

"We did it!"

"Not that, Ju!" Bear's half irritated. "The ReWild. I worried it was made up."

"Made up?"

"That nature hadn't grown back. That it was still all dead."

"Yes," I say softly. "It worked. Nature found a way."

"Look at the spiderwebs, Juniper! They're just like your drawings!"

I stare at them. These ornate, perfect hangings. Geometry strung between branches. Some have spiders in them — these eight-legged creatures that aren't ticks, but you're meant to be scared of anyway.

There's a spider still spinning. This incredible, graceful thing with long legs. Her web spirals out from the centre and she walks it like a circus performer. Like an acrobat.

"I wish I could tell Annie Rose about it," Bear says. "And Erienne. Why did he have the GPS if he knew he could never leave, Juniper?" His nose is crinkly.

I keep my voice flat. "He hoped things would change one day. That the disease would burn itself out or maybe scientists would make that vaccine." Or maybe if things got so bad — if it was a choice between the disease or the Institute — then Erienne would run into the Wild anyway, even though he knew he wouldn't last out here. But I don't say the last bit. Out here, the city feels like a bad dream.

There's a sudden yelp from Bear. "Ow! Ju! Something bit me." He's wandered into a clump of green straggly plants. "I think it was a snake, Juniper! It's burning."

"Burning? A snake?" I say, moving towards him into the plants, reaching out for his hand.

"Juniper!" Bear says, indignant. "Do something! What if it was a tick?"

I look at his hand again, where little round pimples are rising out of his skin, and then I look at the plants and I feel a prickling on my hands too. A strange sensation I've never felt before, halfway between an itch and a sharp pain. "It wasn't a tick, Bear!"

"A snake then. I felt it, Juniper. Why are you laughing?"

"I'm not," I say, fighting to hold back my amusement at the outrage on Bear's face. "Look, it got me too. Your snake. We're standing on it."

Bear looks down at the ground, all quiet and excited. "Where, Ju?"

I giggle. "I thought you were the naturalist. I thought you knew all this."

He pulls a face at me as he looks at the green leaves around us with their little stinging hairs. He mutters the word out loud, begrudgingly. "Nettles. See! I told you something stung me."

"Well, actually you said bit."

"It could've been an adder, Juniper, and then you