



The moon hangs above us, a white impossible kite on a string of stars. These tiny twinkling lights, trillions of miles away.

We're about to stop and make camp when Bear says it. Or screams it.

"Tick, Juniper! Tick!"

"Where?" I shout, brandishing a stick in my hand ridiculously, like it would do any good against an insect.

"On my neck!" He's crying. This is the one animal he knows to be scared of.

I scramble for the torch and turn it on, directing it to where Bear's little fingers point, on the side of his neck, up near his ear. It's brown or black maybe. One round body, eight legs, its face buried deep inside his skin.

"Stay still. Don't touch it."

I've gone through this scenario so many times. Even at

school they taught us how, just in case one got through. Never squeeze a tick. You take hold of it with tweezers, close to the skin, and you pull. Slow, steady, straight up.

Time matters. The longer the tick feeds, the more time there is for the disease to pass through the skin barrier. To leach through into your fluids. The microbes. The pathogens.

Only you have to do it right. If you're heavy-handed, you could crush it and then it releases even more microbes, all at once. Or the tick breaks away, but the mouthparts get left inside your skin and you've got a prime site for infection.

Even if we are resistant, we could do without having to fight off infections. And what if we're not? What if Silvan was right and the disease has mutated on past the resistance we have? Bear's only six. The youngest kids got it worst, their immune systems weren't developed enough.

"Ticks are harmless to us, aren't they, Ju? Benign? Safe?" Bear says, still playing our game, even though his voice is breaking with fear.

"Yes, but we still need to get it off."

My fingers are fat and numb as I wield the metal tweezers, trying to get the right angle as close as I can to Bear's skin, under the body of the tick and its floundering legs. Then I squeeze and pull. Slow, steady, straight up. I can feel the insect resisting, clinging on, its pincer mouth buried inside him.