

Sam pulled her denim shirt tighter, wishing that she'd worn a sweater instead. The inside of the train compartment was just chilly enough to be uncomfortable. Two men were her only companions, even though the car seated more than thirty. She wondered briefly how many other people were tucked away in other cars, but she put the thought out of her mind. She probably wouldn't get the chance to find out.

The station was dilapidated, as was the train itself. She told herself it must be safe; after all, these trains ran once or twice a month, didn't they? *After all, if they wanted to kill us, they would.* She took a deep breath and reassured herself she was right.

A strident voice interrupted her thoughts. A woman, tousled and wild-eyed, was being half-led and half-dragged onto the car by two stoic-faced men. The older one, maybe forty, looked as if this happened to him every day. The boy who held her other arm couldn't have been more than seventeen. His eyes were wide and frightened.

"This is a mistake, a terrible mistake! If you'll just let me stay in the station here until my husband gets it all straightened out--"

Neither man spoke. The boy straightened his bright blue cap with one hand and dug the fingers of his other deeper into her fleshy arm. She let out a little whine and tried to pull away.

"On the train, ma'am." It was the older man who spoke, and he sounded every bit as bored as he looked.

She was a large woman, and it was obvious that neither man would be able to fit through the doorway with her.

She braced herself against the frame, and continued to plead her case. "I'm telling you, it's a mistake! My husband will have me brought right back. It'll be much easier to let me wait here! Please!"

The older man leaned forward. Sam tried to make out what he said, but his words were drowned out by an announcement that the train would be pulling out momentarily. She watched as the woman's hand rose to her throat. Without another word, she stumbled up the stairs and collapsed into the nearest seat.

She had hardly sat down when the train lurched into motion. Sam watched as the countryside

slid by. She swallowed hard. *I'll never see this again.* She pushed the thought out of her mind and turned her attention to her fellow passengers.

A young man sat near the front of the car, a worn magazine absorbing all his attention. He was a little too thin, and his pale blond hair was cut so short he appeared bald at first glance. He crossed his legs, bobbing his foot up and down at an almost frantic pace.

Sam turned her attention to the other man in the car and found he was examining her as well. He was around forty and slightly plump. His stomach hung a little over his belt, and the buttons of his shirt strained a little against his paunch. He smiled weakly. "Morning."

Sam nodded back. "Good morning."

Neither spoke again, and she turned her eyes back to the woman. She was wringing her hands and staring out the window as the city passed by. Sam ignored the view; it was impossible to enjoy it knowing she'd never get the chance again.

"You heard anything about where we're going?" It was the plump man again.

Sam answered. "Just that it's the Old York colony. And rumors, of course."

His smile was weak. "Same here. It's harder, not knowing what to expect." His voice trailed off on the last few words.

"I'm Sam."

"I'm Ralph."

They were silent for a few moments, until another voice joined in. "I'm Allen." The man with the magazine was swatting his knee with it. "Nice to meet you."

Sam turned to the woman, who was still fidgeting in the back of the car. "You are?"

She turned to the others, her large blue eyes bright with tears. Her plump cheeks were blotchy. She sniffed. "Mary. I can't believe they'd make such a horrible mistake."

Sam thought, *What the hell?* and asked, "Mistake?"

Mary sniffed again, and Sam resisted the urge to wince and the sound. "Yes, a horrible mistake. I'm sure my husband will straighten it out, and I'll be on the next train back. It's just terrible."

Allen spoke. "There are no trains back."

Mary flinched as if she'd been struck, and Sam wondered at his callousness. Sam turned to him. "How do you know that?"

Allen was wringing the magazine. "I've been researching exiles for three years; that's what's got me here. No one comes back from the colonies."

Mary began crying again. Ralph leaned toward him. "There's no need to be so gloomy; you don't know that it's as bad as all that."

Allen turned to each, as if evaluating them. "I'm a realist. I've been researching the colonies and the exiles and writing underground articles." He tossed the magazine to Ralph, who unrolled it. "They let me keep the latest one, and believe me, there's no coming back."

Ralph had visibly paled as he thumbed through the work. "Where did you find this out?"

"I bribed a supply plane to let me on board a few weeks ago. We went out to drop some medical supplies, and I took the photos while I was in the air." Allen ignored their shocked looks as he pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "That's probably what got me caught. Should have paid the bastard more."

Ralph didn't take his eyes from the cigarettes. "How did you get those?"

Allen smiled and handed him the pack. "It's all who you know; I met quite a few people involved in the black market. That's about the only market there."

Ralph helped himself to a cigarette and offered light. "I guess you know the right people."

Allen shook his head. "The wrong ones, you mean. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here." He took a long drag and put the remains out beneath his heel.

Sam forced herself to be civil. "You don't seem too upset about it."

Allen smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Too late for that. Besides, I've seen it. It's worse than you probably think, but not as bad as it could be. I'll survive."

Sam felt her stomach tighten. She tried to ignore Mary's soft sobs from the back of the car. "So tell us about it."

Mary let out a little sob. "You don't know anything! You're lying."

Allen shrugged but didn't respond. Sam was grateful that he showed that much tact. When he finally spoke, his words were measured. "It seems very crowded from the air, lot of people milling about, waiting for the drop. They seem pretty desperate for supplies; it's chaos down there. I don't know how work or living assignments are made, if at all, but there must be some type of arrangement. Things don't seem to be falling apart, at least."

Ralph pulled a carefully folded piece of paper from his pocket. "Of course, we all have these." He opened the sheet. "Mine is for 1000 credits. I have no idea how far that will go."

Allen nodded. "That's pretty standard, I think. If you're careful, that will last a month, maybe six weeks. Don't use the banks though; they can't be trusted."

Sam felt a small amount of relief. Surely she'd be able to find some kind of work before her money ran out.

"How do you know that?" Mary's voice was shrill.

"It's just what I've heard."

Sam interrupted. "How long does it take to get your savings transferred. I filled out some forms, but no one could give me an exact time frame."

Allen laughed outright. "You've got to be kidding. They're not transferring that. The paper you have in your pocket is it, and it's all you're going to get."

Sam reeled as she tried to take in the information. She had almost twenty thousand saved, and she'd comforted herself by counting on using it to make a down payment on a place.

"Have you talked to people from the colonies?" Ralph looked hopeful as he spoke.

"No, not directly. My sources are in the black market. What they know is from selling to the colonies."

"Not buying?" Sam noticed Allen's omission.

"What would they have to sell? And who on the inside would want something from there?" Allen's words were almost a challenge.

Sam leaned her head back and shut her eyes. It was still too much to take in. She listened as Mary rose and staggered back to the bathroom.

Ralph whispered. "What else aren't you telling us?"

Allen hesitated until Sam spoke. "I want to know too."

"Most people are pretty desperate. There's shortages of everything. The black market helps, but there's a high price, and very few people are able or willing to pay it."

Ralph asked, "How do people live?"

Allen stared at him hard. "Trade. You trade what you have." He turned to Sam. "In some ways it's easier for women, or harder, depending on how you look at it."

"What are you saying?" Sam's stomach was turning into a bunch of knots again.

Allen shrugged. "You know what I mean. You'll always have something to trade for, if it comes to that."

Mary staggered back out, her face ashen. She sunk back into the seat and laid her forehead on the one in front of her. No one spoke.

Sam turned her attention outside their car. They were still within the borders, but just barely. Signs were posted along the tracks and the highway that ran alongside, reminding them that they were approaching the border check. Other than government cars, vehicles were almost never allowed to pass through. The train, however, was expected, and the gates would be open and ready for their exit.

As they approached, Sam stood to get a better view. The train rocked as it picked up speed, and she saw the lines of razor fencing clearly now, just yards ahead. They passed through the first gates. Soldiers patrolled the quarter mile between the fences. It was rumored that dogs were used too; Sam had even heard stories of land mines. They passed through the second fence, and she sat down.

Ralph laughed bitterly. "That's it then, I guess."

Mary had begun to cry again.

The change was dramatic. No cars dotted the highway. No people could be seen outside the ramshackle buildings that still stood. It was as if life had just stopped on this side of the fence.

"I wonder how far it is." Sam spoke to no one in particular.

"Not very. Ten, maybe twenty miles." Allen had gone back to fidgeting with the magazine. "So, you all know my dirty secret. What did you three do to find yourselves here?"

After an awkward pause, Ralph spoke first. "Um. Immorality." He smiled sheepishly. "I was convicted of being a homosexual because of an, uh, incident when I was younger. I was given the choice between this and treatment. I hope I made the right choice." He chuckled again.

Sam spoke, feeling her cheeks redden and hating herself for it. *What do I have to be embarrassed about?* "Immorality. My boyfriend and I had moved in together. We didn't think anyone knew, but..." Her words trailed off. She turned to Ralph and laughed, "At least you got the *option* to take treatment instead."

Mary was staring at them hard, her lips tightened into two thin white lines. "I didn't do anything."

Ralph shook his head. "That doesn't matter. All that matters is what you're accused of."

Mary looked at each, weighing whether she should tell them. After nearly a minute, she decided. "They say the baby isn't my husband's, but it is. I'm not very far along, so I'm sure they've just made a mistake. When my husband straightens it out, I'll be going home." Her voice broke on the last word. She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. "My husband forgave me; I told him everything, and he forgave me. This baby is his, I know it is!"

The train lurched as it began to slow, and Sam was almost grateful. She wasn't sure she could take another of Allen's outbursts, and from his look, he was about to say something. She saw that they were pulling in to a dilapidated station. It was crowded with people, all of whom looked ragged and hungry. Soldiers pushed them back to no avail; they poured around the soldiers and clamored for the train.

When the train stopped, they all stood. Sam wondered if she looked as pale and terrified as the others did, and decided that was probably the case. They filed out and were immediately whisked through the crowd and into the station by the guards. They were pushed into a dusty room that was furnished with a handful of mismatched plastic chairs and a metal desk. No one sat down.

An older man was there. He wore no uniform, but was instead dressed in a shabby suit. He looked like a bureaucrat down on his luck. "I'm here to welcome you and provide your orientation."

As he spoke, his voice fell into a monotone. Sam wondered how many times he'd given this speech to others like them.

"You have been resettled in an effort to place you in a society more welcoming and befitting your--" here he paused, "--lifestyle. You have been given a credit voucher that will provide you with a means of support until you obtain employment. You will all be given a list of employers and housing facilities where you may seek work and lodging."

Sam reeled. No work or housing would be provided?

He continued. "There are few laws or societal demands, so you will find it easy to pursue your own interests. Some communities do have a sort of law enforcement, which is not endorsed or supported by the federal government." He absently flipped the page on his clipboard. "Supply distribution takes place on Wednesday and Saturday. You should arrive early to ensure maximum availability."

Ralph interrupted. "Excuse me. Where do we cash the voucher checks? Who do I talk to to get a room for tonight?"

The bureaucrat frowned, obviously displeased at the interruption. "Vouchers may be exchanged at a federally endorsed banking facility for the current exchange rate. You will be given a list of potential quarters."

Sam spoke. "Exchange rate? Potential quarters? What exactly is the exchange rate?"

The man flipped the papers down on the clipboard. "I believe it is about three to one, currently."

"Are you saying that my one thousand credit voucher is worth only about three hundred?" Sam's voice rose in both fear and anger.

"Approximately."

Ralph was on his feet. "This won't do. This won't do at all."

They were interrupted by a boy who wore a soldier's uniform that was obviously new to him. He fidgeted with the hat as he spoke. "They got through to the train again, sir."

The bureaucrat rolled his eyes, as if to say, "Not again!" Turning to the four, he put on his best diplomatic smile. "I regret to inform you that your things have been stolen from the train by the mob outside. You may file a lost baggage claim, which will be processed as soon as feasible."

Ralph took a step toward him, sputtering. "What? You can't do this!"

Mary was crying again, loudly, and Sam felt close to tears herself.

The bureaucrat tucked the clipboard under his arm. "There is one last thing. You may, at this time, contest your exile."

Mary jumped up. "I do! I want to contest!"

Sam allowed herself to hope, for a moment.

The bureaucrat flipped to the back of the clipboard. "Infidelity, correct?"

Mary's voice was shrill. "No, not correct! Not correct at all!"

"Ahem, I see. And you?" He turned to Sam. "Heterosexual immorality?"

Sam nodded, "But I want to contest it."

Finally he turned to Ralph. "And you? Do you want to contest as well?"

Ralph nodded, but he had gone almost ashen. Sam wanted to sit down, but didn't dare move.

Allen stepped forward, puffing another cigarette. "No, on all three. They confessed on the train."

Mary cried out, and Sam felt her knees let go, and she sank into the plastic chair, hard. Allen shrugged. "Sorry. I have to do what I can to survive, but I told you that already."