

The Renascent Children

by Carryn Kerr

Chapter 1

The firestorm is raging. It's all around me. Everywhere I turn, trees are being ravaged by the huge flames. Run, I urge myself, run. But which way? Where would I go? There is nowhere, and I cannot see through the smoke. Burning wood and other acrid smells penetrate the air, though I would rather not think about this. It just makes me more terrified than I already am. A branch crashes down behind me, and again I try to run. I really try, but my legs are stuck. They won't move. The fire is roaring, deafening, as it sucks the oxygen from the air.

Branches crack as the furnace chews through the wood, and just ahead, another tree crashes to the ground, spraying me with a bright shower of embers, singeing my bare skin. Heat and smoke scorch my eyes. I cannot breathe. I clutch at my throat, rip at it, trying to get to the searing pain of the hot poker that is slashing me from the inside out. The smoke is getting thicker, an impenetrable, grey shroud. A blanket of heat hits me from all around. Hot, scorching agony rips through my body, blistering my skin. I am tiring, fading, I am sure. I can't go on.

A hand reaches for me, closing around mine, "Come, Cassidy," says the cadenced male voice, gentle and smooth. I am drawn to the sound of it, sure that I would follow the owner of this voice to the ends of the earth. Although I still see the flames, the agony and torment melt away, evaporating into a mist. My eyes follow the smooth sun-bronzed skin of the forearm beside me, moving to the hand that is clenched into a fist around mine. It doesn't feel like the grip is tight. I don't feel that at all. I only feel safe. It is a man's hand, but it is not my father's, nor is it Liam's, and that surprises me. Who else would clutch onto me with such intensity?

I look down at my hand. It is bigger than I remember, and though the skin is still smooth and mildly sun darkened, the hand itself is not quite as ... bony. A soft, femininity has replaced

the definite protrusions of the knuckles. It reminds me of my mother's hand, but younger. A young woman's hand, I realise, but still mine.

I look again, to the unfamiliar hand that is gripping onto me, and follow the clenched forearm upwards. For a moment, I stop at the threadbare t-shirt, covering the smooth muscles that curve over the top of the arm. My eyes follow the hard line of the collar bone above strong chest muscles, and finally, my gaze moves up. I look at the definite lines of the sun-bronzed face, then take in his light hair, flecked through with lighter bits. My gaze moves to his eyes, an unusual aquamarine, the serene colour of the ocean shallows around a tropical ocean island. His hard jawline dips, and his eyes meet mine. In spite of the fire raging around us, his lips are stretching into a smile, dragging long, crevassed dimples down from his cheeks. He is beautiful to look at, and I'm sure that his face will forever be etched into my memory.

My attention is jerked away, back to the fire, still raging around us, though it is remote now, far off. Then all is silent, and I am alone. This seems almost worse to me, than the fire, and I begin to scream, agonising wails of anguish.

I woke with my heart thudding wildly in my chest, sweat drenching my body. The dream had felt so real, the images so vivid. Of course I was not a woman though, I was only fourteen, and I was late. I groaned as I looked at my bedside clock.

It was still dark outside, and Liam must have heard me pulling my half-asleep body down the stairs, as he was already depressing the front door handle, before I reached the bottom stair. He turned towards me for a moment, "Cassidy," he grumbled, stepping through the doorway, "I've been waiting forever. What's been holding you up?"

I knew that it was nothing more than a feeble reprimand and that he probably didn't really expect an answer. "Sorry," I said a little sheepishly anyway, zipping my jacket as I caught up to him on the garden path.

He raised his eyebrows, but in his usual appeasing manner, he didn't press me for an answer, and as we turned onto the sidewalk, the fresh scent of the cool spring morning made me feel a little better.

I did not usually take note of the oddities in Petriville, so common to us now. I had never been out this early though, and as we crossed it, I observed the soft glow of the reflective lights, splashing the decorative footbridge, that replaced the intersection, nearest our house.

When we stepped onto the two-way mobile conveyor, to ride the gentle slope up towards the town square, I considered, for a moment, how strange our world must appear to outsiders. I supposed though, that it didn't really matter much, since, in the five years that we had lived here, strange as this may be, I had never actually seen anybody visiting Petriville.

"Could we please walk," Liam said, cutting into my musings, as he tried to urge me to hurry.

"I'm sure we're not that late." I mumbled dismissively, and ignoring his pleas, I remained stationary. I was enjoying the pre-dawn sights as we passed them. The ornate sidewalk lanterns were casting dim circles of light beneath them, and the alternating trees seemed surreal, with the soft green garden lights splashed on their branches. It was pretty.

Liam did not seem too anxious though, and as we passed beneath the next intersection footbridge, he ducked exaggeratedly.

"Don't flatter yourself Li, not even dad's that tall," I said, with a small laugh.

He smiled, spinning to face me, my amazing brother. It really astounded me that even on my darkest days, he could bring a smile to my face.

The truth was that I adored Liam, loved being his little sister, and at two years my senior, he took his role as my protector quite seriously. He was everything to me, the first person that I would go to when I needed help, or if I just wanted to talk, and no matter what, Liam always knew exactly how to make me feel better. Some say that you only truly appreciate a person

when they're lost to you. Well this was never the case with my brother. I appreciated him every day, from the moment that I could remember.

My attention was slowly brought back, as the rear side of the old-style-stone municipal buildings came into view.

We drew alongside the buildings, then hopped off the conveyor, Liam rather dramatically, into the town square. Oddly, it was not a square at all, but a circle, though at the centre of Petriville, the pinnacle of the gentle, even mound on which the town was built. Twelve darkly paved strips leading from each conveyor, converged at the midpoint of the circle, the fountain, though we had already deviated towards the train station.

I was still gazing back over my shoulder, mesmerised by the eerie glow of the directional lights that were showering the municipal buildings, when Liam grabbed my arm, "Watch where you're going, Cassidy." He groaned, as he stopped me from falling over a park bench in one of the grassed areas.

"Thanks," I half laughed, feeling a little chagrined, but took his advice, and turned to face our direction of travel.

When we exited the square, walking up the wide staircase and through the automated glass doors, we entered Petriville's only train station to see four hands swaying wildly over the crowd, beside a stationary train.

"Harriet! Jonas!" I called from far off, and jogged the remaining distance to our friends. They were actually our only friends in Petriville, not that it mattered to me. In fact, not being the most social creature, I preferred it that way, "I missed you last week." I said to Harriet, as I gave her a welcoming embrace, "How's your grandmother?" I asked, as she returned my hug, with two pats on the back.

"Missed you guys too," she smiled, cocking her head, as she flashed her perfectly rounded dimples and twirled a strand of long, blonde hair around an elegant, pale finger, "she got

better almost as soon as we arrived, thanks. Must have been something to do with having had a visit from her favourite grand-daughter,” she smiled, “or namesake,” she muttered drily.

Her brother, his cropped blonde hair only a shade darker than his sister’s, returned my hug with way too much enthusiasm, almost squishing the air from my lungs. "Ouch," I complained, though I was really just being facetious, and as we ambled across the platform, he sighed, “it really is good to be home.”

Home, I thought in a flash of lucidity. Was it home? I had an acute sense that in the not-too-distant future, Petriville would not feel like home at all. Perhaps my earlier dream was infiltrating my thoughts. I shook my head to clear it. Although the name of our town, Petriville, never failed to amuse me, I wasn’t sure that the founder, Gina Petri, had even noticed the irony of it.

A few high schools had conglomerated for the outing, and hundreds of teenagers had already boarded the long train. Everyone chatted excitedly while they waited, and a group of younger girls, already seated, were singing one of the latest radio hits. I rolled my eyes as I passed by, though they seemed oblivious to my disdainful reaction.

Harriet and I moved to the back of the carriage, while Liam and Jonas ducked into the row ahead of us.

While they chatted, I observed their blonde heads bobbing over the back of the bench, and a tender warmth washed through me, as I pondered over how similar they were. Their thick wavy hair and bright green eyes made them appear more like siblings than Liam and I, my long, dark walnut hair, in stark contrast with his. Strangely, Harriet and I shared a similar shade of deep blue eyes. She was the epitome of a blonde bombshell, according to Liam, though beauty was not uncommon. Not in Petriville. Every one of our multicultural citizens was favourable to the eye. And athletic. And intelligent. Now that I began to think of it, I realised that it was rather strange. Just another of Petriville’s oddities, I guessed.

“You’re very quiet this morning,” Harriet observed, as the train click-clacked its way through the town's outskirts, and began the slow continuous descent through the first ring, the wheat fields.

“I had a really disturbing dream last night,” I said, “or more like this morning,” I murmured, gazing out the window at the domestic animals in the second ring, as the bright pink hues of sunrise began to brighten the pale blue sky. “It’s left me feeling a little introspective, I think.”

Jonas and Liam turned, giving us a wry smile, as we passed through the next ring, watching as the horses grazed peacefully in the large field, “They’re going to miss us today,” Harriet moaned.

“Oh, I’m sure they much prefer it when we’re not around to ride them,” I muttered drily, as I turned my attention back to gazing out the window.

I became lost in thought, as I caught sight of Zenobia, my favourite of the mares, but was brought back from my daydream with Harriet's hand waving slowly in front of my face, "Hello, anybody in there?" She enquired, playfully mocking.

"Did I say that I missed you last week?" I asked, not really feeling in the mood for the idle banter, though I smiled anyway.

I turned to look out the window again as the train clattered through the maize fields, and finally veered off, continuing its journey alongside the zoo.

“I’m sorry, Cass,” Harriet said, laying her hand on my shoulder, “I was just trying to lift your spirits, you know. You look really down.”

“I’ll be fine, thanks Harri.” I sighed, still unable to shake the wretched after-effects of the dream, “Like I said, it was really weird. Kind of like a horrific premonition.”

Our guide ignored everyone's blank expressions, as we gazed out at the occasional buildings, and strange, stark environmental changes. He continued his lecture on the benefits of, and variations between the gigantic habitats, and made special mention of the fact that each species was housed separately.

"It looks to me like, if there are any animals at all, they could just walk across to the next species' habitats anyway," Jonas muttered.

It was only towards the end of the journey that Harriet noticed the oddity, "Wait," she said, angling herself in her seat and pulling my face around to look in the same direction, "do you see that outline?" She asked, directing my gaze for me.

I sat bolt upright, "It's nearly invisible!" I exclaimed, as I saw what she was referring to.

Liam and Jonas were looking too, and Liam was incredulous, "It looks like a soap bubble, the way it reflects light in rainbow colours," he paused, and then added, "...and look how high it extends above the habitats."

"I wonder what it's made of," Jonas pondered aloud, "and it must be really strong to keep the animals inside."

The trip ended back where it had started, and as we had suspected, the zoo did, in fact, encircle the entire town. "It's kind of similar to the moat of a castle," I said, as we disembarked at the station.

"Do you think that was the intention?" Harriet enquired.

"Maybe," Jonas answered, then with a smile, he added, "I wonder who they want to keep out."

"... or in, for that matter," Liam concluded drily.

If I thought that I had been miserable that day, it was nothing in comparison to the look of sheer horror displayed on the faces of our parents when we arrived home. Liam was usually almost the mirror image of our dark blonde, tall, athletic father. Not this time. This time dad's brows were drawn into tight lines of anguish. The muscles over his defined jaw were bunched from the tension of his gritted teeth, and his bright green eyes were pulled into tight slits. Was he angry? I couldn't decide whether his expression was one of hatred, or agony.

"Are grandma and grandpa okay?" I asked mom, trying to reconcile their level of devastation.

"They're fine, Cass," mom murmured solemnly, gazing up at me through her tear-filled, deep blue eyes, and though her voice caught, she added, "they're all fine."

"What then mom?" I pushed, noticing how limply her long, dark hair was hanging over her face, "What's going on? Why are you and dad so sad? Please tell me."

"Cassidy Jones," Dad seethed, "That is enough! Would you please just stop interrogating your mother."

I felt heartbroken. My father had never spoken to me like this before. Not ever. I tried to rationalise his harsh words, but could only put it down to the fact that I had never before seen my parents appear this devastated.

Liam grabbed my hand and pulled me to the staircase, muttering as we climbed up towards our bedrooms, "I've never seen Dad this drunk before, Cass. Something really bad must have happened for them to be this way. I can't imagine what it could be though."

Chapter 2

I was not sure why I bothered to walk, to school, with Liam, since he never spoke to me anyway, his earbuds shoved into his ears, as he rapped, spun, and air-drummed to a current favourite tune. It wasn't as though I didn't listen to music while we walked, I just didn't listen as dramatically. This time was no different, and, as usual, we trudged along the winding brick pathway, through the park opposite our house, in silence.

I was pondering, as we exited the park onto the pavement outside school. Our parents' unsettled moods had prevailed for weeks now, and according to rumours that had been spreading through the school halls, they were not the only ones. I nudged Liam in his side, indicating that he should pause his music, "Liam," I asked, after he had, "what do you think is up with mom and dad?"

He opened his mouth, as if to answer, but closed it again, as a woman in her mid sixties, with silver blonde hair, headed in our direction. She had just left the school, and a phone was pressed to her ear. As she turned to wave at two young children, she smiled, but I soon realised why Liam had dropped into silence.

She was engaged in a heated argument with the caller, or at least, the caller was engaged in a heated argument with her. I could hear that from far off. Her voice remained steady, even monotone, and though I could hear that the man on the other end was yelling, I could not hear the content of his argument. The woman must have assumed that we were listening to music, because, as she passed by, she continued talking without changing the pitch or tone of her voice.

"Graham, the contract states, very clearly, that any legal infringement would declare it void." she had said this in a matter-of-fact, expressionless tone, then, for a moment, she softened slightly, "nothing is cast in stone, we can discuss this at a later stage," then she pulled the

phone away from her ear, pressed the disconnect button and plunged the phone into her handbag. I got the distinct impression that she had only said the last bit to appease the caller.

As we entered the school grounds, Liam and I glanced at each other, wide-eyed, and in a silent grimace, our prior conversation forgotten when Harriet and Jonas all but launched onto us from behind, “thanks for waiting for us guys,” Harriet laughed. “We were trying to get your attention the whole way through the park,” Jonas agreed. I was sure that wasn’t true. We would have heard them if they had been.

The announcement came a week later, an invitation for everyone to meet in the town square for an address by the company president.

On the day of the big address, I woke to a beautiful mid spring morning. It really was a glorious day for the slightly inclined, accelerated walk, and our parents, Liam and myself ambled leisurely, beneath the clear blue sky, towards the town square. The air was pleasant, just cool enough to feel fresh when it touched the skin, but not cold, and I found myself wondering if this was, perhaps, going to be the day that we found out what had kept our parents busy for the past years.

Over our time here, our father’s dark blond hair had noticeably begun to grey at the temples, while his handsome face had become drawn. It was even worse lately, as he seemed to carry a perpetual strained tension behind his bright green eyes. Then there was the irritating, stuck-on happy face that he insisted on wearing, obviously for our benefit, and I wondered if he realised that we could see straight through the facade.

It was harder for our mother to hide her anxiety, and the deepening lines around her deep blue eyes revealed the truth of her emotions. Her normally rich, dark hair had lost its natural lustre, and on the occasions that her exterior melted away, the heaviness of her mind was laid bare, for all who knew her, to see. She had become a shadow of the beautiful woman in the photographs that adorned the walls of our home.

Townsfolk had begun to gather in the square, or circle, early that morning, in preparation of the address, and as we stepped off the conveyor, we moved towards the expanding crowd that had gathered at a bank of elevators in the municipal buildings. The line moved quickly, and in a short time, the doors slid open for our turn.

The elevator shot downwards with alarming speed, then it slowed, and bumped to a halt. When the doors opened, I gazed out astonished, as we had stepped through the entrance of a huge stadium. It could not have been a stadium though, could it? The chairs looked more like luxury recliners than stadium seats.

Liam's mouth was agape, "Is this the big secret?" He asked, incredulously, as if I had the answer.

Many of the sections had already filled, though Jonas and Harriet's parents had kept place for us. Roger stood when he saw us, waving his thick forearms in the air, "Over here, Joneses," he bellowed over the noise of the crowd. I noticed that both Jonas and Harriet had dropped their eyes to the floor, in embarrassment, though Megan, Harriet's older double, seemed rather used to her husband's random outbursts.

The next four open seats beside us soon filled with another unfamiliar family. The coffee skinned man was attractive beneath his dishevelled, almost wild looking, tightly wound grey and black hair. His wife, beautiful, as was the custom in Petriville, fashioned weaves in her pitch-black hair, while their children, a young girl, and even younger boy, looked nothing less than shell-shocked.

Dad leaned over Liam and I, to shake the man's hand. "Joshua Carter, I believe," he said, "it's a great pleasure to meet you, and welcome to Petriville." Dad gestured towards each of us as he said our names, as though Joshua could not determine who was who in the introduction, "This is my wife, Emily, and our children, Liam and Cassidy. I'm Peter Jones," he said, and then proceeded to introduce the entire Winters family.

"Likewise Peter," Joshua replied, then introduced his wife, Caroline, and their children, Samantha and Paul, to everyone.

Samantha, smooth-skinned, and yes, gorgeous, stared nervously up at me, with her huge ebony eyes.

"When did you arrive in town?" I asked.

"Two days ago," she said shyly, "it was quite a sudden change for us."

"Why's your mom wearing dark glasses?" I asked softly, although it was quite obvious, and I felt a little chagrined by my bluntness.

Samantha did not seem to notice, and shrugged as she mumbled back, "I don't think my mom likes it here. She's been crying since we arrived."

"For two days?" I asked in surprise.

"Yup," she nodded, flattening her mouth into a grimace. "I thought it was about having to leave our old home so suddenly, and that we left most of our things behind, but everything arrived at our new house yesterday, and she's still been crying, so it can't be that."

Mom, Dad, Roger and Megan really seemed to hit it off with Joshua and Caroline, in fact, so much so, that they made us all switch seats, so that they were together.

"There must be more than fifty thousand recliners in here," I said to Harriet, as I gazed around, astounded.

Liam was frowning, his palms up questioningly, though his words did not emulate his body cues, "I must say, it is impressive." The lilt in his voice implied that he was not finished.

"But?" Harriet enquired.

He cocked his head, and raising one palm, he continued, "I mean, it is impressive, but surely this is not the big project that our parents have been working on for the past five years," he said, again with a lilt.

"I seriously doubt it," Jonas agreed, "why would an underground stadium be kept under wraps? I guess it could be part of it though," more seriously now, "What do you think?"

"Doesn't make sense to me," Liam complained, "I can't see how their professions would even fit here."

When a woman in her mid sixties walked to the centre of the stadium, Liam and I both gasped, though the thousands upon thousands of people who filled the seats instantly quietened down.

She gracefully mounted the four steps to the large platform. The silver blonde hair, gently shaping her face, was tucked behind her ears. I gazed at the huge screens on each side of her and noticed how tired her pale blue eyes appeared.

"Who's she?" I called over to my mother, who was three seats away from me.

"She's Gina Petri," mom answered, as though I ought to have known.

"Well, I've never 'met' her before." I said, emphasising the past tense verb.

Mom sighed, "She's the woman who began, and brought this project to life," she mumbled, sounding tired, as though she was reading from a script.

"Well, she's the person who Liam and I saw the other day, you know, the one we told you about, the one who was arguing over the phone."

Mom dismissed my observation with a cursory, "mmm."

The woman stepped up to the microphone, and it crackled to life.

"Good morning everyone!" she said, "Thank you for joining us today."

I mused over the fact that we had not been given an option in the matter, but never commented on it, and a loud cheer erupted from most of the kids and teenagers.

I was surprised that she did not speak in the same monotone, and though she still spoke slowly, there was a melodic tone to her voice now.

The woman allowed everyone to quieten down before she continued, "For those of you who don't know me, I am Gina Petri."

Another cheer.

Gina smiled and paused before she continued in the slow, melodic rhythm, "It is with great excitement that we announce the completion of the project, and thank you to those who have endured more than your fair share of stress over the past years."

She got straight to the point, and her next statement almost flattened me, "Each family sitting here has been specially sought out and selected to embark on one of the most amazing journeys of our time. A trip into space."

An eruption of loud mumbling and animated gestures went up in the crowd.

I took a while to react, as the shock from her declaration had momentarily numbed my senses. Finally, I turned to Liam, "Am I hearing correctly?" I asked, horrified, feeling my eyes widen with the disbelief that I was feeling. Liam never answered, but the subtle shaking of his head was answer enough.

Not in my wildest dreams or worst nightmares would I have considered this as a remote possibility, and I had not the slightest interest in leaving earth, not even for the quickest jaunt into space.

Liam and I both turned to our father, who was the nearest of the adults, and I gasped, "Is this what all the secrecy has been about, Dad? Who asked us if we wanted to go?" I was losing control, and Liam gently laid his hand on my shoulder to calm me.

Dad looked and gestured towards Gina, also sounding tired, "Just listen to what she has to say, Cassidy," he implored, "We'll discuss it afterwards, at home, okay?" As though that was ever going to happen. Everything that we tried to discuss with our parents these days, was brusquely dismissed.

Gina made eye contact with a few individuals within the crowd. "Up until now, we have largely kept this project confidential, and I'll explain why in a moment, but the time has come for you to learn more about it."

"About ten years ago, marine geologist, Graham Porter, made an interesting find in the Eltanin Crater, an impact crater in the Southern Pacific Ocean. Mr Porter's discovery is what has brought us here today. This compound, which is beyond anything we could have created without the sample, is what we have used to encompass our spacecraft. The strength and structure are beyond anything ever discovered before. It could possibly be an alien technology, though we can't be certain of this. It also has a reflective quality that somehow conceals it, and is permeable to water and breathable gasses. If this compound got into the wrong hands...." she trailed off, leaving the rest to our imaginations. I couldn't grasp why this would be a bad thing, though. Perhaps my imagination wasn't as vivid as hers.

I wondered if this was the same Graham that she had argued with, and glanced at Liam. The look on his face told me that he was considering the same thing.

Gina paused, and people began to talk amongst themselves. She stilled the crowd with a raised hand. "Obviously, the stadium is part of the spacecraft, and since it has its own gravity,

it shouldn't feel much different to being inside an airplane." I wondered why this would be obvious, and rolled my eyes, then realised that I was adding contemptuous physical punctuation to everything that she had said. I wondered, casually, if this attitude would eventually land me in trouble.

She continued, interrupting my musings, "Adults will be largely involved in the operation of the craft, and as I mentioned previously, you were all chosen for your specific skill sets, whether it was to work on the initial build, or with maintenance and other operations en voyage. Each child was also chosen, selected for your future value."

"How could she possibly know who our future selves will be," I muttered to Liam, "when we, ourselves don't even know yet?"

He didn't answer, and Gina continued her monologue without pause, "... and, in this way, families were selected. The selection has been a slow and purposeful journey. Not one of you is here by accident. The pets that were given to you last year will also accompany you."

Liam became abruptly defensive of our Dobermann Pinschers, Achilles and Yvon, "Well what were we supposed to have done with them otherwise?" he growled under his breath, then continued sarcastically. "Oh right, we could have taken them to the boarding kennel down the road."

"What boarding kennel?" I enquired, thinking that he knew something that I did not.

"My point, exactly." He muttered derisively.

Gina's voice cut into our conversation, "You will notice that, as of this morning, Wi-Fi has been disconnected, as well as phone, radio and television services. This is to concentrate all available resources on the launch. Out of town visits have also been cancelled until further notice."

I glanced at mom and dad, and frowned. In fact, when I looked at others around us, the kids were animated and talkative, while the adults all carried the same mournful expressions. I turned to see that Liam, Harriet and Jonas were also scanning the faces of the crowd.

"Do you think that our parents doubt the safety of the spacecraft?" I whispered.

Though none of them answered, an unsettled feeling began to rise in the pit of my stomach. I tried desperately to brush it off as me just being my usual cynical self, but still it lingered.

I thought about the zoo animals, the farm animals, and our horses. Wouldn't they be severely traumatised by the nearby spacecraft launch? Nothing made sense anymore. Everything that I considered just added to my sense of dread, and I felt as though we were being used as human lab rats.

With that, Gina dismissed us, and as we trudged home in silence, each submersed in our own thoughts, the dourest feeling began to take hold of my senses.

Chapter 8

We quickly became accustomed to the unusual, mild weather, but I could not shake the constant nagging at the core of my stomach, and I yearned to go home.

Two months into our journey, after completing some arbitrary experiment in class that had left Harriet and I with a broken test tube, the intercom buzzed. Harriet sighed audibly, as our headmaster's deep voice boomed across the classroom.

"Not again," I groaned, and our teacher's displeased expression told me that I had spoken too loudly. I really was so sick of hearing announcements that always seemed to precede a complete alteration to our lives.

"Good day pupils, please pay attention." The principal paused for a few seconds, "At seven-thirty this evening there will be a compulsory live broadcast on the information channel. Please note that this is only for teenagers. School will continue normally for the remainder of the day. Thank you." He disconnected.

Well, so much for that. The fact that young kids were encouraged not to watch the broadcast peaked everybody's curiosity. The entire school was abuzz with speculations of what the announcement would be. Harriet and I walked silently through the school hallways between classes, not because we had nothing to say to each other, but because everybody else said so much, and we rather enjoyed eavesdropping on their speculations. Almost every conversation that we overheard, between companions or groups was about what they expected to hear that night, and there certainly was a lot more nattering at school than usual.

We drew our own conclusions at the end of each overheard conversation.

"The journey is over and we are returning to Earth." A group of younger, overly optimistic girls decided.

"What do you think?" I asked Harriet.

"Nope, that would have been fine for kids to hear."

"I agree," I concluded.

"Something has been miscalculated, and we are going to be left stranded, stuck out here forever, unable to return." Two older boys this time.

"Your turn," said Harriet.

"Perhaps that's plausible. That could be something. A scary thought though."

"Very," she agreed.

"Our oxygen supply is diminishing and we're all going to die out here."

"Harriet?" I asked.

"Better than the last option," she said wryly, "still too scary a thought though."

So many terrifying ideas, were so carelessly being bandied about, seriously considered by our peers.

Finally, we too became caught up in the many random speculations.

"I've just begun to feel safe here, but now, I'm not sure." Harriet said.

"I'm not certain that we ever were entirely safe out here," I offered, "I think that we have been coaxed into a desensitised state."

"True," Harriet said, "What, exactly is safe anyway really, when we've been shipped off of our planet with barely any warning, and no choice."

After we fell silent, every possible doubt began to bombard my thoughts, but by the time we left for home, it seemed that all ideas had run dry, and all we could do was wait for the dreaded announcement.

By the time seven thirty came, I was beside myself with worry, unable to keep my thoughts calm or, for that matter, my eyes dry.

Liam picked up the remote, and dropped to his favourite spot with one foot stretched out on the centre table and the other resting on the edge. His free hand was behind his head, and I was astounded that he could so easily relax, when a stampede was galloping through my stomach.

Mom and dad joined us, and though I said nothing, I glanced at them quizzically. I had assumed that this broadcast was specifically for the youth.

Strangely, the pre-broadcast image was our new perspective of Earth, and I shook my head at the observation.

Gina again materialised on the television screen and spoke without pause. "It is with a heavy heart that I come to you this evening," she said, though she did not look troubled at all.

My stomach pitched and my heart skipped a beat as my mind raced through all our peers' considerations and then so many more of my own. Before she continued, my skin froze and my eyes began to water. I knew, without doubt, that this was going to be bad.

"We have received news from earth, and though we have been expecting this," she paused again. I puffed out an irritated breath of air before she went on, "it still comes as a terrible shock."

I turned to face mom and then dad, and was all the more horrified that their faces appeared to be masked in sadness. I should not have been surprised though, this was a look they had often carried of late, "What is she talking about? And what have we been expecting?" I was not even certain that this was a question, or a defiant statement.

Gina continued, "Joshua Carter is an expert in this field. He will present the details." She paused as the camera pulled back to show a tall, attractive, well-dressed, coffee skinned man. As he stood beside her, I began to realise that I recognised him, minus the wild hairstyle, as his tightly curled grey-flecked hair and beard were now neatly trimmed. He was the man that we had met during our first visit to the stadium, Samantha and Paul's father. I turned towards dad quizzically, and understanding my enquiry, he nodded slowly in confirmation.

Gina's voice drew my attention back to the television screen, "Thank you for joining us Joshua," she said.

Joshua's slight nod was his only acknowledgement, and his large brown eyes carried more than just sadness. He made no formal pleasantries, nor did he offer any of the insincere exchanges that usually accompanied interview openings. He began his explanation without waiting for Gina to prompt him.

"I am so desperately sorry to be the one to present you with this devastating news," he said.

"That is a rather disconcertingly odd way to begin a public statement," Liam drawled as he dropped his feet to the floor and moved his body forward. Pre-empting what I was sure was about to come, I curled my hand into his.

Joshua's previously tired, but expressive eyes appeared more sunken than before, and his skin was sallow, like a man under extreme stress. I had seen this exact look on dad's face many times over the dozen weeks preceding, and since, the launch.

Joshua Carter continued, "By profession, I am an astronomer, my main area of research being the tracking, mapping and studying of larger than normal asteroids."

Suddenly I knew. I knew what all the secrecy had been about, and I knew what Joshua was about to reveal. Tears instantly began to flow down my cheeks, and I wrapped my free arm around my waist.

He continued, "Until recently, nothing substantial had ever been recorded and I honestly thought that nothing ever would be, not in our lifetimes anyway. Then, a few months back, in the middle of the night, a warning alarm was triggered, by an asteroid tracking satellite," he paused and shook his head, before continuing, "The asteroid was enormous, travelled at tremendous speed, and it's trajectory was estimated to be too close to Earth. I was astounded that no other space station had reported it."

"Tragically, I could not share this information. That task was my employers', and as I understand it, the consensus was to avoid creating a worldwide panic, since there was no possible solution. It would be up to each government to make the announcement, if and when they deemed necessary." He glanced sideways at Gina, then downwards, and removed his glasses. Before he continued, he drew his thumb and middle finger towards each other across his eyes, replaced his glasses, and wedged them into the bridge of his nose.

"I am speaking to the children out there now. You may have guessed what I am about to reveal, and it is only as of this moment, that I am finally at liberty to do so." Joshua choked on the words, and took a sip of water. He glanced towards Gina and grasped the sheet of paper that she held out to him. I gaped as the sheet of paper began to quiver in his hand.

He took on a formal stance, but again shook his head before he continued, "It is with the most grave sorrow that I give you this news," he paused again, still choking on his words. "... Within a maximum of two days, this asteroid will strike earth." He paused, and I thought that he was about to lose his composure, but he took a deep breath and continued, "We are still unsure how far-reaching the impact will be, but we know that it will be devastating. The news has spread across earth. These are their last days."

It did not matter then, that Joshua had lost all self control, that his whole body was visibly shaking, or that he doubled over and ducked away from the cameras, and I only caught any of that through the blurred vision of my tear-filled eyes.

I had known what he was going to say, almost as soon as he had begun, but still, I had hoped that I was wrong, or that at least there would be evacuation procedures in place. Never this.

He had said, "These are their last days!" What did he mean by that? Was he being literal?

The television went dark, but we remained in place. I felt weighted, as heavy as a statue, stunned into silence.

Joshua had kept this from us, he had looked us in the eye and had remained silent, and I began to ponder how deep the deception actually ran.

My body felt numb, cold, ice flowing through my veins. I gazed downwards, to the two hands between Liam and I, clasped, no clamped together, seeing them as if from a distant dream. One of them was mine, I knew this, though I could not feel it. I could not feel Liam's grip, though I yearned to feel the warmth of his touch. I felt nauseated. Tears burned at my cheeks, tracing scalding outlines down my face until they dropped away. My hand was too heavy to lift, and I could not wipe at them. I considered rotating to see Liam, though my head would not turn. I knew that his expression would be dull. Impassive, in the shock that I knew he would be feeling.

My mind was in a loop of one tumultuous thought after the next. It began with our family back home, at the absolute betrayal that they must be feeling. Then I wondered how Joshua's own children had felt after his announcement tonight, or if they had already known. My stomach dipped even further when a new realisation struck, and I came out of my stupor to face mom and dad.

They did not hide their tears, but remained quiet. I considered that they were monitoring Liam and I, and was almost certain that I was beginning to understand why they would need

to. I gathered my thoughts and began to recall how sad our parents had been in the weeks prior the launch, and even since then. The truth of the betrayal seared through my gut like a sharp edged blade, and I gritted my teeth as I choked, and spat the words through my lips with no doubt in my mind, "You knew!" I seethed.