be here when you return. I won’t have her head.”

“Clare.” Mr. Moscovitz began the whole humiliating process with a smile. “I’ve spoken to Kevin and the others and gathered a version of what happened in the park that I want to check with you. To start, you were all out of bounds.”

“I know.”

“The park isn’t safe for you to go off meandering. It’s a beautiful space, a useful, vital space, but it can be dangerous, even for me. I wouldn’t walk through it on my own after dark and you shouldn’t at any time. Okay?”

“Now, Kevin has informed me that you also told a stranger, a woman you met, that you didn’t know him and he was trying to hurt you. Let me finish here—I know Kevin and I’m sure you had good reason to disassociate yourself from him. I’ve wanted to do the same thing on many occasions. But Clare, you put yourself and Kevin in an awkward position when you lied to that woman. She might have had the best of intentions, but what if she had taken you seriously and reported the incident? Next time, come to *me*. And don’t ever run off like that again.”

“But I do know her, the Pamphleteer. She’s my neighbour.” Clare regretted mentioning the Pamphleteer, but she had to interject. Adults never seemed to understand that it was necessary to lie sometimes—not only to avoid being caught alone with the class jerk, but to show that jerk you could be tough too. “I know her, she lives next door to me,” she continued. “Ask Florian. Ask my mom.”

Mr. Moscovitz, ready to conclude his eloquent summary of his student's misconduct, looked confused. "Pamphlet—what?"

He pulled at his moustache. "Well, anyhow, here's the deal. You're both in trouble because you left the play area. Kevin will be staying after school to help me clean the chalkboards and rearrange the bookshelves. You'll be helping George in the Victory Garden. A load of plants came in yesterday that need to be put in the soil, and the flower patch has to be watered and fertilized. In this sun everything probably needs watering again. You're to meet George by the boiler room after the last bell. He's expecting you and reporting back to me, so don't you dare leave."

George was the head janitor. He was known by his first name, as all the janitors were. He wore a blue uniform, spoke with an accent, and could be kind and funny or gruff and sarcastic, depending on the amount of garbage left in the halls.

The Victory Garden was Mr. Moscovitz's personal project, begun during a Second World War commemoration year. Clare was younger then, but she remembered the assembly where he'd revealed the idea to the school. A group of wrinkled veterans had come dressed in their uniforms, and the older students had read poems they'd written. Mr. Moscovitz had told them that the war effort started at home in those days. This notion still fascinated Clare. Wars seemed to happen ceaselessly on the other side of the world, but they had nothing to do with her household. Some kids in her class had been born in countries where wars were fought, countries like Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan, but Clare had never asked them what they'd seen. That would be impolite. Wars, in Clare's experience, were mainly inspiration for games.

"Go have your lunch now," said Mr. Moscovitz. "Scram."

Clare wasted no time grabbing her lunch bag and rushing out of the room. She couldn't believe she would have to stay after school. Only the losers in her class were given detentions, the scab-picking, test-failing, mother-profaning losers who never did their homework and always got into fights at recess, because they were too bored and angry to wait their turn or walk away when the popular kids taunted them.

She bristled as she reflected on what Mr. Moscovitz had said. Did he think she was stupid? She was nearly twelve years old; she *knew* about the dangers in the park. Living in a city made you *knowledgeable*. You knew what the women on the street corners did for a living. You heard about teenagers hanging around the elementary school playground at night, drinking beer and doing drugs atop the jungle gym. You knew kids who stole candy and make-up from Pawlak's drugstore and swapped them for cigarettes. You knew kids who rolled other kids for their baseball hats and shoes. These kids might not be smart in the school sense, but they were tough. As much as she hated to admit it, Clare recognized that kids like Kevin R. were tough.

You had to be as tough as the city itself to get by. Nothing was stronger. It was concrete everywhere, plunging into the ground and rising up, up, up into the sky, framing the waterfront, circling the parks, and ordering homes and gardens into neat rows. It began downtown and radiated outward for kilometres. Surely Toronto had been stamped permanently on the edge of Lake Ontario. No, surely it had been carved out of bedrock! Clare felt the certainty of this in her fists. She pushed open the door to the schoolyard with her knuckles. The sweltering air blasted her face like engine exhaust but she pressed onward, searching for Florian among the screaming crowds of kids.

Florian didn't ask for details about Clare's talk with Mr. Moscovitz, for which she was thankful. She'd had enough mortification for the day. Instead, he offered her half his salami sandwich and a cookie, and invited her over to his house after the detention. Clare promised that they would finish with the Norse before hunting down the Pamphleteer. They sat on a bench under a tree, plotting Freya and Leif's search for their father while sharing their lunches. Florian said Freya and Leif should have to venture into Valhalla. The idea was a good one, so Clare agreed to it. But she was having trouble showing her enthusiasm. She couldn't evoke the ancient and adventurous feelings that the park had instilled in her yesterday, when things had been clearer and more pointed. She narrowed her eyes until the schoolyard trembled like a desert mirage.

"And it's a huge hall, Valhalla, with five hundred and forty doors." Florian was recalling a description he'd found online the previous evening. "Odin lives there, with the spirits of the dead war heroes. Hey—are you listening?"

"Uh huh." Clare made herself look busy by reaching for her drink. "Ugh. My juice box is warm, feel it. I wish my mom had packed a popsicle."

"It would have melted."

"Well, obviously. But I still wish I had one."

"So anyway, Valhalla is guarded by eagles ..."

As Florian spoke, Clare saw Tommy and Farouk jump over the fence and sprint across the baseball diamond. They ran towards the benches near the Victory Garden, where some of their classmates were hanging out, eating, gossiping, reading comics, and braiding each other's hair. Tommy was clutching a paper bag.

"Florian, I think they have freezies!"

Ever since the weather had warmed, kids had been sneaking out of the playground to buy bagfuls of the ten-cent freezies from Team's, the best candy store on Roncevalles Avenue. They returned like heroes: crowing that dessert had "finally arrived," recounting how they'd managed to outwit the lunch supervisors, pledging to share their loot. But there were always more kids than freezies, and so, citing fairness and democracy, the returning heroes held a toss. They organized their friends into a crowd, assigning a few people to keep the lunch supervisors and the younger kids at bay. Then they threw the freezies into the crowd one by one and observed with pleasure the pushing, kicking, and tripping that ensued. Nobody knew who had started the practice, but everyone agreed that it was the best thing to have hit the schoolyard in weeks.

Clare and Florian followed Tommy and Farouk across the basketball court to the Victory Garden. Recognizing what was to come, their classmates had already laid down their hairbrushes and comics and risen from the asphalt.

"Come on you lazy asses, you freaking hyenas," Tommy called.

"Line up, line up over here," Farouk sang. "We've got *freezies* ..."

The kids playing Red Ass against the school wall stuffed their tennis balls into their pockets and clustered around Tommy and Farouk. The hair-braiders and comics-readers discussed their favourite flavours with exaggerated nostalgia, enthusing about blue tongues. Orange and purple, red and white. Blue, blue.

Clare wedged herself between Rebecca and Magda, who smiled and made room for her. She liked them, although she found them bland. Their notion of fun seemed limited to baking cookies and watching soap operas. Whenever Clare spent time with them after school, she found herself longing for Florian.

“Can you move over for Florian?” she asked them, and they complied.

Tommy positioned everyone in front of the Victory Garden fence with the showy authority of a movie director. “You stand over there, and you, over here. Taller people in the back. Whoa, you’ve grown, Rita—whoa, you’ve gotten bigger—”

“Shut up, pervert,” Rita replied.

“He’s in love with her,” murmured Magda.

Florian quietly gagged and Clare giggled. With a sudden burst of pleasure, she leaned back on her heels and twisted from side to side. Rebecca was laughing at her, Rita was giving Tommy the finger, Farouk was trying to ensure the lunch supervisors were far enough away, and the entire playground was glittering in the midday light, as if a child had glued a million sparkles onto its hard black surface. So what if she had a detention. It wouldn’t take up more than half an hour of her time.

At the last minute, Tommy decided he wanted to be on the receiving end of the toss and handed the bag of freezies over to Farouk. He had just ensconced himself in the crowd when Kevin R. appeared. Clare stiffened.

“Hey, hey, Farouk man.” Kevin was all high-fives and fist-bumps. “Let me throw a couple ...” Farouk obliged him and Kevin took his place.

“Everyone ready?” he asked, and then his eyes alighted on Clare.

“Wait. Not you.” Kevin pointed at her. “You’re a liar. Do you know what this one did to me?” he said to the others. “She told some lady in the park that I was going to hurt her. If that lady had ratted, I would’ve been suspended.”

The awful part was that he was right, and Clare couldn’t bring herself to lie again and deny it. She could only hope that everyone would laugh off his reaction.

But it was sympathy, not disbelief, that stirred the crowd. "Wha' ... No way, man ...". Someone sucked in their breath. Clare had to speak up soon.

"Whatever, Kevin. You were out of bounds too and you know it."

"*Out of bounds?*" he repeated. "Why don't you get *out* of here?"

"You didn't buy those freezies, you can't tell me what to do," she told him, but that was the wrong response. Farouk was frowning at her. She could feel Rebecca and Magda withdrawing from her side by microscopic degrees. Rita was grinning and everyone else was gazing at her with curious contempt, daring her to say more. Her heart was beating much faster than she liked. She realized she wasn't going to come up with a clever remark that would win back their favour. Florian put his hand on her arm and said, "Come on, ignore him," and she let him pull her away.

"Clare!"

She turned around instinctively, and instantly regretted it.

"Catch," said Kevin as he hurled an orange freezie high into the air, and she could do nothing but stare as it sailed over the fence, into the Victory Garden.

George greeted Clare with a nod after school. "So you're my apprentice."

She nodded back. His shirt had dark patches under the arms.

"How long do I have to stay?" she asked him. She could almost hear her mother chiding her for rudeness, but the day had been miserable and she was eager to leave for Florian's house. Fortunately, the afternoon had passed more swiftly than the morning, and none of her classmates had mentioned Kevin's accusations, although she'd glimpsed Rita gesturing towards her and whispering. She'd tried distracting herself from her



lingering embarrassment by scribbling notes to Florian on her binder: *Leif gets caught by the marauders too but Freya saves him by giving them a sleeping potion made from dandelions, which she puts in their stew.* But Kevin had still found his way into her head: *He's really getting on my nerves these days ... I hope he fails grade six because I can't wait for him to flunk out of high school, it's way too far away.*

Worse than Clare's embarrassment was her suspicion that she'd shown herself to be weak. It had preyed on her so strongly that she'd felt uncomfortable in her chair. Why hadn't she told off Kevin? At least that would have been useful. After the fact, her only option was to act as if she didn't care. Luckily she was good at that. When the bell had rung at 3:30 and Mr. Moscovitz had caught her eye, no doubt intending to remind her of the detention, she'd looked back at him with her stoniest face.

Now she stood before George, mentally crossing her fingers that she wouldn't have to plead with him to let her leave early. He didn't seem surprised by her question, but he didn't seem bothered, either. He checked his watch.

"You don't have to stay long," he replied. "You'll plant some tomatoes and water the flowers, and I'll tell Mr. Moscovitz you were here until four. Okay? Follow me. The sun is very bad, so you must wear a hat. I have extras inside."

George led her into the shed, a small storage space off the boiler room with a door that opened onto the Victory Garden. Because that door had no lock on the outside, he had to take Clare through the boiler room, which was rotten luck on a day like today. The shed itself was not much cooler than the boiler room, and it was packed full of gardening supplies: bags of soil and seed, buckets, trowels, even a wheelbarrow. Clare almost knocked over some rakes and shovels piled against a wall.

“First things first.” George unlocked the outside door with a brass key on his keychain. “I want to show you—” He reached up, picked something off the top of a red fuse box, and opened his hand to reveal another brass key. “You wouldn’t want to be locked in here overnight, believe me. It’s hotter than hell—I mean, hotter than a zoo. So I keep this one extra key here, just in case. If you’re in here alone and some fool or the wind shuts that door there, you go and get this and get out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“It opens the door to the boiler room too, but I like to keep that closed. We don’t want different gases and temperatures mixing together, eh? It makes bad smells.”

George put the key back on the fuse box. “I’ll get you a hat. The tomatoes are already outside; we just have to dig some holes and put in the stakes.”

He went about grabbing hats from a bin, pulling wooden sticks and trowels from the shelves and lifting a yellow bag off the floor, placing everything in the wheelbarrow. Clare read aloud the name on the bag. It sounded familiar for some reason. “GloriVita Corp. Glorious Grains, Grasses and Organic Gro-All. What’s Gro-All?”

“That’s the fertilizer. What you mix in the dirt, what makes the plants grow. Mr. Moscovitz just bought that. The company, they donated the wrong kind! The chemical kind. Now see that little bag of soil over there? Can you get that?” George said “little,” but the bag of soil weighed more than anything Clare had ever carried.

She didn’t have to carry it far, though. The Victory Garden was quite small. It was square-shaped and bordered on three sides by a wire fence that reached Clare’s chest, and on the fourth side by the school wall. A narrow path divided it in half. On one side of the path was a row of markers with pictures of vegetables that had been painted by the

younger students. From the blobby spots of colour, Clare deduced that there were carrots, beans, lettuces and tomatoes—though the carrot picture might also have been a pumpkin. On the other side were markers with flower blossoms, none of which were familiar to Clare. She thought flowers were rather boring.

George set the wheelbarrow in the middle of the path and wiped his brow. Clare was coming up behind him when she heard him exclaim, “What the hell is this?”

“Oh,” said Clare, seeing what had upset him, “freezies.” And then her arms gave out and she dropped the bag of soil on her right foot. “Ouch!”

There were freezie wrappers all over the lettuces, their ends bitten off and their insides drained, though some were still coloured by residual liquid. It looked like a family of neon snakes had shed their skins. And there was the granddaddy snake, the orange freezie with which Kevin had taunted Clare, melted in its dusty casing.

“You kids were throwing these things again? You can’t find the garbage can?” George’s tone was hard. “What do you think this garden is for?”

Clare couldn’t believe it. She hadn’t even taken part in the freezie toss and here she was receiving the blame, when it was all Kevin’s doing. And her foot was throbbing and George hadn’t even noticed. When he mumbled again, “What do they think this garden is for?” she replied, exasperated, “I don’t know. To celebrate the war?”

“Celebrate?” George sounded appalled. But then he sighed and said, “I guess that’s what it seems like sometimes, doesn’t it.”

He bent over the lettuce patch and began collecting the wrappers. Clare figured she’d better do the same. They didn’t speak. After all the wrappers had been gathered, George picked up a trowel and knelt down near the tomato marker. He motioned for

Clare to join him. Unsure as to how she could actually help, she watched as he made a shallow hole in the earth, uncovering roots as fine as spider webs, bits of fertilizer, pill bugs, pebbles, bottle caps, a penny and a long, thin earthworm.

She recoiled. "Oh my god."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't like worms," she said. An unwelcome image of pinkish brown bodies, mashed up and spread across wet sidewalks, flashed to mind.

"Don't like worms? But they're a gardener's friend." George reached for the tray of tomatoes. "I'll tell you what, though, I'll dig the holes and clear away the worms, and you can plant the plants." Clare allowed a brief, grateful smile, and he showed her how to tap the tomatoes out of their plastic containers, gently-gently, and place them in the holes so that they were covered up to their leaves. The earth was dry and crumbly on top where the sun had baked it, but damp underneath. It felt peculiar on Clare's hands. She and Florian hadn't played in the dirt in years. Once, it had been their building material of choice. They'd constructed Martian cities and smoothed down lunar seas in Florian's backyard. But nowadays they preferred to keep their fingers clean.

"So you don't like worms," George said again after a few moments' work. "So your parents don't have a garden at home? Do you live in an apartment?"

"No." Clare was concentrating on handling the spindly tomatoes.

"Do they have one at the cottage? In the country somewhere?"

"We don't have a cottage. I've never been to the country."

"Never been to the country? That's impossible."

"Well, maybe once or twice."

“To a town, a village somewhere? Or the real country?”

“A village. Or maybe it was a town. I don’t know.”

“And did you not like it? Was it not beautiful, not clean?” George persisted, taking the stakes from the wheelbarrow and shooing Clare aside.

His tone had softened, but Clare couldn’t tell if he was just being conversational or if he was testing her for something. “No,” she said crossly. “It wasn’t.”

It had been tedious and strange. Clare’s parents had taken her to a little town two hours west of Toronto, to visit a dying great-aunt she’d never met. Jason had begged off going with homework as his excuse, and to Clare’s fury, he’d been allowed to stay behind. It was an unusually cold March afternoon and Rufus, Clare’s father, had worried that the car wouldn’t start. Clare could still recall the feeling of the cold sneaking around the windows, up the sleeves and down the collar of her jacket, chilling her skin through to her insides. Patty had made her wear a dress and her legs were numb.

The little town where the great-aunt lived had a few main streets, a supermarket and several churches, one offering *Tuesday Bingo* in orange letters. When they’d arrived at the hospice, Patty had held a finger to her lips and widened her eyes to indicate that Clare should *BE QUIET* inside. The great-aunt was sleeping in her room, her eyes shut and her mouth turned down. She’d looked like a frowning paper cut-out, made of tissue paper, dressed in red-dotted rags, and put to rest under tissue-thin blankets.

She’d opened her eyes when they entered her room, but otherwise did not move. Rufus had tried reminiscing with her. “Remember the corn festivals?” he’d asked. “The quarry behind the Schwarz farm? The water was always cool. Remember when the bank was held up and the thief turned out to be a cousin of the police chief?”

It was funny to hear her father speak so fondly of the little town—and what was a quarry? Clare had wanted to ask Rufus, but the look on his face was so focused that she'd kept quiet. He'd almost seemed fierce. Eventually Patty had touched his shoulder and said they should be heading back, to check that Jason hadn't burned down the house. Outside the hospice, the three of them had waited shivering for a long red light, although there weren't any cars on the street. There weren't many people on the sidewalks, either. The lack of commotion had compelled Clare to look up. The sky was blindingly blue and there was nothing to pierce its intensity: no skyscrapers, no planes passing overhead, no cranes, no condos, no billboards and no expressways. Nothing could possibly have been lonelier than that endless sky and those streets emptied of sound.

Back in Toronto, Clare had told Florian that the little town was inhabited by the bodies of soulless slaves imported from Antarctica. "They grow them in the glaciers," she'd said, "and then ship them up to Canada to fill the towns and villages, because real people do not want to live out there. Do you know how many real people you see on the streets? Zero times zero, that's how many. Zero."

Clare shivered as she remembered this, though she was hot with the sun on her back and the hat squeezing her sweaty forehead. She felt rather badly for acting so petulant. "Maybe the country is nice," she said to George, "but it's also ..."

"Quiet? I like that." George banged the last stake into the ground and considered Clare. "How is my apprentice doing? Tired? Getting burned?"

When she shrugged, he said, "Well, you can go now. I'll do the twining and the watering. Here, take the extra stakes inside—and wash your hands!"

"Yes, sir!" Clare jumped up. "Thank you."

“Wait a minute,” said George, his voice firming up again. Clare could already tell she wasn’t going to like this speech. “Promise me you’ll be more respectful of this garden. Put your garbage in the garbage can. And tell your friends.”

“It wasn’t me, honest. I really didn’t do it, George,” Clare replied, trying not to sound too defensive, though the unfairness of it was flushing her face again. She didn’t mention that she would have taken part in the freezie toss had circumstances permitted. She hadn’t in the end, and wasn’t that the important thing?

“I don’t care—I’m not blaming you,” George said. “All I’m asking is that you kids be more careful about these things. This garden was built for you. These tomatoes, the carrots and beans—you’ll be eating them at your graduation dinner. You don’t want to be dropping candy wrappers all over them. It’s a bad example for the younger ones, too. The world doesn’t need more people littering. You should know that.”

“Everyone knows that,” Clare replied, but she was thinking, *Everyone knows that picking up one freezie wrapper won’t make any difference at all.*

“Good. Then we are agreed. Now, did you enjoy yourself here today?”

“I guess so,” said Clare. “Except for the worms.”

George’s laughter was loud and rough. “You’ll learn to love them.”

Clare wasn’t sure about that. She didn’t intend to return to the Victory Garden anytime soon, if ever. But no matter, George wouldn’t miss her. He was already busy unwinding thick brown thread from a roll and fiddling with the tomato plants. Gently-gently. “George,” she said. “Do you really like gardening?”

“Very much. It’s my hobby. I wanted to study horticulture, and then forestry, when I was young ... I moved to Canada instead. But I love all plants.”

Clare wondered if Mr. Moscowitz had asked for George's help in the garden because he knew this, or if it was part of George's job. Did teachers discuss their hobbies with one another? Were they friendly? Were they *friends*? She tried to picture George as a boy in another country: his ears sticking out, his cheeks smeared with dirt, his hands up to the wrists in the earth. The other country had stone houses and people promenading across cobblestones in top hats. They threw him pennies ...

"Are you staying or leaving?" George's expression was amused. "Maybe you'd like to become a gardener after all."

"Oh! Yes. I mean, no, I'm leaving."

Clare put the extra stakes in the shed and washed her hands in a stained metal sink, wiping them across her forehead and the nape of her neck instead of drying them. It would be fastest to leave through the playground, so she waved goodbye to George and unlatched the gate in the fence, to let herself out of the Victory Garden.

She passed some teenagers playing basketball, some girls and a few shirtless boys calling out quick, serious commands as they darted up and down the faded court. She hauled herself over the wooden fence near the baseball diamond and dashed towards Roncesvalles. She passed Team's and the old Brighton theatre, the Polish delis and travel agencies, and the Asian fruit and vegetable stores that marked each corner. Cyclists swerved to avoid her and hunchbacked women elbowed past to finger the fruit on sale. A few of them clucked at her disapprovingly, but she paid them no mind. In the distance, she could see the pale blue water of Lake Ontario, hanging like a delicate scarf off the paler blue sky. It let loose a breeze that dried the sweat on her face. She kept her eyes on the lake until she reached Pearson Avenue and turned the corner.



Several paces ahead of her, a man strolled along in a navy suit. It was the hottest time of day but he moved with ease, as though unaffected by ordinary irritations like the weather. Clare recognized his gait and his height, and knew who he was even before he turned up Florian's walk. Charles Weatherup, Florian's father, was home early today. She faltered for a second, but then continued on; Florian was waiting.

### **Chapter Three: Charles Weatherup**

Once, when Clare was much younger, she told Florian that his father looked mean.

What she'd meant was that he resembled a cartoon villain. His smile was wide and his nose pointy. His hair was blond but his eyes were dark, and his gaze imprisoned misbehaving children like marbles in a fist. Clare could recall several times when she and Florian had got up to no good—painting Florian's back door with mud, for example—and he'd stopped them with a glance. Still, Clare hadn't thought she was really afraid of him when she mentioned it. Not until Florian had replied, "He is."

Charles Weatherup was tall and handsome (according to Patty) and he always wore a suit and tie. Clare couldn't picture him in the polo shirts her own father wore. Rufus was sloppy and awkward in comparison to Charles, who never got salt on his shoes or his trousers in winter, and always appeared tough in his trench coat, much tougher than the snow, sleet and bitter wind. Clare used to feel embarrassed for her father when their families got together, until she realized that Rufus didn't seem to approve of Charles. He grew quieter when Charles was around, and he never laughed.

Florian, she'd noticed, was much the same.

Charles worked for Mayor Lash at Macropolitan Hall, in the administrative division of the city's government. Patty had mentioned that he was a department head, but Florian said that he was the Mayor's best friend and closest advisor. He had a big westerly office from which you could see Toronto spilling down the lakeshore towards Hamilton. Florian had shown pictures of his office as part of a digital slideshow for the careers unit in grade five. In one photograph, Charles grinned at the camera from a desk

that was piled near to the ceiling with folders and spiral-bound reports. Clare supposed that Charles had a bed in that office, hidden beneath all the paper, because he spent most of his time there. She liked to imagine that he had a whole lair behind a secret door, where he trained his hawk eyes and practiced his most cutting remarks.

Now he was home before she and Florian could flee to the basement or the alley behind their street. She rang the doorbell apprehensively.

Florian answered. "Hey, you're early."

"George said I could go. It's way too hot."

A refreshing curl of cool air brushed Clare's face as she stepped inside. The air-conditioning must have been running. She wrenched her feet from her shoes without untying them and pushed them aside with her toes.

"It's terrible out there," Florian's mother, Lily, said, emerging from behind her son. "Come and have a drink, Clare. There's lemonade."

Inside, Charles was nowhere to be seen. The curtains were drawn in the living room. The Weatherup house was the largest on their street and it seemed more cavernous in the gloom. Clare had to wait for her eyes to adjust before following Florian and Lily down the hall, towards the light coming through the kitchen windows.

She claimed her favourite seat in the kitchen, the red stool by the counter. Florian took the blue one. Lily poured them lemonade in highball glasses and garnished it with sprigs of mint. "It tastes even lovelier this way," she told them.

Clare thought Lily was the most beautiful mother she knew. She had streaks of grey in her bob, but she didn't look old. She wore sundresses in summer, black pants in winter, silver balls in her ears and silver rings on her fingers.

“What do you think of my flowers, Clare?” Lily asked.

A vase filled with orange blossoms stood upon a table in the corner. Their petals had black dots on the insides. Ordinarily Clare would have answered by rolling her eyes or yawning loudly, but to Lily she said, “They’re nice.”

“Florian’s father bought them. They’re tiger lilies.” Lily sipped her lemonade. “A lovely gift on a wretched day like this. I hope you were okay at school, darling,” she said to Florian. “Did you need to use your puffer?”

“Um, once. At lunch.” Florian had actually used it twice, after he pulled Clare away from the freezie toss and again during afternoon recess.

Lily sighed. “We should go swimming. Maybe that’ll strengthen our lungs.”

“We might go swimming for my birthday tomorrow,” said Clare.

“Perfect. At the community centre or the park?”

“The community centre,” said Florian. “The pool in the park is still empty.”

Lily leaned forward. “We should hop the fence with a garden hose and fill it up ourselves. Bring some pretty things to float in it, extra-large blossoms and lanterns; bring our best bathing gear—I’ve got a vintage suit somewhere.”

Sometimes Lily’s ideas were too outlandish to admire.

“We can’t just climb over the fence, Mom,” said Florian. “We’d be fined.”

“And Mr. Moscovitz would, like, accuse us of treason,” Clare added, feeling bolder about the past 24 hours’ events. “He’d draw and quarter us!”

“Moscovitz?” Charles entered the kitchen then. “What’s this about torture?”

“The kids are wrecking my plans for a night-time swim in the park,” Lily replied, smiling up at him. “But I guess they’re realists.”

Charles said, "I doubt that very much."

He rested his hands on Lily's shoulders.

"Lemonade?" she offered, but he declined.

"So. Florian, Clare. How was school?" he asked.

"Fine," Florian answered quickly. "We had math in the morning—fractions again—and, um, novel study and art in the afternoon."

"Novels and fingerpainting. Sounds intellectually taxing."

"Charles," said Lily, "don't forget about the math."

"They should have you reading the newspapers and debating. You're old enough to learn about issues, old enough to be studying more than novels. Or playing games in the park. I'm surprised Moscovitz wasted your time with that."

Clare might have agreed that Predator-Prey was a waste of time, if it hadn't been Charles Weatherup making the criticism. The more she thought about the game, the less she could see what its purpose might be, apart from teaching the obvious fact that larger animals ate smaller animals. It had really just been a giant round of tag, except that in this version it was better to be It. An irksome part of her recognized that had she been a wolf or a fox like she'd wanted, and had Kevin R. not spoiled that morning in High Park, she might think differently. But she tended to ignore that part.

Florian, head bent down, was running a finger around the rim of his glass. When he looked up, his face was impassive, but the words he spoke were deliberate lies: "We weren't just playing in the park—we were learning to read maps."

"Yes, maps," Clare joined in, "we had maps of the park and the city. Like the girl down the street, the one who's into the environment? She was there too."

“Oh really?” Charles said. “I know her. Your neighbour. Maps?”

“Yeah. I mean, maybe. Actually, I’m not sure.” Clare tried to sound casual, but she felt like she’d tattled on the Pamphleteer somehow.

“Ripped out of a colouring book, probably. These teenagers. They vandalize, they harass their neighbours, they block the streets with their bikes and their carrying on, and they claim it’s useful. But they don’t care, they can’t care. They’re just bored.” Lily shook her head at this, out of affection more than disagreement, but Charles defended himself. “Don’t you remember how it was? When you’re young, you don’t give a moment’s thought to anything other than your own disappointments and heartbreaks. You chase after only what makes *you* happy. Come on, don’t deny it, darling, I know you spent years sneaking out of your parents’ house for—”

“Hush, you,” Lily cried. She sounded delighted. “Listen kids,” she said, “why don’t you make this cranky old man happy and go outside to discuss something serious. Have a philosophical debate. Go and get some shade.”

“Philosophy!” Charles scoffed, but he also looked pleased, and Clare and Florian tumbled off their stools and fled before they had to witness any more.

“Gross,” whispered Clare on their way out the door. Patty and Rufus were very different from Lily and Charles. They didn’t tease one another in that unusual, private way. They rarely held hands and their kisses were rushed pecks.

Florian concurred by pulling a face, and then changed the subject. “Let’s go to the churchyard,” he said. “It can be L’Anse aux Meadows.”

“Okay,” Clare approved. So the game was on. “And the alley can be the Atlantic Ocean. Let’s say we sailed for weeks to get there—maybe even months.”

The churchyard was a parking lot located at the eastern end of the alley. Apart from Sunday, when it served the church's Orthodox congregation, the parking lot was rarely used. It was very suggestive, with odd bits of garbage strewn about, oil stains left behind by the weekend cars, and the ominous boarded back windows of the church. It transformed into anything and everything: a tuberculosis sanatorium, a site of nuclear chaos, Gallows Hill. The alley itself was narrow, with garages like junked dollhouses heaped on both sides. Many neighbourhood kids learned to ride their bikes there, and later, to make the elaborate signatures they scrawled across the garage doors and church walls. When Jason and his friends were nine or ten, before they dared declare ownership with graffiti, they decreed that a person could claim a section of the alley with a piece of wood. The only catch was that the piece of wood had to be as long as his or her legs. But sticks and boards of such length were in short supply on Pearson Avenue, except for the summer when the Czajkas up the street redid their back fence. For the most part, the claimants had to make do with ripping planks off rotting gates, or sneaking off with the larger branches when the hydro workers trimmed the trees.

Clare had been disappointed when this system of making claims fell out of favour, because finding the sticks and boards was almost as thrilling as fighting the turf battles in the alley. But at least she and Florian were now free to play where they liked. She scoped out the parking lot for a place to serve as Freya and Leif's new home. It only took a few moments for her to decide on a spot where tall weeds bordered the backyard fences of several houses, including the Pamphleteer's and her own. She pointed dramatically. "Over there—that's where we'll live. In the forest by the sea."

"Holy crap," said Florian. "Those dandelions are *huge*."

“Weeds always grow through cement,” said Clare, anxious to start playing soon. “Come on, our hut is over there. We have to set up stuff.”

“But these weeds are enormous.” Florian moved ahead of her. He grabbed a handful of the tallest ones, which refused to surrender their grip on the ground, and then crouched to examine the underbrush. “Look,” he said. “Look at the grass.” He ran his hands over a patch of light green mist that seemed to float above ground. The pavement bordering the fence was riddled with thread-thin cracks.

Clare knelt beside Florian, feeling curious despite herself. Grit and tiny shards of glass dug into her skin and she mumbled a few meaningful ouches. But she was already thinking about how they might include the mysterious weeds in the game. Maybe the forest around their hut was inhabited by wicked spirits that had caused the trees to grow and grow, so they couldn’t leave to save their father. Or maybe—

A ripple of laughter washed through the fence. “Listen,” Clare said quietly. They leaned forward on their knees and pressed their ears to the boards. “Like thunder” they heard, “green beyond belief,” and then, “explosive.”

It was the Pamphleteer and her friends. Clare recognized her voice. They must have just entered her backyard. Clare could hear the soft stutter of chairs being dragged across the lawn, and the clink of many ice cubes as something was poured into glasses. “Totally explosive,” the Pamphleteer was saying.

“Bombs,” Clare muttered to Florian. He nodded and scratched “bombs” onto a fence slat with the point of his stick. Without saying a word, they had agreed to put the Viking game on hold. They’d never waste an opportunity like this. Since Jason had become more hostile in his demands to be left alone, they’d had to curtail their spying.



Now Clare wished she had her notebook to jot down the peculiar things the Pamphleteer was saying. She kept referring to “gorilla gardening,” whatever that meant. It sounded rather violent, and the Pamphleteer and her friends seemed to like that.

Clare and Florian spied on them for a good twenty minutes, shifting positions every now and then to relieve their prickling feet. Florian tried to continue recording the conversation on the boards, but gave up before completing another word. *EXPLOS*, read the fence, just below *BOMBS*. But no matter, the Pamphleteer and her friends moved on to other less captivating topics. They talked about their classes, about dreary jobs and dog races, rat races. Clare thought she might as well have been listening to her parents blabbing away, except that her parents didn’t swear as much. She studied their clothes and accessories through the cracks between the boards. The Pamphleteer’s hair was wrapped up in a purple cloth. Another girl’s head was shaved. They looked messy and exotic, unlike the girls in Clare’s class, who were very conscious about appearing neat, hair-spraying, lip-lining, and zipping up their bodies into clean edges like models. Clare was going to whisper something about hairy armpits to Florian, but she didn’t get the chance because somebody behind them called out, “Hey.”

A bunch of boys, black-clothed and covered in chains, were strolling towards her and Florian. In the middle of the group was Jason.

“Quick,” she murmured. “Pretend we’re playing something else.”

Florian marked up an Xs and Os grid with a stone.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Jason was already standing over them. He scrutinized the Xs and Os game. “God, you’re such geeks.”

“Go away,” said Clare.

“Is that your sister?” one of the boys asked. “She got my little brother in trouble.”

Clare had forgotten that Jason knew Kevin R.’s brother.

“Oh yeah? What did you do?” Jason asked Clare. He kicked at her hand.

“Nothing, just *leave*.”

Another wave of laughter came through the Pamphleteer’s fence. Jason peered through the slats. “Check it out,” he said to his friends. “It’s the hippies.”

“The chicks with the dreadlocks?”

“No, it’s the loud one, that freaking yappy dog. The popcorn dog. You know, popcorn dogs, those tiny bitches that jump up like this”—Jason jumped—“like popcorn kernels, popcorn gone crazy, you know, like someone turned the burner to max and left the lid on too tight. With little popcorn teeth just, like, just waiting to explode, and can they ever growl”—he demonstrated with a roar.

“Can we help you?”

The Pamphleteer and her friends were watching them over the fence. They must have moved their chairs during Jason’s performance. Suddenly the Pamphleteer let out a shrill bark and they all collapsed into hysterics.

Jason paled a bit, but he answered back. “Yeah,” he said. “I’d like a few, um, yogurt-covered raisins, please. But no seaweed snacks, okay? You can SHOVE THOSE UP YOUR ASS.” His friends hooted. He tossed off a few more phrases that Clare knew Patty would have been horrified to hear, and they scampered away.

“What do I look like, a health food store?” the Pamphleteer inquired. Her friends cheerfully informed her that she did. “As if I’ve never heard that one,” she said. Then she addressed Clare: “You again. You’re a regular agitator, aren’t you.”

“Only when you’re around,” Clare replied. To her surprise, the Pamphleteer’s friends began laughing again. “That’s right, your fault, your influence,” they told the Pamphleteer, who fluttered her eyelids and swooned with exaggerated pleasure. Clare stared at them all uncomprehendingly, thinking, *These people are aliens*.

“You’re pretty funny, you know,” one of the guys—a boy with a beard—said to Clare. “Why don’t you come over and hang out with us?”

She was rather shocked. Was he serious, or was this just a trick? She glanced nervously at Florian, who looked nervously back. Her parents were on cordial terms with the Pamphleteer’s parents, so she supposed they wouldn’t mind. And the Pamphleteer and her friends were imploring them, “Have some juice, have some cookies, come talk to us ...” She realized that she was thirsty again, and more crucially, that she and Florian might glean some information about what was so explosive, exactly.

“Okay,” she answered.

“Okay,” Florian repeated. Clare was relieved. He must have seen that this was an ideal opportunity, too. He even dared ask, “Did you plant these dandelions?”

“No, no. But we did plant the black-eyed Susans. And the asters.” The bearded guy pointed to some flowers that Clare had thought were coloured daisies.

“Come around the front,” the Pamphleteer ordered before disappearing below the fence. Clare and Florian jogged out of the churchyard and back onto Pearson Avenue, sidestepping scattered recycling bins and some gossiping neighbours.

“This is crazy,” Florian said. “I think they’re crazy, don’t you? And you know what? I think she does look like a health food store.”

“Me too!”

The Pamphleteer was waiting on her porch with her friends. There were five of them and they all shook hands with Clare and Florian when they were introduced. Clare felt quite adult, in an oddly enjoyable way. Daniel had the dark, curly beard. He seemed particularly friendly, as did Amy, the girl with the green vines tattooed on her arms and shoulders. She was so fair that her eyebrows and eyelashes were nearly invisible. She touched Clare's ponytail and said her hair was pretty. Clare wanted to ask if her tattoos had hurt, but the Pamphleteer clapped her hands like a teacher and requested that Amy fetch the jug of juice from the backyard. "It's shadier on the porch. We can sit here," she instructed everyone else, and obediently they sat.

At first they were awkward with one another, gulping their drinks and throwing out goofy, almost apologetic looks. Then Daniel said he could taste the banana in the juice and he squeaked and scratched his underarms, making Clare and Florian giggle and the Pamphleteer and her friends relax. "Chimpan-Dan," Amy joked, "our pet monkey." Florian informed her that contrary to popular belief, chimps were not monkeys, they were apes. The others appeared to appreciate this, though they also teased Florian, calling him "Wikipedia" after the website. Their teasing was very nice—desirable, even. Clare was having more fun than she'd expected. She was still put off by the Pamphleteer's queen-of-the-universe attitude, and she was listening hard for condescending remarks. But so far none had been uttered. She leaned back against the porch railing, contented, hoping that Jason and his awful friends would walk by and see her there.

Disappointingly, though, nobody had breathed a word about green explosions or bombs, or whatever it was that had them so rapt before. Clare wanted to ask about the maps they'd had in High Park and their discussion in the Pamphleteer's backyard, but she

couldn't mention these things outright because they would know she and Florian had been eavesdropping. She followed the conversation about chimps attentively, searching for an entry into it. Her chance came when the girl with the shaved head said her older sister had volunteered for a conservation society in Rwanda that protected gorillas. Clare straightened up. "What kind—the gardening kind?"

Daniel slapped the floor. "You're *hilarious*," he gasped.

"Quite the comedian," said the Pamphleteer wryly.

Clare understood then that she'd made an error, but she smiled nonchalantly to appear as if she'd meant to be clever. She had no time to be self-conscious, though, because Daniel went off on a weird tangent about animals and what people might learn from them, including how to garden, if they only paid attention. It was a sermon Clare believed she'd heard before in various other forms, so she zoned out.

But the Pamphleteer didn't let her escape completely. "You know that's what we do, don't you?" she asked Clare. "Guerrilla gardening."

"Oh. Yes."

"Guerrilla as in revolutionary, not primate," the Pamphleteer went on, and Clare recognized the term then. "Maybe you've seen our posters. Basically, we plant flowers and vegetables in random places around the city. Like the concrete plant holders on Roncesvalles, the ones with the maples and ashes—I might put some coreopsis in them, and leave a sign asking people to water them if they can."

This was what all the violent talk had been about—plain old gardening? It was detention in the Victory Garden all over again, but with the hippies instead of George. And coreopsis sounded like a skin disease or an eye defect, or an incurable disorder that

Clare might have invented back when she and Florian played hospital. Not something to cultivate. Clare felt let down, and a bit anxious about her after-school time being wasted. But her interest lifted when Florian asked, "Is it legal?"

"It's vandalism," replied the girl with the shaved head, rather proudly. "We could be fined for it. Of course we haven't been yet, because who would want to punish us? We're making the city, like, beautiful. We're not hurting anyone."

"I don't know," said the Pamphleteer. "If Mayor Lash had his way, I'm sure we'd be fined and then picked off the streets and hidden away, like the graffiti artists and the anti-poverty people, the squeegee kids. He can't deal with his citizens behaving differently. And he hasn't supported any of the sustainability accords, not even the ones the federal government promotes. Not that they're ever good enough."

"The mayor is an ass clown. A fraud." A boy who'd been brooding in the corner beside Amy raised his head. "He only cares about money and making Toronto safe for people in the suburbs, so they'll drive downtown and spend a fortune on gas, parking, and *musicals*." He directed his next comment to Florian and Clare: "You know he wants a curfew for kids your age? Everyone under sixteen off the streets by eleven. He thinks it'll stop the gangs. As if it's thirteen year-olds causing the havoc. Meanwhile the cops are harassing black kids at Jane and Finch and in Regent Park every night."

"That curfew probably won't happen," Daniel stage-whispered to Florian and Clare. "My friend here, he just likes a good political conspiracy."

"Be serious, Daniel," the Pamphleteer said shortly. "If you want to improve the natural environment of this city, you can't ignore the social problems. You can't just go on about, I don't know, *animals gardening* and forget about *people*."

Sustainability, anti-poverty, revolutionary, Jane and Finch, thirteen year-olds causing havoc—thirteen year-olds *did* cause havoc. Clare knew of a few who could be tyrannical, though she didn't say so. The kaleidoscopic words that the others had used were whirling around her head. They were adult words, but the way the Pamphleteer and the boy in the corner spoke was not adult; not like the calm, regretful manner in which Patty, Rufus and the news anchors on television spoke. And they were willing to argue with one another, which was also unlike Clare's parents, who pained themselves to avoid fighting in front of her and Jason. But the porch was still tense. Daniel rose abruptly, to take the jug inside he said, and Clare had to stand to let him pass. From her new vantage point, she saw her mother and Charles Weatherup coming down the street.

Patty was carrying several grocery bags and the antique briefcase that had once belonged to Clare's grandfather. Charles also held a briefcase and a few bags, and he had a newspaper tucked under one arm. They were chatting animatedly and Clare thought they might walk by without noticing her, until Patty waved. "Hi, honey!" she called in her merry voice. "What are you doing up there?"

Florian and the others stood up as well, and Clare cringed. "Just talking."

"What?" Patty took a step up the Pamphleteer's walk, with Charles in tow.

"JUST TALKING," Clare repeated, and the boy in the corner sniggered. She felt a touch contrite and dropped her volume. "Where's Dad?"

Patty and Rufus both worked at a college in the north-west end of Toronto and they usually drove together. Rufus taught applied science and Patty had a high-up position in admissions. Clare didn't know what her mother did exactly, but her father had once suggested that Patty was very good at bossing people around.

“Your father had an advisory board meeting with GloriVita, out in Etobicoke. He has the car, so he should be home very soon. In fact”—Patty shifted her bags to one hand and checked her watch—“Oh no, it’s six! I said I’d ring your grandmother, she’s been complaining about the help they’re sending your grandfather. Thank you, Charles,” Patty said with a smile, and she put her free hand on his arm for a second before taking her bags from him. “Nice to run into you. Enjoy *your* meeting.”

“My pleasure,” Charles replied, and Patty dashed off to the Lowy house. “Dinner will be in half an hour, Clare!” she yelled over her shoulder.

Clare supposed that Charles would move along his way, but he didn’t. He stayed on the Pamphleteer’s walk and gathered them tightly in his gaze. It seemed to Clare that he was inspecting them for spots and bruises, as if they were peaches or nectarines. Then his eyes found the Pamphleteer and his lips curved upwards. “Have you been educating my son and his friend? I hope they weren’t wasting your time.”

“Of course they weren’t,” the Pamphleteer answered. Clare wanted to hug her. “We were having a very useful discussion about gardening revolutions.”

“Oh? Aren’t you a little young? Gardening is rather geriatric, isn’t it?”

“Not at all.” She paused. “Aren’t you a little sweaty in that suit?”

Clare was stunned. The Pamphleteer was really brave, or really foolish. She was certainly impolite. Maybe she didn’t realize who Charles Weatherup was.

But Charles wasn’t ruffled. “No, actually. Why would I be?”

“Well, global warming has kind of reached a boiling point today.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Charles. “I don’t think it has. Were you giving my son ideas about climate change? He’s a dreamer; he might take them to heart.”



“Good,” said the Pamphleteer. “It would be awesome if he did. And I don’t care if he’s a dreamer. It’s better to have some dreams and ideas than none at all; and dreams aren’t only fantasies. I mean, we’re not talking about *games*.”

“You’d be surprised,” Charles replied. “Very nice speech, by the way. You should write for the mayor.” Then he took up his briefcase and backed down the walkway. “I’ll see you tonight,” he said to Florian, and he departed.

Clare sagged against the railing of the porch once he turned the corner. Everyone seemed to wilt. “What a monster,” muttered the girl with the shaved head.

“He’s not always like that,” said Florian stiffly. The Pamphleteer reached for him, but he ducked her hand and fled down the steps. “I really should go, it’s almost dinnertime. See you later, Clare—uh, thanks for the juice—”

“What’s going on? Who was that man?” Amy asked Clare.

“Florian’s dad,” Clare said sombrely. “He works for—”

“—Dictator Lash,” the boy in the corner finished for her. “I knew I’d seen him before. He’s on the news clips sometimes, with our *dear*, dear leader.”

Clare remained on the porch with the Pamphleteer and her friends a while longer, but she contributed no more to their conversation. When Rufus pulled up in the Lowy’s rusty station wagon, she said she’d better be going. She hugged her father as he clumsily removed himself from the car, burrowing her head under his arm once he was standing. The street was crawling with people she wished would go away. The old woman who smoked cigars on her porch shouted hello in Polish. Mr. Ramchandra across the road greeted them with a wave of his gardening sheers. Clare clung to her father like a barnacle, hoping he’d lead her home, but he dragged her over to the Ramchandras lawn.

“Hello, Sam,” he said. “Your roses are impressive this year.” The Ramchandras’ bushes frothed with ice cream scoop-sized blossoms.

“Yes,” replied Mr. Ramchandra. “And it’s only May.”

“When did they bloom?”

A short laugh emitted from Mr. Ramchandra that didn’t match his perplexed expression, as if he were a ventriloquist’s dummy and couldn’t believe the words put into his mouth. “You’ll think I’m crazy, but they only budded this morning.”

“Huh,” said Rufus.

“Huh,” Clare echoed, but she wondered if guerrilla gardening was involved.

“Indeed,” said Mr. Ramchandra. “I’m at a loss for words myself.”

Patty declared it too humid to cook, so the Lowy family dined on salad, cold beet soup from the deli, and bread that they dipped into olive oil and vinegar. Rufus poured beer for Patty and himself. The sunset flooding the window coloured their skin pink. The overhead light was out; the air seemed electric enough on its own.

“Listen to everyone outside,” said Patty. “The street will be busy all night.”

“Mm.” Rufus’s mouth was full of bread. He pushed his glasses up his nose and swallowed. “We could go for a walk. Maybe even to the park.”

“I can’t, you know that,” Patty replied. “I’ve got those files to finish. And there’s a mystery on at nine—or is it ten?” She drummed her fingers on the table. “I better check that time. Now, birthday girl.” Patty gazed fondly at Clare, who pursed her lips and made an ugly face in return. “You want to go swimming tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

"Did you invite Florian to come along?"

"Mm hmm." Clare yawned to inform her mother that her questions were boring.

"How about Rebecca and Magda?"

"Ugh. No."

"They asked you to their parties."

"They're lame," Clare said, and unthinkingly added, "like most of your ideas."

"Suit yourself." Patty rose from her seat. She collected some bowls and plates, dumped them in the sink with a clatter, and hurried from the room.

Clare, Jason and Rufus sat masked in the half-light. Clare clutched her spoon so tightly she could feel its edges threaten her skin. What could she say? It wasn't her fault her mother was so sensitive. She tapped the spoon on the table.

"Stop that, Clare." Rufus got up. "You've done enough."

"Yeah, you twerp," said Jason. "You ruin everything."

Was it only this morning that *he*'d been the rude one? They'd sat in the same chairs, possibly using the same spoons. How annoying that Patty should be so touchy, and how awful that she, Clare, should be as troublesome as her brother.

He had a new pimple in the crease of his nostril. "I hate you," she told him. "I hate you more than anyone else, and I wish you were dead."

Hours later, Clare stood on their front steps with her father, whose invitation to join him had been a declaration of forgiveness. Rufus pointed out a bat swooping near the phone wires. The street was less busy now, but it still twitched with some activity, with car doors slamming, footsteps resonating, and voices rising and falling.

Summer evenings could be spooky. The heat slowed things down, so that every ball bounce and word called out in the street seemed significant. People sat on their porches and stared at passers-by, unmoving, until dusk turned to darkness and not even the whites of their eyes were visible. It was as though everyone melted into the night air. Clare had become aware of this phenomenon as she and Florian skulked around the neighbourhood. More often than she liked, she realized that she was being watched while in the middle of watching others, and she had to scurry back home.

Inside the house, Clare's math homework remained unfinished and Patty's anger a persistent shadow. Clare paused in the living room, gathering the courage to apologize to her mother, but Patty didn't acknowledge her. She was watching television with Jason. Its eerie blue glow washed their faces of expression.

Clare had rarely been as happy to climb into bed as she was that night. Her berry-print sheets felt chilly against her legs when she first slid between them, but they heated up in minutes. She tossed and turned. What had Patty said about today's temperature—that it set a new record? Yes, that was it. Charles Weatherup was wrong. It was not yet summer, and the evenings were not yet meant to be this warm.

## Chapter Four: Dreams

Under a dark, cloud-knit sky lay a vast ocean, and atop the vast ocean sailed ten or twenty or a hundred ships with huge strong hands attached to their oars, huge strong hands dipping in the water, paddling the ships to shore. What extraordinary ships they were, with the hands on their oars and the eyes on their prows, their upturned prows like violin scrolls, and the high zing-zing of a violin following them as they zoomed across the water. And there was Patty on the prow of the ship in front, her arms crossed and her chin raised and her hair done up with bones. She was laughing as the ships came nearer to shore, nearer to Clare; and then the violin prows stretched into birds' necks, and a splash and a crash and the ships had taken flight. They looked like flamingos, although they were grey, but they quickly shrank to pigeon-size. Here was Florian, choking on their feathers. Sky-scrapers one thousand storeys tall loomed over him, forming a forest canopy with their antennae, sealing off the air supply. *He can't breathe*, Clare cried to the pigeons, who were also grey-suited zombies with guns for beaks and guns tucked under their wings and bullets adorning their feet. *And the ocean is gone, you drank it all, you greedy pigs*. She grabbed Florian's hand and they ran until they were parched, but there was nothing to satiate them. *I drank it*, said Kevin R., showing them the giant straw he'd used; *it's mine, I drank it all, you can't have it, you're dead—*

With a sigh, Clare fell back into her bed. Or rather, she felt her dream fall away from her as she lay in bed. She opened her eyes and her bedroom slowly materialized, millions of squirming grey dots shaping themselves into her dresser, bookshelves and chair. Her mouth was dry and the cup on her night table was empty.

She slipped out of bed and crept down the hall to the bathroom, taking care not to tread on the creakier floorboards. Her parents were restless sleepers and they woke easily. She held the cup in one hand and used her other hand to guide her, following the familiar scratches and bumps on the wall with her fingertips.

The light was off in the bathroom, but Clare could make out an odd shape in the corner. It was Patty, sitting on the toilet with her nightgown pulled up over her knees. "I'm in here!" she hissed as Clare said, "*Sorry!*" and shut the door. She stood in the hall until she heard the toilet flush and then entered the room again.

"Can't sleep, honey?" Patty whispered. "Are you hot? Is your window open?"

"I'm thirsty—thanks," Clare said quietly as Patty refilled her cup. Something occurred to her. "Mom. You were in my dream just now."

"Really? What happened?"

"I can't remember," she said, and she suddenly felt a bit sad.

"Never mind, then."

Maybe it was the loss of the dream, or maybe it was the strangeness of having a conversation in the dark; but in any case, something shifted in Clare, making her feel even more forlorn. "Mom—I'm sorry," she blurted.

"Oh, I know," Patty said dryly. "It's all right."

Then she patted Clare on the back and padded off to her bedroom, closing the door firmly behind her. Clare wasn't sure if her mother had forgiven her or not. She swayed a little on her spot in the hall before retreating to bed. She was terribly aware of the size of her house as she went. The basement seemed very far away. She tried to ignore the noises coming through her window—raccoons or cats, she told herself, or somebody

getting drunk in the alley. She focused on recalling her dream instead. Florian had definitely been in it. Had Charles Weatherup been in it too? She began to suspect that he had, he had been standing somewhere near her mother.

She thought about Florian and how he'd fled from the Pamphleteer's house that afternoon. The girl with the shaved head shouldn't have called his father a monster, not in front of him. Maybe she and Florian should have declined Daniel's invitation to hang out. Maybe they should have played the Viking game instead of spying. It would have been nice—they hadn't played a successful game in months. Not since Halloween, when they were obsessed with the Salem witch trials. The realization came with a pang. Why had it become so difficult to pretend, when it used to feel so effortless? And special, and haunting. For the witch trials, Florian had been the judge and executioner, and she'd been the possessed girls and the witches (whom she made into real witches, to practise cackling and throwing fits). The alley had become Gallows Hill. They'd played nearly every day after school, well into November, until the cold air had singed all the leaves off the trees and the puddles in the alley had frozen into dirty mirrors.

Winter had come then, and with it Christmas and the school concerts and parties, and the computer game Florian received from his parents, where you built your own city. That had kept them occupied for weeks. You were in charge of almost every detail, from the roads and skyscrapers to the picnic tables along the waterfront. You could build as many theme parks and shopping malls as you liked; you could choose to fight crime, or pollution, or a war with another city. Of course, the choices you made had consequences. If you didn't construct enough housing, there'd be a homelessness epidemic, and if you refused to sell advertising space, there'd be a stock market crash. But if things went

wrong, you could have the city destroyed any way you wanted—by flood or terrorist attack or asteroid—and start over again. Clare couldn't deny that it was lots of fun. Yet in the end, there was nothing that made it preferable to her imaginary worlds. After all, everyone played computer games. *Adults* played computer games.

And there'd been many books and television shows and rented movies, and slushy snow forts in Clare's miniscule backyard, and talking, talking, lots of talking—but not a single game lasting longer than a few days' discussion. So it was true what people said, what her parents and Charles and even the Pamphleteer suggested would happen. You stopped pretending at some point, whether you wanted to or not. It was inevitable, like paying the bills and listening to CBC Radio in the car. Clare had held for years that she would never succumb to the deficiencies of adulthood, but she and Florian were on the brink of it—and she was turning twelve. She was desperate for something to happen. With her burning face half-buried in her pillow, she mouthed the words, *Please, please, please*. Please let something happen, please let something happen—

Eventually, she fell asleep.

Just before dawn, a gust of wind rushed into Clare's room, filling her curtains like sails, blowing papers to the floor, and rousing her from rest. She lurched across her bed and slammed the window shut. The wind pounded on the glass like a giant hand or a storm that had travelled across a great lake, gathering power on the way. If she'd been more awake, she might have marvelled at its strength or enjoyed its cool temperature, but her eyes were closing even before she lay down her head again.



## Chapter Five: The City of Grass

Something was tickling Clare's ear. Something was buzzing around the smooth snail shell of her ear, coming closer and closer to tiptoeing inside, and it wouldn't stop. Clare squirmed and slapped the side of her head with a heavy hand. She kept her eyes closed, hoping to doze, but her brain was awake and becoming aware of a commotion outside. A curious, muted sound wafted through her bedroom, like the wind stirring the city from its overheated sleep. Like hundreds of people whispering to each other.

Normally, Clare could hear her father leaving for the gym and her mother moving around the kitchen or washing up in the bathroom. But there were no footsteps or pots crashing this morning. She sat up and called out, "Mom? Dad?"

"Mom?" she tried once more, climbing out of bed.

She took a few bare-footed steps down the hall and paused. Jason's radio was on but he was nowhere to be seen. A towel had been dropped outside the bathroom. Patty's hairbrush lay in the sink, collecting drips from the tap.

Clare wasn't sure whether to panic or get angry. Her family couldn't have left her by herself: it was her birthday. They must be hiding somewhere, waiting to surprise her. They had surprised Jason on his twelfth birthday with a bike that Rufus rode right into the kitchen. She and Jason had been so stunned by the uncharacteristically silly display that they'd made him do it again and he'd obliged, his elbows and knees inelegantly pulled in, a shy smile on his face. Patty had served them French toast with bananas and cream, and orange juice in wine glasses. This was before Jason cut "please" and "thank you" from his regular vocabulary and replaced them with grunts and sneers.

"I'm coming downstairs!" Clare yelled. Nothing indicated that anyone had heard. She didn't think her mother was capable of remaining this still.

She stood on the carpet at the top of the stairs and gripped the banister. It had always been unsteady and it trembled now under her hand. She could hear the activity outside more clearly, as though there were no walls separating her from the street. The whispering had increased. As she descended the stairs, she saw that the front door was open. The air felt fresh. Yesterday's humidity had dissipated.

The living room to her left was dark, the curtains still pulled shut. Parting the curtains was usually the first thing Patty did. In the dimness, the furniture and other objects—the ratty brown couch, the coffee table cloaked in yesterday's paper, Jason's running shoes by the television—all looked like they belonged to another family. Clare surveyed them briefly. She suddenly understood that her parents weren't planning any surprise. In fact, she had never really believed they were.

Daylight hummed around the open door. A breeze rustled the hem of her nightgown. She wondered if she was too old to wear it outdoors, but decided she didn't care. She didn't even bother slipping on her sandals.

Clare strode onto the porch and exclaimed aloud. Pearson Avenue had changed—the city had magically altered—the world had been transformed. Everywhere, as far as she could see, up and down the street and under the parked cars, the sidewalks, walkways and dusty black road were blanketed by a thin layer of grass.

Her parents were standing with the neighbours, Rufus in knee socks and running shoes, a squash racket slung over his shoulder, and Patty amazingly in her bathrobe and slippers. Clare bounded over to them, yelping again as she hit the grassy walkway, for

the shock of it under her feet was like dipping into cold water. It wasn't the tender green that covered most lawns; it was longer and a bit rougher, and it must have fractured the pavement, for the stalks hid sharp chips of concrete. "Ouch, ouch, ouch," she chanted as the chips pricked her soles. She ran to her mother. "Hi, honey," Patty said distractedly. She was busy conferring with the Ramchandras.

"What's *happening*?" Clare asked.

"Nobody knows," Rufus replied.

"Who put the grass there?"

"Put the grass there!" A man Clare didn't recognize laughed. "I don't think this is part of Mayor Lash's city improvement plan."

"Where did it come from?"

"Nobody knows," Rufus repeated. "Nobody knows."

A couple of neighbourhood children, younger than Clare, were tossing concrete chips over their shoulders and crying out, "*All fall down, we all fall down!*" One girl was squatting over a crack in the asphalt, determinedly pushing them back into the ground. None of the grown-ups seemed concerned that she was sitting on the road. They were jabbering away like Clare's classmates after a fight on the playground.

"Unbelievable."

"Did anyone see anything?"

"No, and I was up until one-thirty."

"Just unbelievable. I'm in a dream."

"The *Star*'s website says it's mainly in the west end."

"Well, I heard on the radio that it's happening downtown too."

“And it’s not just grass, it’s trees, bushes; everything’s gone wild.”

“Is it safe to drive? Are the streetcars running?”

“I’m sure they’ve already sent out some crews.”

“To do what? Mow the roads?” This from the man Clare didn’t recognize, who quite enjoyed his own jokes. “Bring on the lawnmowers!”

“This won’t be good for my allergies,” complained a woman with baggy flaps of skin under her eyes. She dolefully blew her nose into a fistful of tissue and Clare tittered. Patty stopped her conversation to frown at her daughter.

“Honey, you’re still in your pyjamas!”

“So? You’re in your bathrobe and slippers.”

Rufus managed to stammer a few conciliatory words. “Uh, breakfast, anyone?”

“I’m not really hungry—”

“Clare!” Patty grabbed her arm. “Happy birthday, honey.”

The living room curtains were parted and the television switched from one newscast to the next as Clare, Patty, and Rufus balanced plates on their laps. Patty had decorated Clare’s toast and peanut butter with some chocolate chips that she picked off and chewed, leaving the rest to cool and petrify. She was too engrossed to eat.

On every station, the news anchors and reporters were trying but failing to explain the sudden appearance of the grass. “Growth not seen since, well, nobody knows when,” they stumbled. “Simply fantastical,” they pronounced. Most favoured a light approach to the story. “Like a movie” came up frequently, as did “nature’s revenge.” One channel ran clips of savage plants from black-and-white science fiction films.

"They're finding it hard to take seriously," said Rufus with sympathy.

Clare thought the nicest aspect of any uncontrollable situation—a thunderstorm, for example, the flashy kind that brings everyone to the window—was that it made the adults she knew *fun*. Even if they acted authoritative about matters they couldn't explain, it was possible to detect in them the same glee that she felt.

And it was impossible not to feel excited. All over Toronto, shoots and stalks and strands of various yellows and greens had sprouted in the most mystifying places. The newscasts showed construction sites and empty lots that were furry as fields. In Chinatown, a bewildered man stared at a verdant mound outside his store. "It was garbage last night," he told a reporter, "cardboard boxes, paper, the recycling. You know, *garbage*." Many trees, flowers, and hedges had also swelled in size, welling upwards and outwards. In Rosedale, a white pine towered over all the houses on the block, holding its evergreen branches high above the rooftops like a lady lifting her skirt to avoid the dirt. "Right out of an Emily Carr painting," Patty said admiringly. "Just gorgeous."

A professor from the university informed an interviewer that yes, some plant roots were capable of forcing their way through pavement. But not so quickly and thoroughly. It should take several years and the absence of human interference, the daily urban bustle, for them to seize the city. "We should have trampled the grass to death before it spread like this," she said, rubbing an eyebrow above her glasses. "And we should have noticed it earlier. But it came out of nowhere." She spoke with concern about the city's roads and buildings, using terms like "infrastructure" and "systems" that made Clare think of filing cabinets. "What interests me, however," the professor brightened, "is that much of this grass seems to be native. On my way to work I saw switchgrass, sweetgrass, and, uh,

little bluestem mixed in with the European varieties, the fine-leaved fescues and such, which is what we typically grow on our front lawns.” Clare was mildly impressed by all the names. She thought grass was the same around the world.

“Prairie grasses,” Rufus noted.

“The prairies are way out west, Dad.”

“There used to be some in Ontario too, once upon a time.”

“Speaking of time, it’s a quarter past eight,” Patty intervened. “School.”

The university professor had been replaced on the television screen by a parade of suited white men. The voiceover was chattering about debates and elections, or trials and corruption. So that was it: a bit of novelty and then back to politics.

Clare sprang from the couch and sprinted into the kitchen, where she ditched her dishes on the counter. “Rinse that plate!” her mother hollered from down the hall. She let the faucet flow for a second and then snatched her lunch bag. In the living room, she stuffed the bag into her backpack and tied up her running shoes. Patty breezed in and out, fixing her earrings and knotting a scarf around her neck.

“Where’s Jason?” she asked as she readied herself. “Did he leave already? He’d better have his key; we’ll be at the pool later. Oh, listen!”

The television was blaring traffic reports. The Gardiner, the Queensway, the Don Valley Parkway: Clare knew *these* names well. “How can they go on about stupid fender benders when all that”—she pointed to the window—“’s happening outside?”

“The grass?” said Rufus. “Oh, it’ll be gone soon. It can’t last.” He stretched his skinny arms. “Things will be back to normal by tomorrow, I bet.”

Florian was sitting on his front steps with his red backpack poking out behind him and a violin case at his feet. He had lessons three times a week, to Charles's chagrin, but Lily insisted. He lifted the case from its grassy bed as Clare skipped up the walk and, before saying hi, asked, "Do you think it was the Pamphleteer?"

"Of course!" The idea hadn't exactly occurred to her, but it made so much sense that she must have subconsciously thought it too. "That's why she had those maps. They were planning on taking over the whole city." Guerrilla gardening was becoming more and more fascinating. "They must have been planting all night."

"They couldn't have done everything. Just the stuff around the neighbourhood—did you know there are raspberry bushes growing in the alley? My mom picked some for breakfast. Anyhow, the Pamphleteer and everyone must have planted here, and then let it spread around the city." Florian reflected on his logic. "Or else there are more of them, like a network, and they were working together."

"Like a terrorist network?"

"Yeah. They kept talking about explosions, remember?"

"But they aren't really violent. It's just an act."

"Yeah, I know. I think my dad thinks they are, though. Yeah, he does. He was sort of mad at breakfast. He said there was going to be a mess for Parks and Rec. and the garbage collectors, and hell to pay for the greenthumbs."

"Really?" Clare felt a rather delicious mix of fearful awe and relief that she hadn't been present at the Weatherup table. But she wanted details too. "Was he angry at you yesterday? After the Pamphleteer's?"

"No," he said flatly.

An elderly man in plaid shorts and a tank top, a cigarette in his mouth, was rolling a manual mower over his walkway and part of the sidewalk. "Move, move," he ordered them, scowling as if they were the cause of his labours. He was a sad, beery clown, and his effort to clear the pavement struck Clare as useless, but she sensibly didn't scowl back at him. And Florian hadn't yet wished her a happy birthday, but she didn't really mind. Not at all, actually. Maybe this was what people meant by *maturity*.

"If it's after 8:30, I'm twelve years old," she announced as they made way for the mower, for once feeling neither pleased nor unhappy about the fact.

Florian hoisted his violin case to check his watch. "You have one minute! What will you do in your last seconds as an eleven year-old?"

"Hmm, I don't know! Have five hundred pieces of cake, do a thousand jumping jacks, read a billion comics, save the universe, skip to Kalamazoo—"

"Too late," he said, and for a lovely instant his big eyes lost their solemnity.

On Roncesvalles, they pushed through a crowd clustered around a streetcar stop. This was not an uncommon sight, but the crowd today was bigger and most of the faces in it very lively, prattling away with the same excitement Clare had witnessed on Pearson Avenue. But some were uneasy. "Goddamn it," a man muttered to no one in particular, "goddamn streetcar; I've been waiting twenty minutes." Clare wondered why he didn't flag a taxi. Cars were still tearing up the street as if nothing was different, flattening the poor grass. Her father was probably right. It couldn't last.

But she reconsidered Rufus's opinion when she beheld the schoolyard. She and Florian halted at the gate and her lips parted in astonishment. It was a meadow. It was a golden, blossom-dotted meadow, with flowering vines creeping up the jungle gym and



basketball stands, flowering shrubs circling the smelly long jump pits, bushes caging the dingy hockey nets, and children and their parents squawking and swooping in from all directions. The grass was especially thick on the field by the baseball diamond. A teacher ringing a brass bell was marching round its circumference and yelling, "*Off the grass*" in between the clangs and dings; to which the kids he was shooping away answered, "But it's *everywhere*." "Off the grass, up your ass," they mocked him.

"Not a fine moment for our species," somebody declared. Clare and Florian spun around. It was Mr. Moscovitz, with a wicked bent to his brows. "And that goes for your peers too," he said. "Now, I need you to come inside, guys. I wish we could stay and watch the hullabaloo, but they don't want us to dawdle out here."

Clare was glad to be in Mr. Moscovitz's class that day. Instead of taking up the homework, he began by asking everyone what they'd seen and heard about the morning's peculiar events. They talked for half an hour. Not every teacher would have spared the time for such discussions. Clare's grade five teacher wouldn't have; she was always too worried about finishing her lessons and following the rules.

And everyone had stories to tell. Kevin J. claimed to have seen things emerging from the sidewalk. "I'm a total insomniac," he said, "and my window's on the first floor; and I swear, the grass just came up. In, like, five seconds, like in the ninth level of—" He rambled about video games for a minute, until Magda interrupted him with the confession that she'd screamed when she'd opened her door: "I woke up my sister. She was pissed." In a hushed voice, Rita described how a series of events involving a neighbour's dog and an overgrown tree root had resulted in her brother's stroller tipping onto the road with her brother strapped into it. A speeding van had stopped just in time.

Kevin R. smirked through most of the stories, in a disdainful more than taunting manner. Finally he asked, "What's the big deal? Nobody was killed."

Farouk, who'd been resting his head on his folded arms, sat up and frowned in agreement with his friend. "Yeah," he said, "in other cities, it's earthquakes, hurricanes, bombings. It's real and, like, deadly. In Toronto, it's *grass*."

"It's pathetic," Kevin continued, "this neighbourhood. Big scary dogs hiding in the bushes. Old ladies tripping over tree roots. Ooh. Give me a break."

"What's your problem?" Rita challenged him.

A boy named Lukas, who wore glasses and was smart, quiet, and a little unruly, joined in Kevin's protest. "It is pathetic. I have cousins who live in the Swansea Mews and *they* have serious problems: breaking and entering, fighting. Two weeks ago the guy next door to them was beat up, and my aunt came home after working all night and she heard the whole thing. She called my mom at three a.m. *That's* deadly."

"Maybe it's not deadly," argued Rebecca, "but it is kind of crazy."

Florian drew in a breath. Clare knew he was working up the nerve to participate. "And we don't know why it started," he added, "or if it'll get worse."

"That is pretty unnerving," Mr. Moscowitz granted. "Plants aren't supposed to behave like this, are they? No, they aren't. Can we speculate about it? What if you were a reporter who had to explain it? What would you suggest was the cause?"

Clare loved exercises like this, and she had the perfect response. Her hand shot up immediately. "Guerrilla gardening," she said with confidence.

Whoops and animal noises shook the group of desks where Kevin R. and Farouk sat. Kevin leered at her. "What are you talking about, dork?"

“Kevin,” Mr. Moscovitz warned him.

But Clare was undeterred, secure in her knowledge and safe in her seat by Florian and Magda. “Guerrilla as in *revolutionary*, jerkface,” she said to Kevin; “you’re the only animal around here.” The class rewarded her by erupting in laughter.

Mr. Moscovitz chastised her for her language, but he was absorbed by the idea of guerrilla gardening and asked many questions that she answered as if she were an expert, though she was careful not to sound too keen lest he suspect she’d enjoyed her detention in the Victory Garden. When he sought other ideas and Florian mentioned global warming and the heat wave, a few people groaned, but Mr. Moscovitz’s eyes gleamed. “Ah, yes. Which brings us to geography.” Their discussion was over.

Morning recess was cancelled to check the safety of the schoolyard, but the students were allowed out at lunch, though not on the jungle gym. George snipped and yanked vines with big shiny leaves from the ladders and ramps while a lunch supervisor kept kids away. Clare and Florian staked out a place on the field, which was no longer off-limits. The grass nearly reached their knees and when they sat, it obscured their legs. Some of the stalks were crowned with tufts, like wheat. They felt a bit coarse against Clare’s skin and caught the fine hairs on her limbs, but crumbled into moist specks when she rubbed them between her fingers. They smelled toasty, but bitter when crushed.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Clare said, not quite knowing what she meant but not caring either. The sun was hot again but the air was drier, and the ground was lumpy and warm. A helicopter split the sky overhead. She could feel the grass imprinting her calves as she and Florian munched their sandwiches. Patty had chopped green olives into her tuna salad and they burst between her teeth like beads of salt water.

Rebecca and Magda wandered over with a card and a clutch of chocolate-chip cookies wrapped in foil and ribbon. They coerced Florian into singing happy birthday with them while Clare blushed and smiled, and then they all lay on their backs with the grass brushing their cheeks and its toasty scent floating above them. Somewhere, Clare imagined idly, Kevin R. was gnawing on his own sorry lunch and sulking. When the bell rang at one, she returned to class feeling like she'd risen from a long, luxurious bath with a temperature that never dropped and an infinite supply of water.

That evening, as Clare shared a pizza with Florian and her parents, she decided it was her favourite birthday yet. Jason had phoned to say he wouldn't be home for dinner, which displeased Patty, but not Clare. The warm-bath feeling from lunch was still on her. It helped that they'd recently come back from swimming at the community centre. The pool hadn't been very crowded, owing to a problem with the pipes earlier that afternoon. She and Florian had raced around it freely, testing their ability to hold their breath and touch the tiled bottom, while Patty basked on an air mattress nearby.

Now Clare's wet hair hung in paintbrush points, dampening the shoulders of her T-shirt. Her presents were stacked at her feet. Florian had given her books: *The Amber Spyglass* and *Looking at the Moon*. From her parents, she'd received a DVD, a jean skirt, and a pair of sparkly flip-flops for the summer. But the best gift by far was the cat mask. She'd noticed it in the museum shop several months ago. It was made of leather, with tiny triangle ears and stiff copper wires for whiskers. A silky black elastic drooped off the back. She'd adored it, and her mother had remembered.

"They had one left," Patty said, delighted by Clare's reaction.

After they'd consumed the pizza, Rufus started grumbling about the news. Clare graciously let him flip to it. The grass, the balding news anchor told them, had not stopped growing. The city was beginning to show the strain. Most sidewalks were cracked, some of them almost shattered. Potholes plagued all the major roads and traffic was at a standstill in certain areas. Indeed, Patty had been half an hour late coming home, and she'd left work especially early to take Clare and Florian swimming.

"Our reporters and staff have been compiling a list of the plant varieties," said the news anchor. "Some of the more plentiful ones include:

"Virginia creeper creeping up many buildings including First Canadian Place and the CN Tower. Its berries are poisonous. Please don't eat them.

"Buddleia lining sections of Spadina, University Ave and Bloor Street.

"Cattails along Harbourfront, Sunnyside and the Beaches.

"Canada waterweed, or water snake weed, in the drains and sewers.

"None of this is limited to downtown," he continued. "North York, Scarborough and Etobicoke have all been affected, as have Mississauga to the west and Richmond Hill to the north. Some regions are also reporting erratic behaviour from animals and birds such as raccoons, foxes, rabbits, red-tailed hawks and coyotes."

"Coyotes!" Clare cried. Her mind was overrun with images of salivating fangs. She had no clue there were *coyotes* within a half hour's drive from her house.

Mayor Lash's slick smile filled the television, a mob of microphones and cameras swarming before him. "We'll get to the bottom of this," he swore. "A massive clean-up is underway." The news anchor announced that the mayor would be hosting a press conference tomorrow. Citizens were advised to watch.

"Tomorrow," muttered Rufus. "That's not very useful." He turned to an American channel. *Plant riot in Toronto baffles experts* said the crawl at the bottom of the screen. On the BBC, the caption read *Day of the Triffids in Toronto*. Rufus explained that it referred to a British novel about flesh-eating plants. "Don't get any scary ideas, though," he added. "It's science fiction, and it was written last century."

Clare wasn't scared, but she was in the grip of a giddiness induced by the pictures onscreen, as well as the presents and pizza and pop. Florian appeared dumbstruck. His mouth was set in an unmoving "O" and his eyes were also round. When Clare nudged him, he jumped. His laughter was glazed with giddiness too.

Perhaps sensing this, Patty suggested that Clare and Florian finish their drinks on the porch. Outside was much less frenetic than the television implied. They unfolded plastic chairs and sat with their arms and glasses dangling over the railing. In the shadows cast by the streetlamps, other voices marked other porches and balconies. The grass had lost its green to the dusky light. Mr. Ramchandra's enormous roses lolled over the Lowy's lawn. A squirrel scuttled across the road and disappeared under a car.

Two figures were giggling their way down Pearson Avenue. It was Amy and the Pamphleteer, Clare saw as they neared. Emboldened by the sugar and caffeine, she shouted, "Hey!" and Amy called back, "Hello! Isn't this lovely? The city is *alive*."

"Come have a drink," Patty invited them. "It's Clare's birthday."

"Hey, that's great! This day has been one giant present," said the Pamphleteer. "I'll be sad when they clean everything up. It should be *my* birthday"

"But it's not your birthday, it's Clare's," Amy admonished her. "And we must dance for her!" She spun a squealing Pamphleteer across the walk.

“Nice moves,” someone yelled from a window. The Pamphleteer yelled back, “But of course,” and let Amy spin and dip her again, until they fluttered to the ground in a whirl of skirts and long hair and flashing, jingling bracelets. The person in the window whistled, Patty said, “Bravo!” and Clare and Florian clapped so loudly that the sound must have put a hundred more cracks in the sidewalk.

The Pamphleteer and Amy got up on their knees and bowed deeply before Clare. “We are your humble servants,” Amy intoned. “We beseech your good will.”

Clare nodded imperiously, which took some effort because of her giddiness, and commanded them to sit. They crawled to the porch without minding their skirts, their bracelets tinkling in the grass. Once seated, the Pamphleteer turned to Florian. “Hey,” she said with a grin. “We just ran into your father. We asked if he liked the landscaping job, but he ignored us. I don’t think he does like it. Or us.”

Florian smiled weakly. Amy shook her head at her friend, as if to say *shut up*.

“Landscaping job?” Patty asked, confused.

“The *grass*, Mom.”

“Oh.” Patty didn’t sound sure. “You ran into Charles? Mr. Weatherup?”

“Uh. Yeah.” The Pamphleteer went quiet. Clare worried that her birthday evening was crumbling into awkwardness, but Patty eased the tension. “Well, I suppose everyone is out and about!” she remarked. “It reminds me of the blackout of 2003. Everyone was outdoors that night too. It was an Orthodox holiday—the Assumption of the Virgin I think—and the churchyard was filled with people carrying candles and singing. Do you remember, honey?” She petted Clare’s hair. “We joined them as they walked around the church, and you begged us for your own candle. Even Jason wanted one.”

Florian, Amy, and the Pamphleteer clamoured to share their blackout stories too. It was amusing listening to them: Florian's earnest recollections, Amy's enthusiasm and kind comments, the Pamphleteer's dry tone and clever words. Patty went inside for the rest of the pop and the cake, and came back with Rufus. They all stood around Clare's chair and howled the happy birthday song. The Ramchandras' light flicked on and the Ramchandras strolled over singing, Mrs. Ramchandra cradling their Yorkshire terrier, Leya; and the old woman who smoked cigars ambled over too. Soon a proper party was in progress on the Lowy's porch, and at the centre of it was Clare. She licked the icing off her fork in the glow of their beaming faces and wished for the grass to flourish a few days more. Just long enough, she thought, to keep the warm-bath feeling strong in everyone.

But it was cold showers that met the Lowy family the following day. The power had gone out while they slept. Rufus was cross because his alarm clock failed to rouse him, making him miss his second squash game in a row. Patty snapped that he couldn't drive with the roads as they were anyhow, so he might as well quit complaining. She was in a rage because Jason had broken his curfew and staggered in reeking of smoke and beer, and bleeding from a strange gash on his hand. "I don't even want to *know* what you were doing," she said furiously as they all glared at their breakfasts. "No, I do want to know. What the *hell* were you doing?" Jason refused to speak to anyone. The meal finally ended after Clare wailed, "Why is this family so horrible in the morning?"

She trudged up the street with Florian's violin. Patty had fetched him from his lesson before going to the pool yesterday, and he'd forgotten the violin in their car. Clare swung it beside her as she splashed through swampy puddles. It must have rained.



A tired-looking Lily welcomed Clare and left her to wait for Florian in the kitchen. They had all slept late, she apologized. They must have lost power too: the clock on their microwave was blinking 8s. Clare was surprised that it hadn't been corrected. That sort of thing was usually done straight away in the Weatherup household.

She sat on the red stool by the counter and traced circles on the countertop with a finger, while silence steeped in her ears. Then someone flew down the stairs and swished into the study off the hall, banging the door shut. "Florian?" Clare asked, startled. She crept out of the kitchen. A heated conversation was taking place in the study, but when she moved closer to the door she could only discern one voice.

It was Charles. "But they need to believe they're getting answers. You must have the right people. This is outrageous." He paused and let out a disgusted laugh. "Them? There's one down the street from me, actually; a girl who harasses everyone with her— Exactly. The garbage incident. I'd be interested to see if any charges have ever been laid. Send someone around to talk to her? Yes, yes. Goddamn greenthumbs."

Clare froze. She knew precisely who he meant. The Pamphleteer. But what did he intend to do? He said *send someone to talk to her*. He said *charges*.

She heard the receiver click and stole away from the study in a panic, but the door remained shut. In the grey light of the frosted window by the entrance, she stood and thought hard. Charles really disliked the Pamphleteer. He'd made that apparent on several occasions—and he was friends with Mayor Lash. He might have been talking to Mayor Lash! Clare suddenly had an inkling of what the Pamphleteer was up against. She didn't know what Charles was going to do, but the Pamphleteer had to be alerted. She'd have to tell her. The notion was dizzying. Maybe the Pamphleteer *had* done something awful. She

could be insulting. She'd made Florian uncomfortable with her remarks about his father. But Charles always made him uncomfortable. And the Pamphleteer was blunt, but Charles could be—could be *cruel*. Clare would have to warn the Pamphleteer. She was resolute. By the time Florian came down the stairs, she was feeling almost heroic.

“Florian!” She rushed over to meet him at the foot of the stairs and whispered urgently, “I just heard your dad—I just heard your dad saying—”

“Heard him saying what?” He glanced at the study and his expression darkened. “Were you spying on my father?” he asked indignantly.

“He’s going to arrest the Pamphleteer! We have to warn her!”

“What? He’s not a police officer!”

The study door creaked open and Charles stepped into the hall. He puzzled over them for a moment. “Don’t you two have school?” he asked gruffly.

“Charles? Are you still here?” Now Lily was flouncing down the stairs. “I thought you’d left. Florian, darling, you forgot your puffer on your desk. Here.” She hugged her son tightly, then released him and slid an arm around her husband. “Take care today, darling,” she said quietly. “Call if you’re going to be late.”

“Without a doubt.” Charles bent his head towards Lily, paying her the utmost attention. His gruffness had vanished. Beside Lily, he was almost gentle. Clare couldn’t help staring at them. Separately, they appeared exhausted. Lily was wearing an old sundress and a weary look on her face, and Charles’s hair was mussed and his tie and collar messy. Yet together they were striking. Florian was staring at them too. Clare felt a rush of pity for him. He was their only child, but he seemed left out somehow.

“Scoot now,” said Lily, noticing them. “But be careful where you walk.”

On the street, Clare faced Florian and reiterated what she'd overheard. "Your dad said it was a girl down the street who harasses everyone. He said *goddamn greenthumbs*. We have to tell her, Florian; she could be in *huge* trouble."

"Maybe she is in trouble," he said guardedly. "Maybe she did this."

"I don't think so. It's in Mississauga too, remember?" she replied. She didn't understand his cautiousness. He *knew* what his father was like, yet he was just standing there! Then he had the gall to *shrug*. Clare fought a tremendous urge to push him. She turn around and started off towards her end of the block.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"I'm going to her house! I'm telling her whether you like it or not!"

"Fine, but see if I ever speak to you again, Clare! I'm so sick of you, you know that? Always bossing people around, always getting your way, never for a single second thinking about anyone else, never doing *anything* for anyone else—"

She halted. "Excuse me, but I just brought back your freaking violin—"

"That's a *favour*. That's what you do for strangers on the *street*. They drop a glove and you pick it up and run after them. That's not doing something—"

"Your father is a monster, Florian!" Clare was yelling now. "And I'm beginning to think you are too! I really hope you don't ever speak to me *again*."

"Don't worry, I won't!" he shouted, and then he ran away from her, his red backpack jerking from side to side. She blazed along in the opposite direction, hating him more and more with each crashing footfall, stamping in the puddles and doing her best to crush the hideous grass that was growing, growing, growing without respite.

## Chapter Six: "What do you mean, too late?"

The dog had been limping after Clare for a quarter of an hour as she negotiated her way around the nettles, and Clare was ready to kneel before it and scream and scream and scream. It was a filthy little dog, its fur seeded with burrs and bits of grass—and worms, probably. Something dark and repulsive was crusted on one of its back paws. Clare had thrown it a hostile look when she entered the alley, but the dog followed her undaunted, coming closer and closer while she tried to ignore it. Now its hot, stinky breath condensed on her arm as she reached down to pluck a raspberry. She shuddered.

"Go away," she ordered the dog, wiping her skin with her shirt.

But the dog was tireless. It raised its snout and stared at her.

"I *said*, go away!" She was careful not to yell. If the police officers in the booth at Roncesvalles and Pearson heard her, they might think there was a problem and come running. Then she'd be sent back indoors to bore herself to death again.

She'd been mooning about the house for days, feeling quite unable to read or write in her journal or even try on her new cat mask, and Patty was sick of it. "You need to *do* something," she'd insisted, pulling the blue chip bowl from the cupboard. "Here. If you pick some berries, I'll make pancakes for lunch. If the milk is still good."

"If the stove is actually working," Clare had retorted. But she'd accepted the chip bowl and marched outside; and here she was, the love object of a dumb lost dog.

"I don't really like animals. I never had any pets," she told the dog. "And you're definitely not going to be the first." She reached down into the raspberry bushes again. Their branches nipped and scratched like wildcat tongues. Patty and Lily were pleased

with the raspberries, declaring them the blue-ribbon crop of an otherwise dismal plot, but Clare thought they were rather nasty plants. And the nettles, they scattered stinging white spots on your arms and legs if you just brushed them. She kept her arm rigid as she guided her hand through the toxic leaves and prickly branches, past the fruit, to the pavement. When she touched ground, she glanced back at the dog; and then she walked her fingers around the underbrush until they found a stone.

She straightened up and held the stone over one of her eyes. The dog disappeared behind its bumpy grey perimeter. “Goodbye!” she proclaimed, and she squeezed the stone tightly so that all the power in her body filled her arm from her shoulder to her wrist; and *smash*, she hurled the stone against the nearest garage door. A flock of pigeons took to the air in a little squall of flapping wings, and a squirrel jumped down from a hidden spot on the garage roof. But the dog merely flinched.

Clare felt heavy with futility. In the past, she might have flung the chip bowl aside and cried, but gestures like these were becoming increasingly irrelevant. She looked at the dog looking at her. It was panting loudly and eagerly. A chop of greasy hair hung over its face. Such a small, mangy creature. She turned to head home.

The sun was ascending and the humidity in the air intensifying. Clare made her way slowly through the brambles and grasses, for they concealed large cracks in the concrete and pointy pieces of household debris. Broken flashlights, broken shears, broken bottles everywhere; hubcaps, rakes, blue boxes and green bins; a chewed-up dolly, a toaster oven, even a fridge door. Enough wooden planks to claim a country’s worth of territory. Many backyard fences had been consumed by ivy, and some of their boards had been pulled off like rotting teeth in an attempt to keep it from spreading.

Clare considered the ivy as the garages shuffled past. Its waxy leaves were glazed with morning light. It might have looked pretty in an old-fashioned way, if it hadn't been *everywhere*. Despite all efforts to control it, the ivy had festered. It slithered up telephone poles and curled around the wires. It sunned itself on garage doors and the walls of the Orthodox church, and shaded itself under the eaves. The botanists called in by the city counsellors condemned it for gobbling up wood and mortar, but their instructions to have it destroyed had little effect. Like the other instructions and edicts and rules put in place by Mayor Lash's government, they were no match for the ivy.

Nothing had been able to stop the ivy or any other plant. Lawnmowers jammed on their tough roots, and gardening shears barely managed to trim their leaves before they started growing again. The city crews and military teams that the federal government had sent in dug up trees and shrubs from dawn to nightfall, but each morning the plants returned as strong and lush as ever. Rumours floated that Mayor Lash wanted planes to fly by and dump herbicide on the city, and for one afternoon the health clinics and stores that were still open did a brisk trade in surgical masks. Patty said it brought back bad memories of the SARS crisis; and the rumours were probably just the Pamphleteer and her friends scaring people into turning against the mayor. Patty had become rather defensive of the mayor. Since her college had been closed, along with the rest of Toronto's schools and public offices, she and Rufus argued about the mayor a fair bit.

In the end, no poisonous chemicals were required to stop the plants from growing. They stopped on their own. Just like that. It still boggled the mind. The plants—just—stopped. Or more accurately, as the experts on the radio put it, the plant growth dropped to normal levels, four days after the grass first appeared. The mystery of it lined the adults'

faces and greyed their hair. Religious groups, scientists, and politicians railed about bioterrorism and the apocalypse. Clare listened to many of them make strident claims on the radio. But she couldn't believe it was holy vengeance, and terrorism only happened elsewhere. More likely, she imagined in her dreamier moments, it was a force that had long been forgotten. A swirling, fluctuating, green-tentacled force, like weeds under the sea pushing to the surface. Not good or evil, just indifferent to human will.

With one hand gripping the chip bowl, Clare pressed her other palm against an ivy-shrouded garage to balance herself as she hiked over some brush. She peeked behind her. The idiot dog was still there. She quickly turned back. The thought of it gazing after her annoyed her, and in her annoyance she tore leaves off the ivy. Then the tediousness of the whole thing drained her again. Her happy, dreamy moments were few and far between these days. It was either worry or boredom filling her head, or an odd sense of disbelief. On some occasions—like when she saw a parked car on Pearson suddenly lurch forward because the root of a giant chestnut tree had pushed up the asphalt beneath it—she thought she must be in another world. At other times—after she went up to Roncesvalles with Patty and saw the police on the corner, and people tiredly plodding from store to store during the shopping hours—she wondered if the city she'd known had ever existed. Yes, it was the city she'd known that was in another world. This one was very real, and as the grown-ups kept reminding her, there was much work to be done on it.

For those four days of wild plant growth had been disastrous. First the power went off and on and off and on, and then it went out for 48 hours. It was irritating, having to take cold showers and play dull board games by candlelight, but it wasn't frightening; not until the boil-water advisory. Some type of algae had possibly contaminated the pipes.

But the power was off and boiling water was out of the question, except for the people who had barbecues. A few enterprising types set up their barbecues on Roncesvalles and charged rather a lot for their coal-boiled water. They seemed quite silly to Clare, with their *Kiss the Chef* aprons and their pots of water bubbling like witch cauldrons. But they did make money. Rufus said he wished he'd bought water from them instead of the supermarket. A brawl had exploded over the last bottles of water in the store, and an old man had been shoved to the floor. Similar rampages happened around the city.

Many people tried escaping Toronto then, although the roads were very damaged. But after countless accidents killed more than 30 people in a single day, the highways were closed and citizens were asked to sit still and be patient. Police checkpoints were set up to ensure no one departed the city by car. That caused much consternation, and a group of protestors rushed Mayor Lash's offices. A few of them exchanged blows with security guards, and the entire group was arrested for disturbance.

Then two ramps off the Gardiner Expressway collapsed under the pull of creeping plants and seven people died, and all vehicle use was prohibited. And *then*, hours later, a cargo plane landing at the airport crashed into a larger one on the runway, and everyone on board both planes perished. The larger plane was full of people hoping to get away. According to the radio, the crash was caused by "frenetic bird activity." In any case, the runways were nearly in ruins, and the airport was shut down too.

Things became especially tense after the foundation of an abandoned warehouse gave way and the building fell in a roar of disintegrating concrete. Nobody was hurt in the incident, but it became apparent that the foundations of all buildings were at risk. The vines twisting their way up the skyscrapers were very hardy; and plant and tree roots had



penetrated the basements of many homes and businesses. The downtown core of the city, where the skyscrapers rose hundreds of feet into the air, was barricaded. Many apartments were evacuated, their residents sent to sleep fitfully on cots in community centres and schools that also lacked power. The Ramchandras set up a tent in their backyard and packed it with water bottles and boxes of cookies, but the tent and its contents were stolen. Other people did camp on their lawns, and some even camped on public property, though Mayor Lash had forbidden this. Their garbage, and all the garbage that nobody was collecting anymore, got tangled up and buried in the weeds and went rancid in the heat. Clare still had to plug her nose as she passed through certain parts of the alley.

On the fourth evening, after Patty and Rufus had set out a dinner of crackers, smoked oysters, and a bean salad with tomatoes from someone's garden, Mr. Ramchandra banged on the door. He'd heard that helicopters were arriving at the Island Airport to evacuate the entire city. Patty was both anxious and relieved, but Rufus was skeptical. "They can't fly out five million people on helicopters. That would take weeks," he said, "and *that* would be too late." "What do you mean, too late?" Clare asked him, but he just sealed his lips and raised his eyebrows. Patty told him to keep his doom and gloom to himself, Jason said it was already obvious that things were totally whacked, and Mr. Ramchandra, looking uncomfortable, excused himself; but he promised he'd come back with whatever information he could scrounge up around the neighbourhood.

"What do you mean, too late?" Clare found her panic foolish now, as she walked down the alley between the banks of ivy. But that had been the scariest time, that fourth evening. Much more terrifying than the times she huddled around the radio with her parents, discovering that news channels across Canada, the U.S., and Australia—and *China*,

and *Iran*—were reporting on the destruction in Toronto. Shamefully, she was excited by the attention. And though she knew she should be upset about the plane crashes and car accidents, she just felt a weird blankness when she heard the numbers of dead. They were still far away, those accidents; out on Black Creek Drive and the 401.

But they did make Patty cry. “It’s not as bad as a terrorist attack,” Clare reassured her mother. “It’s not like *thousands* of people died.” Patty rubbed Clare’s back and wept. Clare had often seen Patty cry during television shows and movies, but this was distressing. Yet it was only after her father said *too late* that Clare began to realize her city might not get better. It was impossible to think beyond than that.

That fourth night, the Lowys stayed awake into the early hours, shaking at every creak and groan. No one dared say it was just the house settling. Patty wouldn’t let them use candles, so Rufus put the last batteries in the flashlights and said he hoped he’d find a few more tomorrow. Clare gulped down the rest of the crackers and oysters, grateful for their sharp saltiness. Jason lay facedown on the couch and mumbled into the pillows if anyone asked him a question. Then somebody knocked on their door.

Clare thought it was the police; and then, for some reason she still couldn’t explain, she thought it might be Florian. She must have been delirious with nerves because she hadn’t spoken to him since their fight, and anyhow it was late for him to be out on his own. Nonetheless, she dashed into the hall, brimming with the stories and statistics she’d absorbed. She couldn’t wait to learn what he’d seen and what his father might have heard down at city hall—Patty said that Lily said Charles was sleeping there. (Clare was right about the bed!) But the figures at the door were Mr. and Mrs. Ramchandra. She recognized them in the darkness with a heart-sinking sense of disappointment.

Even now it was awkward to recall. Nobody had ever told Clare that arguing with your best friend hurt a million times more than a crush, and the hurt lasted a million times longer. She hadn't been prepared for the pain of that letdown.

The Ramchandras at least were distracting. They bustled inside, full of apologies. "We're so sorry to trouble you—we're just knackered, but we can't sleep—there's a massive crack in the basement wall—our daughter's in Manchester and we haven't been able to contact her in days, she must be so concerned—" Patty tearfully hugged them both and insisted they stay; and Leya too, she said. The rest of the night was a blur of jittery chatter and laughter. Rufus uncorked a bottle of champagne, saying they might as well make the most of it, and Clare and Jason were each given their own glass. It was too sour and fizzy for Clare, but she liked the warm feeling it gave her.

She curled up in a corner of the brown couch and listened to the adults discuss how little had been done by any government and what had happened to Mayor Lash. Why wasn't he walking around talking to people; did he really expect everyone to stay put in houses that were virtually death-traps. Patty maintained that he'd done everything he could and they shouldn't criticize. Her voice sounded fuzzy to Clare. She rested her head on the arm of the couch. Rufus tucked a blanket around her and the next thing she knew, Patty was parting the curtains and hot sunshine was washing over her face.

"Look at the clock on the DVD player," Patty whispered. "It's working."

Clare sat up, squinting in the bright light. Sure enough, it was.

In stories with tornados or car chases or vicious family battles, there is sometimes talk of the dust clearing after the worst is over. Certainly the morning that the power came back on was calming. It became almost joyful once it was revealed that the plants the clean-

up crews had cleared yesterday hadn't grown back. The Lowys and the Ramchandras shared a festive breakfast of fruit, crackers, and honey on the porch. People strolled up and down Pearson Avenue, languidly waving or calling hello. But the mood of the street was more sleepy than celebratory, and beneath the drowsy smiles was a hazy awareness that the worst was not at all over. Toronto hadn't been sprinkled with dust; it had been strangled by pavement-lifting, sidewalk-swallowing, sewer-clogging, phone-pole-toppling plants. The roads looked like they hadn't been driven on in decades. Pigeons, raccoons, squirrels, and skunks, grown unusually bold, feasted in public on the foul-smelling garbage that covered the curbs. As Clare ate her breakfast on the porch, a housefly alighted on a piece of apple she'd dipped into honey, and then three more appeared. Mrs. Ramchandra swatted at a couple of wasps. "Here comes the insect threat," Rufus said with a sigh.

Mosquitoes, horseflies, shadflies, centipedes, earwigs, dragonflies, moths, spiders, and wasp-like insects that Rufus called mud daubers arrived along with the houseflies. They were all aggravating, but the bald-faced hornets were truly alarming. Much larger than any common wasp or bee, the bald-faced hornets had dark bodies and white heads, and their stings felt like twenty needles jabbing into one poor centimetre of flesh. Or so said Patty, who'd been stung as a girl back when she had the misfortune of living in the countryside. "I moved here to get away from this," she grouched as she swept spiderwebs from the upper walls and put ant poison on the window sills.

But before the insects became a serious nuisance, another more newsworthy threat hit the city. Hungry and resentful citizens, still subject to blackouts, brownouts, and the boil-water advisory, began looting. Some smaller grocery stores had been looted for bottled water and food during the initial four days of mayhem, but during the following week banks

and gas stations also became targets. The national media condemned the looters and Mayor Lash instituted a curfew from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. Jason caused Patty and Rufus much grief by coming home just before curfew and being as secretive as ever about his whereabouts. Clare, who'd always associated loot with birthday parties and thought only teenagers were given curfews, started feeling the weird overwhelming blankness again.

She was sort-of-reading, sort-of-staring on the porch one afternoon, perhaps eight days after everything started, when the Pamphleteer walked up and said, "Hey! Where's your friend?" Clare was half-tempted to reply, *We're in a fight and it's all because of you*, but she didn't. It was beginning to seem like a lifetime since she stomped away from Florian to the Pamphleteer's house (to find nobody home, of course).

At any rate, the Pamphleteer didn't linger around for a response. She informed Clare that she was being interviewed on CBC Radio at two o'clock with some friends from other local activist groups, and Clare and her parents should listen. "We're going after Dictator Lash," the Pamphleteer confided, and then she hurried off. Curious, Clare got Rufus to help her set up the radio on the porch. She spun the dial until she heard her neighbour's voice crackling from the speaker, and then she leaned in close.

"We want to help," the Pamphleteer was saying. "We'd like to start some compost projects around the city, make use of the plant matter they're throwing away ... My gardening group knows tons about weeds, we could identify the more invasive species that should be removed first ... Like giant hogweed. Have you seen any? Yeah, it's huge. I've seen a couple around the west end that are five or six feet tall. The flower looks like a cross between cauliflower and Queen Anne's Lace, if you can picture that. It causes rashes and blisters, but get this: its sap also makes your skin super sensitive to ultraviolet rays. So the

blisters can get worse. It's pretty loathsome ... No, I wouldn't kill *all* the hogweed plants. The way I see it is, if we're conscientious about our own intervention and we do it with the good of other plants and other people in mind, then it's reasonable ... Well, we also want to organize vegetable gardens, make sure people get all the awesome stuff out there ... But the mayor won't meet with us. What kind of mayor doesn't, you know, *talk* to his citizens? Yeah, we're definitely going to do these things, no matter what ..."

"The mayor doesn't have *time* to meet with them," Patty contended when Clare told her what the Pamphleteer had said. "She's a lovely girl, but she's stressing people out. It's selfish, really. People don't want to build composts, they want to get back to their jobs. I spoke to Lily earlier. *No one* at city hall has time for this. "

"Well ... couldn't the composts be the Pamphleteer's job?" asked Clare.

Patty pursed her lips. She was washing dishes in a basin of soapy boiled water, and some of the foam splashed onto Clare's shirt. She didn't apologize.

If the Pamphleteer's appearance on the radio made any other waves, they were lost in reports on the evening news of fires in the city's east end. Only a few cars and garages were wrecked, but the circumstances were suspicious. The fires, as represented by the media, were more sensational evidence of Toronto's demise. The very next night, copycat arsonists torched three garages in Parkdale. One of them belonged to the Weatherups.

And here it was, the Weatherups' garage. Clare stopped in front of it and rested the blue chip bowl on her hip. It was still standing, but its tiny attic window was broken and blackened and its metal door stained around the edges. The pavement was stained black too, where the grass had burned in the heat, and some of the ivy was scorched. But the plants' moisture had ultimately kept the fire from spreading, like a cage of green twigs;

though it did smoke a lot. The night the fire occurred, Clare could smell the smoke in her bedroom, and Patty wandered around the house sniffing the air like a bloodhound. Before she knew its cause, Patty even asked Jason if he'd been playing with matches before curfew. He gave her a disdainful look and answered, "I'm not *twelve*." Not long after, they heard a fire truck wailing, and then its tires crunching the grass and bracken as it rumbled up Pearson. Emergency vehicles, of course, were exempt from the driving ban.

Patty nearly chased the fire truck to see where it was going, but Rufus reminded her of the curfew. "What if our house is in danger?" she griped. "This is ridiculous." They didn't know it was the Weatherups' garage until Lily rang much later to say they were all fine and nothing was beyond repair except Charles's fancy car. Clare went to bed thinking about Florian, wondering if he'd been scared. He'd probably been uneasy but quiet about it. He would have been able to watch the fire from his window.

After the fires in Parkdale, Mayor Lash held a press conference. The power was on, so Clare watched it on television. She'd forgotten what the mayor looked like. His tanned jowls wiggled as he spoke, but his eyes and his tone of voice were hard. "I know that most Torontonians take pride in their city," he said. "I know that most of you want to see our city returned to its former glory. But a small group of people is callously undermining all of our efforts." He paused to gaze sternly at the camera. "At a time like this, when our well-being, our jobs, and our homes are still in peril, we cannot tolerate criminal behaviour. We cannot tolerate anything that disrupts our recovery, especially if it is a hazard to people's lives and property. I'm sure you all agree with me that the looting"—he paused again—"must end. The vandalism *must end*. I have been in touch with the Premier and the Prime Minister, and they agree too. We have drawn up some *requests* ..."

The requests were really temporary rules, Rufus said. The curfew was now 8 p.m. Citizens were asked to refrain from engaging in any “activities or demonstrations” that might divert the police from the clean-up. Clare was confused by this, because the mayor had also said that he’d be stationing officers in every neighbourhood to keep the peace, and surely that would divert them from the clean-up too.

Surprisingly, the fires actually stopped after the mayor’s press conference, though the looting and vandalism didn’t fully abate. A great deal of graffiti appeared around the neighbourhood. On the garage doors and church walls in the alley, vulgar comments and drawings ridiculed Mayor Lash and the federal government. The graffiti artists disparaged the mayor’s requests and new laws, especially the curfew. *Totalitarian*, they called it. Clare learning lots of words from the garage doors and church walls. *Orchidaceous* was another one, as in *this shit is orchidaceous man*. Some of the graffiti was in dialogue form. *This is where the apocalypse starts* was followed by *ah the apocalypse, always in style*, and that in turn was followed by *rich cynical bastards get out of the city*.

This morning, Clare saw that there was a poster among the graffiti, taped to the side of a house near the entrance to Pearson Avenue. She must have missed it when she was avoiding the dog. *10 REASONS TO GET RID OF MAYOR LASH NOW* it stated in familiar block letters on plain white paper. It had been written by the Pamphleteer.

Clare skimmed the poster. The print diminished in size towards the bottom, but its urgent anger was apparent throughout. She shivered as she read. She wasn’t sure if it was fear or something else altogether making her shiver. She felt like someone was spying on her from a window. Someone disapproving, like Charles Weatherup—or something else altogether. She glanced up the alley then, remembering. The dog was gone.



## *10 REASONS TO GET RID OF MAYOR LASH NOW*

*1. He wants to kill ALL the plants including the ones that aren't causing any harm, which is most of them. 2. He says he is "cleaning it up" when he's really dumping it in the lake and the parks. Why have the parks been closed off to the public? Because they've become illegal garbage dumps! 3. He refuses to meet with citizens' groups, i.e. he's not interested in talking to YOU or ME or ANYONE. 4. He's practically put this city under martial law. 5. He's got the police and the MILITARY tucking us in at night. 6. He's jailing innocent people without charging them. 7. He's charging people for "looting" and "vandalism" when they were only trying to FEED themselves and EXPRESS themselves. City walls belong to the people! Let us have our say! 8. His "request" that people "refrain" from demonstrating is complete censorship. 9. He's controlling the media. 10. He has NO plans for our future, Toronto. Get rid of Mayor Lash now, before it's too late!*

## Chapter Seven: The Pamphleteer

Clare ducked under the caution tape cordoning off the alley and emerged onto Pearson Avenue. The sidewalk was scattered with pink and white chestnut blossoms suspended like stars in the green grass, the petals caught on the strands. They were very pretty. She bent down and gathered a few to put in the chip bowl, beside the raspberries. The blossoms looked nice against the blue bowl, but not as magical as they had in the grass. She put them back where she'd found them and carefully stepped around them.

Down the street, she spotted Amy and Daniel descending from the Pamphleteer's porch. Her face broke into a cheek-cracking grin. She hadn't seen Amy since her birthday and Daniel since that day she and Florian joined them all on the porch. She ran forward a few steps, but shyness suddenly slowed her. She approached them with a more hesitant smile. "Hello," she said, almost as if it were a question.

They both looked anxious. Amy allowed a brief smile, but Daniel simply nodded. They must have been at the Pamphleteer's house. Clare glanced over at it.

"Were you—" she began.

"No one was home," Daniel cut her off. "She's out of town."

Clare was perplexed. He couldn't be talking about the Pamphleteer; Clare had just read her poster in the alley, and said so. "I thought it was new," she added.

Daniel reddened. "It's not hers. What, have you memorized her handwriting?"

"Oh Dan, leave her alone," Amy murmured.

His brusqueness smarted. Clare wondered if he no longer liked her. But it also made her determined to prove her point. "Well it's just like her other posters and pamphlets."

Amy was staring at her intently. She ran her hands through her pale hair and sighed. "Look, Clare," she said. "If we tell you something, you must promise to keep it a secret as best as you can. You must shake hands with us and swear it."

"Of course!" Clare nodded fervently.

"What the hell are you doing?" Daniel muttered to Amy.

"It won't hurt," she replied. "It's not like it'll be a secret for long." She stuck out a freckled hand and Clare shook it, and Daniel grudgingly did the same.

"Alright," Amy said briskly. "We're a little worried because the police have been bothering all of us. Not seriously, but they've been asking questions about our gardening group. They're monitoring the graffiti and the rumours around the neighbourhood too. You know about the fires, the arson, right? They found a bike near one of the garages—your friend's garage, actually. It had some, um, distinguishing stickers on it—"

"Whose was it?" Clare asked excitedly.

"It belonged to a friend," Amy said, but Daniel nodded towards the Pamphleteer's porch. Clare had to stop herself from gasping aloud. "It had been stolen that same day," Amy asserted. "She's not involved in any way. Setting fires is *not* what we do. It's such a shame, because we really, really want to help with the clean-up."

"And that's what makes me so angry," Daniel said, more to Amy than Clare. "All we want to do is arrange some meetings for the people in the neighbourhood, so we can figure out what they want and what we can do for them. But there's no way they're going to let us use our old space at the community centre, because it's become a goddamn police registration checkpoint or some such crap; and we don't want to draw unnecessary attention to, say, Mitzi's Café—though I guess it's really our only option for now—"

Clare must have looked very perplexed by this point, because he paused and said, "Basically, we just want an empty room in a quiet building where we can meet with friends, come up with some plans, and store some things. And not be disturbed."

"What about your university?" Clare asked. Rufus had been involved with some committees at his college, and they always had having meetings and conferences in various rooms around the campus. Once he had a conference in a room with no windows. When he came home, he made a joke of rating the chair quality and table height.

"Yeah, it's no good. Security is too heavy, and they're not letting in students."

"Security!" Clare was impressed.

Amy grinned. "What, isn't your school under heavy guard?"

"No," Clare said. "I don't think so. Unless George is still around. Actually, I bet he is! He's our janitor and I bet he's still weeding the Victory Garden every day—" She cut herself off as an image of him going in and out the shed door came to mind. There was a spare key somewhere—on top of the red fuse box—

"Anyhow," said Daniel, "there's our story. The next time you see us we'll be in better spirits. Drinking banana juice on the porch and all that."

Clare knew he was being kind because he felt badly for his brusqueness earlier. She held up the chip bowl. "Want a raspberry?"

"Oh, lovely!" Amy peered into the bowl.

There weren't many berries, and they were small and mushy, but Daniel and Amy helped themselves and thanked her and then said goodbye. Clare ate the rest and ran inside her house waving the empty blue bowl. "The squirrels must have eaten them all," she told Patty, who shushed her with a frown. She was watching television.

Clare flopped onto the couch. A group of people thought responsible for much of the looting had been apprehended in the east end. The news was showing them with jackets over their heads as they were herded into police vans. Mayor Lash was quoted as saying he was “pleased” with the arrests and he hoped for quick convictions.

The poor Pamphleteer, she thought.

Then, that evening, two more odd conversations.

The first took place before dinner. Clare and Jason were alone in the house. Patty had gone to fetch Rufus from Mitzi’s, where a championship round of chess was underway. Clare was cutting pictures of astronauts from old *National Geographics*. Patty had hauled them out of a closet and told Clare she could have them to read or make collages, whatever she wanted. “Your father’s not going to miss them,” Patty had said, “and I certainly won’t either. Just promise me no more whining!” Clare had promised.

A brownout was in progress at the moment. Only the lamps worked and they were quite dim. The evening light was a dark blue. Clare lit two candles on the kitchen table and poured over the magazines. Some of them were from the 1960s. They smelled funny, old and damp. She preferred the newer ones with the glossier photos. She flicked past rain-forests, tropical islands, mountain ranges, tundra, and prairies. Here were pictures of the deep sea, darker than the evening sky, filled with strange, impenetrable shadows and small, glowing fish. Here was outer space, with brightly lit astronauts traversing grey plains. Stars speckled the sky above them. Outer space was a little like the deep sea, Clare decided, what with the glowing stars and fish. She snipped one of the astronauts from the grey plain

and glued him onto the darker blue water. He resembled a diver. Right at home with his brightly-lit, reflecting helmet. She turned the page to the sea article and studied it. *Bloom-in-essence*, she read, sounding out the different syllables in her head.

Feeling pleased with herself, she cut out the rest of the astronauts and searched for scenes in which to place them. She found a photograph of a temperate forest that stretched across two pages. There weren't any animals in it. It looked kind of like Pearson Avenue at dusk: ferny and dim. There were more trees in the photograph, though. She positioned one of the astronauts in the air, hovering, with one arm around a tree trunk. There. He seemed to have just floated down from a spaceship in the treetops.

She was hunting for city scenes, preferably with large structures or buildings like the CN Tower to make a King Kong-style collage, when she heard a loud knocking.

"Jason, can you get that?" she called. "I'm busy."

He didn't answer. Irrked by the interruption, she went into the hall. Two police officers, a man and a woman, smiled at her through the window in the front door. She hurried over to unlatch it. "Um, hello," she said cautiously.

"Hello," the woman greeted. "Is there an adult home?"

Jason must have checked to see who it was from the top of the staircase, because he bounded the stairs then. "Yeah," he said assuredly. "I'm eighteen."

Before Clare could protest, he snatched the scissors from her hands. "You know you're not supposed to use these without permission," he said. They glinted in his hands. Clare made a face at him but kept quiet; she was unarmed.

"We just wanted to ask a few questions about Mary Krol," said the man.

Clare looked at him blankly. "Sorry?"

"Your neighbour, I believe—"

"We don't really know her," Jason interrupted. "She's kind of a troublemaker."

"Oh?"

"She's always harassing people. She's really vigilant."

"Vigilant," repeated the man.

"I mean militant."

"Have you seen this bicycle before?" The woman held up a picture.

Clare not only recognized the bike, but she finally understood what they wanted.

She bit her lip. They were asking about the Pamphleteer.

"Yeah, it belongs to her," said Jason. "Did she, uh, do something?"

"That's not important," said the woman smoothly. "Thank you for your time."

"I heard she's been bragging," Jason went on. "About the fires and things."

"You liar!" Clare exclaimed. Jason raised the scissors slightly, but she ignored him.

"Don't listen to him, he's totally lying. He's only fourteen."

"And she's only seven, and doesn't know what she's talking about," Jason said.

"Well then," said the woman. "I think that's everything."

The police officers left. Clare whirled around to glower at Jason, but he stalked off into the kitchen, giving her the finger over his shoulder. "Why did you do that?" she yelled after him. It didn't make sense. Because the Pamphleteer made fun of him once—?

Clare told Patty and Rufus what had happened as soon as they entered the house, smiling broadly with news of Rufus's victory in the chess match. Clare felt a bit guilty for not being enthusiastic about it, but this was much more pressing. "The police were here and Jason *lied* to them," she said with urgency. "First he said he was eighteen—"

“What—?” Patty frowned. “The police? Jason?” she shouted up the hall.

“Mom, that’s not the important part.” Clare grabbed her arm. “Mom.”

“Hold on a minute, honey—Jason? Is there a mistake on your birth certificate?”

“No,” he called back, bored. “But by the way, Clare left two candles burning on the table. You better teach her some lessons about playing with fire.”

Clare rushed into the kitchen. She was furious with herself; he was right. She blew them out quickly, but Patty noticed the smoke rising from the wicks.

“Honey!” Patty sounded displeased, but she didn’t look too concerned. “I’ve told you never to leave candles unattended. *Many times.*”

“Okay Mom, sorry, but that’s not the important thing—”

Patty was making a terrible noise pulling plates of leftovers and jars of mustard out of the fridge and arranging them buffet-style. “What was that, honey?” she asked as she banged a container filled with olives beside on the counter. “I wonder why the police came by,” she mused. “It can’t be too serious, or they’d have gone to Mitzi’s as well.”

“Mom, *because.* They want to arrest Mary Krol!”

“What? Don’t be silly.”

“They think she set the fires and Jason told them she did!”

Rufus took a bottle of wine from the fridge. “Why would he do that?” he asked.

“They found a bike near Florian’s garage and they think it’s hers, and Jason said it was—” Was this part of the secret that she’d promised Any and Daniel she would keep? Everything was going wrong. Her face was hot and she was blinking rapidly.

“Was it hers?” Patty’s eyes were steely. She’d finally stopped moving.

“I don’t know, I guess so, but then Jason—”



"I can't believe it," Patty said, shocked. "I thought better of her."

"Mom, she didn't do it! Her bike was stolen!"

"Calm down now," said Rufus, pouring the wine into glasses. "You're getting all worked up. Let's eat some dinner and then discuss it."

"This family is *heartless!*" Clare screamed and ran from the room.

The second odd conversation was even more disquieting. The phone rang abruptly at nine, just after Clare had showered and put on her pyjamas. Her hair was wrapped in a turban that she adjusted in order to hear properly. "Hello?" she answered, sniffing. Her voice still sounded thick after all the frustrated crying she'd done.

"Hi." It was Florian. He didn't say his name, but he didn't need to say it. Clare listened to him with her heart pounding against her ribs.

"Um," he said. "I saw you in the alley this morning."

"Really?" Clare was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry about your garage."

"That's okay. My parents are really mad, though. Um, that's why I'm calling."

"Huh?"

"Okay, I think maybe you were right. About you know. Maybe. Okay." Clare heard Lily calling his name in the background, and then he hung up.

Clare couldn't sleep all night. The lamps in the churchyard were on for the first time in days, and they cast disturbing shadows in her room that she'd forgotten about. And Florian's phone call was still ringing in her head—and that visit from the police. They could only mean trouble for the Pamphleteer. She didn't know what to do.

She pulled her pillow over her head and willed herself to doze, but it didn't work. Nothing worked. Not counting, not picturing snowy fields. She got out of bed and put on her cat mask. In the dark, it made her feel like cunning and surreptitious, like a thief. She crept over to window and stared at the wilderness in the churchyard.

The horrible clock by her bed kept ticking. She tugged off the mask and slumped back onto her bed. She tried thinking about other things. Her astronaut pictures. Patty and Rufus had really liked them. They'd been fun to make. What if she were an astronaut, floating around the neighbourhood. She could spy through upper windows and stand on the rooftops. She could fly onto the roof of the school and fetch all the tennis balls lost up there. No doubt there were hundreds. She could fly over the—

Clare sat bolt upright. The Victory Garden. There was a plastic-coated window near the shed door, and there was a key inside the shed. The Pamphleteer could live in the school. Amy and Daniel could have their meetings there. Clare could help. She could wear her cat mask and sneak over to the school with supplies.

No, it was a ludicrous idea. They'd be caught. George would be around—though George was a gardener. He might like the Pamphleteer. Maybe he'd help too.

All night long, Clare concocted thrilling, terrifying plans. When she finally slept, she dreamt she was flying, floating, and hovering through the air, over peaks and valleys and down into the ocean depths. Into forests as wet as the ocean.

The next morning, she yelled to Patty that she was picking berries in the alley again and then she ran next door, to see the Pamphleteer. If she wasn't home, Clare would wait. This time, she was going to tell the Pamphleteer everything she knew.