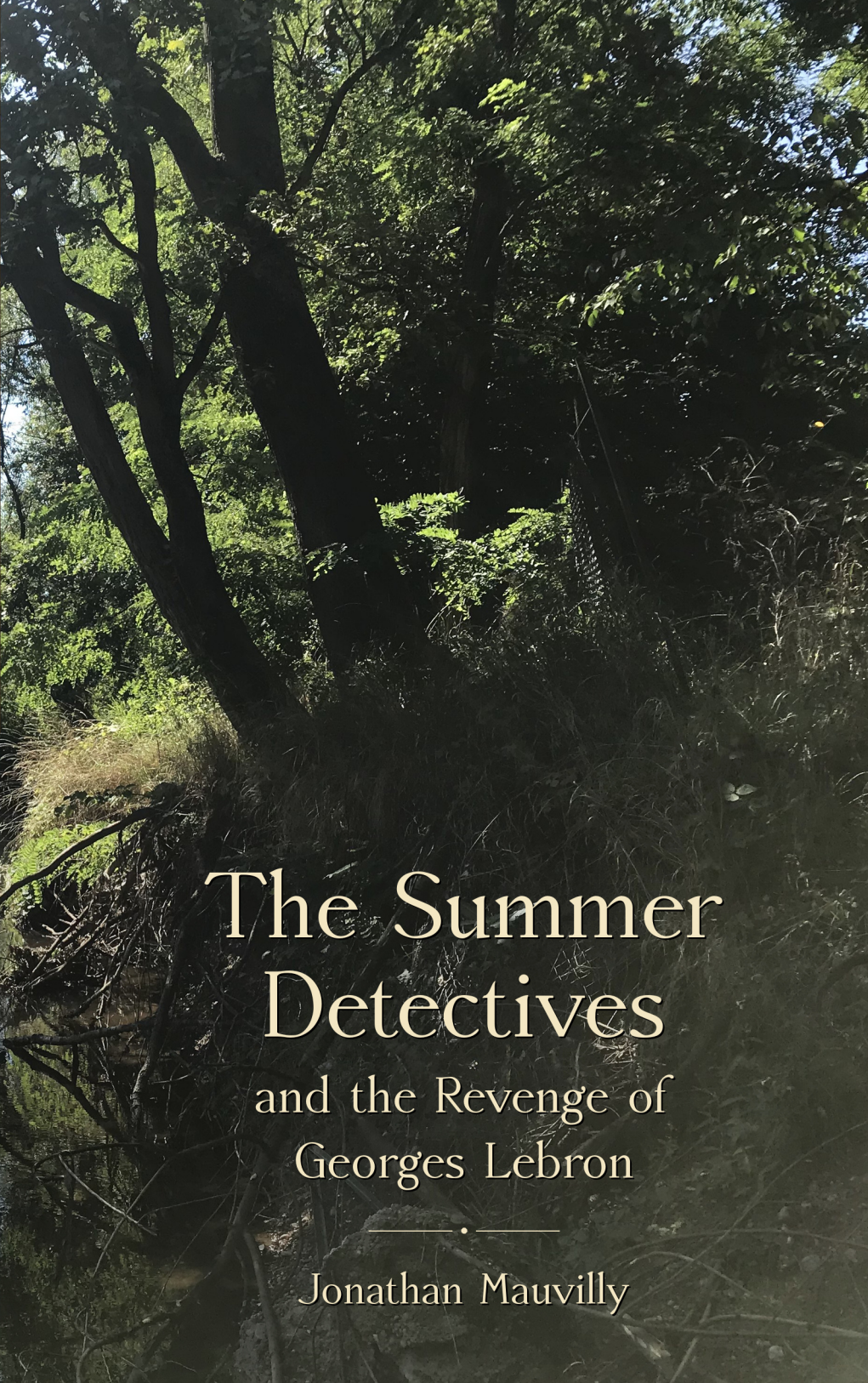


A photograph of a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the thick canopy of green leaves, creating a dappled light effect. Several large, dark tree trunks are visible, leaning at various angles. The ground is covered in a thick layer of fallen branches, twigs, and low-lying vegetation. The overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat mysterious.

The Summer Detectives

and the Revenge of
Georges Lebron

Jonathan Mauvilly

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Prologue: 30 years ago

Her daughter was still sleeping.

That was unusual, though not unheard of.

Normally, the girl was the one who woke her mother.

But this morning, she was still asleep.

A pale morning light streamed through the still-open window.

The night had been hot. Her daughter must have opened it.

The mother walked over to it and looked outside.

Beyond the mountains, a blue and yellow sky announced the beginning of a new day.

She turned back towards the bed.

Fondly, she looked down at her child.

The morning light seemed to make her daughter look even paler than usual despite the faint smile on her face.

Or was it simply the morning sun?

Slowly, she approached the bed.

The mother frowned. A recent newspaper photograph flashed before her eyes.

A photograph... Another girl in a bed...

In a few quick steps, she reached the bed and gently shook her daughter.

She didn't wake.

The mother touched her face.

Beneath the strands of blonde hair, her skin was cold.

Icy cold.

And the smile on her lips was the smile of someone who
would never wake again.

A scream echoed through the house.

Only then did the mother realise it was her own.

Outside, a bird flew away.

Chapter 1: Arrival

Joe was late.

Of course he was.

Joe was always late.

Oliver looked up at the sky in the fading late-afternoon light. His gaze followed a bird that was circling the grassy parking area. Then his eyes drifted once more to the clearing between the trees, where his best friend would – well, should – arrive at any moment.

Oliver kicked away a stone with his shoe.

Why was Joe always late?

Next to him, the CEAR compound still buzzed with activity. Beyond the open gate, marked by a wooden sign reading CEAR – Centre for Experimental Archaeological Research, about two dozen people were working on the new granary.

The structure already stood on four sturdy pillars between the two much larger East and West longhouses, also built in the Neolithic style.

His father, Simon, and the camp director, Walter, were studying a set of drawings, talking animatedly about the next stage of the construction.

Thomas and Rick, two local workers from the nearby village, were sitting high on the framework, securing the crossbeam to the supporting logs with rope.

All the work was done according to the most recent archaeological research. The buildings were reconstructed without concrete, metal beams or even nails. Instead, they used only wood, clay, straw, branches, rope and manual tools, just as people had done 4,000 years ago.

A little farther away, beneath the trees, his mother, Verena, and Annette, Walter's wife, were already setting the tables for dinner.

Excited shouts made Oliver turn his head towards the river that flowed past the compound.

Down on the wide, stony riverbed, Brody and Theseus, Oliver's younger brother, were shouting happily as fish found their way through the maze of little channels and into the basins they had built.

Oliver smiled fondly at the two boys, thinking back to his own adventures by the river only a few years earlier.

The place felt familiar. He knew every smell: the scent of the wet river stones, the earthy smell of the forest after the day's warmth, and the ever-present aroma of the Bolognese sauce that would accompany the camp's traditional evening spaghetti.

He loved the sound of the river flowing gently past the little world of CEAR, the warm light, and the endless shades of green in the surrounding vegetation.

Here, he felt at peace.

Almost.

Because Joe was overdue.

Oliver turned once more towards the forest path.

This time, he heard the black sedan before he saw it.

Slowly, the car pulled into the parking area. Parked beside the CEAR minibus and two motorbikes, it looked strangely out of place.

Joe was finally here.

At first, the doors of the black sedan remained closed.

Then, almost hesitantly, the rear door opened.

A tentative hand appeared, gripping the door frame before pulling its owner to his feet. Joe's tuft of blond hair emerged next, and he looked around curiously, almost sceptically, before finally spotting Oliver and making his way towards him.

He raised his hands in an interrogative gesture and shouted, "What the hell is that smell?"

Like the car he had just stepped out of, Joe looked oddly out of place in his khaki summer suit, complete with a tie.

“Believe it or not, I smelled YOUR expensive cologne long before I saw you arrive,” Oliver said, smiling.

They shook hands warmly before clapping each other on the shoulder.

The corner of Joe’s mouth twitched, just as it always did whenever he was about to voice his discomfort.

“Man, this place is an even bigger hellhole than the one you call home the rest of the year.”

He looked around disapprovingly.

“Wait until you see your five-star tent,” Oliver replied with a grin.

Finally, the driver’s door of the sedan opened, and Fred, Joe’s family’s butler, stepped out. He looked around as though he had just emerged into a radioactive wasteland.

“Oh, I see,” Oliver said to Joe, examining his friend’s attire. “You dressed appropriately for the occasion.”

Joe chuckled.

“Living in a tent is absolutely no reason not to maintain a certain level of style.” He eyed his friend’s jeans and his white shirt stained with mud. “At least one of us will be properly dressed for the occasion.”

“And I’m afraid it won’t be you,” Oliver replied dryly. He looked back to the black sedan.

Fred had already opened the boot.

One enormous suitcase emerged.

Then a second.

Then a third.

Finally, Fred lifted out a portable generator, followed by a jerry can.

“Master Sanders,” Fred addressed Joe. “Would you like me to take your luggage to your room?”

Joe dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand.

“No, Fred, that’s all right. Old Ol here will take over from here, won’t you?”

Fred looked visibly relieved. He closed the boot and walked back to the driver’s door, his black tailcoat flapping behind him.

“Very well then, Master Sanders. Take good care.”

He made a little bow and gave Oliver the briefest of nods before climbing into the driver’s seat.

“Mr. Arkan,” he said politely. He threw one last almost horrified glance back at them, drew the heavy car door shut and started the engine. The car pulled slowly backwards.

“Goodbye, Fred,” Joe called. “And see you in hell, you bootlicker,” he added.

But the large sedan was already disappearing down the forest track, windows rolled up.

“It must be nice,” Oliver said. “Having someone like Fred drive you around all the time.”

The corner of Joe’s mouth twitched again.

“No,” he said. “It gets really annoying fast, believe me.”

Oliver grinned.

“Faster than Ol’ Bertha?”

“Don’t even get me started on her,” Joe replied. “And don’t even mention the three jerks I have to call my older brothers.”

“I won’t mention them, don’t worry. But I’m sure you’ll miss every one of them before you go to bed tonight,”

Oliver said.

Joe snorted.

“As if. So, shall we head over to the rathole we’ll be calling home from now on?”

“Yes,” said Oliver. “Let’s go.”

He picked up two of the large suitcases. Somehow, he also managed to balance the portable generator under one arm and the jerry can under the other, while Joe took the smallest suitcase and the overnight bag.

Together, they started walking into the compound, past the handmade wooden sign that spelled CEAR in rather clumsy cut-out letters.

“I’m glad you’re finally here,” Oliver said. “It was starting to get really boring.”

Abruptly, they had to stop as two workers carried a heavy log across their path towards the granary, on which people were still working in the late afternoon heat.

Once the way was clear, they continued towards the row of tents where everyone slept.

“Well,” Joe said, “let this party get started, then.”

“Here we are,” Oliver said. “Easy to remember. Sixth tent, second row.”

Joe looked at the red tent.

“Hmm. Well, good news,” he said. “It’s bigger than I expected. Still... basic, but bigger basic.”

“I actually asked for one of the larger ones,” Oliver said.

“It’s a family tent. Four people can sleep in it and you can even stand in it.”

“Magnificent,” Joe said. “That still leaves room for me, my ego, and the ladies.”

“Speaking of which, where’s the ladies’ tent?”

Oliver pointed to the small green tent at the end of the row.

“It’s the one right next to ours.”

Joe clapped his hands.

“That is even better!” he exclaimed. “And theirs is really, really tiny, so they can come over to ours instead. Tent size matters, don’t believe what they say.”

At that moment, the zipper of the little green tent slid open, and a river of black hair appeared, framing two piercing blue eyes.

The girl walked past the two boys without so much as a glance and headed towards the dining area.

“Ooh,” said Joe. “The temperature just dropped by forty degrees. Who’s that?”

He paused and looked at Oliver’s face.

“Oh, wait. That was her, wasn’t it?”

Oliver pushed the suitcases into the tent without a word, and Joe followed him inside.

“Your side,” Oliver said, pointing to one of the green sleeping mats. “Mine.”

He pointed to the opposite side, where his blue sleeping bag was already laid out, alongside a neatly folded stack of clothes and a few other belongings.

“Oh, great,” said Joe.

He examined the thin green foam mattress and then shook his head.

“Yeah. I’m not sleeping on that. I brought my inflatable mattress. Assuming Bertha packed it as I instructed,” Joe said as he began unpacking his things.

“But don’t try to change the subject.”

He looked at Oliver with a grin.

“What about... her?” He winked at Oliver, who still didn’t answer.

“Didn’t you tell me there’d be lots of girls here?” Joe asked, finally pulling the dark green inflatable mattress out of his luggage.

“How the hell am I supposed to inflate this?” he added.

“I guess that’s what the generator’s for,” Oliver said, a slight smile on his lips.

“Right,” Joe replied, walking over to the machine. He started fumbling with it.

“So, the girls?” he asked. “Ouch!” he exclaimed and shook his hand.

“Well,” Oliver said. “There used to be quite a few of them. For a couple of years, anyway. This year, the Shennan twins couldn’t come because they’re away at a Scout camp. And for some reason, my father and Walter couldn’t find enough students who wanted to join us. They even had to hire a few local workers to help. I think there were some

budget problems this year. So they decided to do more with less, I guess.”

Oliver glanced over at what Joe was doing.

“Why won’t you work, you stupid thing?” Joe muttered, giving the generator a frustrated kick. “I’m pressing the bloody button and it just won’t turn on.”

“Joe,” Oliver said teasingly, “I think you’ve found the right button. But maybe you should try putting some fuel in it first.”

“Right,” Joe said, picking up the jerry can to fill the generator.

Oliver quickly raised a hand.

“No, Joe. If you pour fuel in that thing inside the tent and start it, we’ll both be dead before dinner.”

“All right,” Joe said.

He pushed the generator aside.

“Well, that’s bad news about the girls,” said Joe, standing back and looking around. “But hey, there are still two chicks here, if I remember – and the two of us.

Mathematically, that’s still a pretty acceptable ratio.” He grinned. “Who needs extras, anyway? They probably couldn’t handle us.”

He paused.

“Or at least me.”

“One of those “chicks” is my sister, Joe,” Oliver said.

“This is only a problem for you. Not for me.” Joe shrugged. “There’s still the other one for you.”

He sat down on the ground and started inflating the mattress by blowing into it.

“Right,” he said between breaths. He blew a few more times.

“So, anyway...” he said, pausing for another breath. “Tell me about the other girl. The one we just saw. Sandra, was it?”

“Leandra.”

“Oh,” Joe said, taking another deep breath before blowing more air into the mattress.

“It’s her, isn’t it? That was her.” He looked up at Oliver with a grin. “Your famous summer crush.”

Oliver hesitated.

“No... I don’t think she is.”

“Though you wouldn’t mind if she were. Huh?” commented Joe.

Oliver was quiet for a moment.

“It’s complicated. It has been for years.”

He searched for the right words.

“How can I put it? She’s... a bit peculiar.”

Joe gave the inflatable mattress one final puff of air before giving up.

It was still almost completely flat.

He tossed it into the corner of the tent and sat down on his sleeping mat instead, unrolling his sleeping bag with a sigh.

“So let me get this straight,” he said, looking at Oliver.

“You’re telling me that the only other girl here – apart from your own sister, of course – has special needs?”

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” Oliver replied. “Not at all, actually. She’s brilliant.”

He went to pick up the almost completely flat mattress from where Joe had thrown it and started blowing air into it himself.

“But what is it?” Joe asked. “She already has a boyfriend, doesn’t she? We don’t care. He’s not here... or is he?”

Oliver blew another breath into the mattress, which was beginning to fill up surprisingly quickly.

“That’s not it. There’s only her older brother, Josh. And I don’t think they get along very well.”

Joe lay back on his sleeping mat, only to sit upright again immediately. It was obviously far too uncomfortable.

“So what’s the matter?” he asked. “Does she like... girls?”

He frowned.

“Because if she does, what are the odds of that? And if she says she does, I’m pretty sure she’s only saying it to keep us boys away.”

Oliver blew another breath into the mattress.

“No. I’d say she comes over as... not exactly... nice.”

He hesitated.

“And I’m pretty sure she bites. She seems to dislike everyone and everything.”

He shrugged.

“At least, that’s what most people think. They say her mother sends her and her brother from one place like this to another all summer so she doesn’t have to look after them.”

Oliver looked at Joe.

“You’d probably be better off doing what everyone else around here does.”

He gave the mattress another puff of air.

“And just don’t pay too much attention to her... or to anything she says.”

A loud metallic clang drifted across the camp from the dining area.

“Ooh, come on,” Oliver said. “That means dinner. We’ll finish unpacking later.”

Joe patted the now fully inflated mattress.

“And thanks for filling this up. I definitely wasn’t going to sleep on the ground.”

“I knew that. But maybe you should try it sometime,”

Oliver replied with a grin.

“Be nice, and I might even let you share one side of my king-size mattress.”

Joe stood up and reached for the tent flap.

“Come on. Let’s go meet your lovely sister Angelina.”

He looked back at Oliver.

“And your love interest.”

Chapter 2: Dinner

Outside their tent, they made their way towards the dining area, where most of the camp had already gathered.

“I have to warn you. Conversations with most of the people here are like trying to dive in the Red Sea. No matter how hard you try to go deeper, you just keep floating back to the surface,” Oliver said.

“And so salty, right?” Joe interjected. “You waited for my pepper to spice things up. Wise move, brother.”

“But they are all very nice. Well, most of them are.” Oliver looked searchingly at the people sitting at the tables.

“Why did you bring the king-size mattress?” Oliver asked. Joe waved the question away.

“Ah, you never know who might want to share it with you.” He gave Oliver a wink. “Or how many.”

Oliver shrugged.

“I’ve known you almost my whole life, and you’ve never had anyone to share even an inch of your bed.”

“Nobody you know about,” Joe replied.

“Hmm. I know about ol’ Bertha, but I’m not sure she counts.”

Joe snorted and punched his friend in the shoulder.

When they reached the junction leading to the dining area, Oliver unexpectedly turned away from the tables.

“Just a moment,” he said and led Joe back through the gate towards the river outside the compound on the other side of the parking area.

“It looked like dinner was that way,” Joe reminded him.

“No kidding,” Oliver replied, raising his voice.

“Theseus! Brody! Dinner!”

“We’re coming!” his little brother shouted back from the broad, stony riverbed, where the two boys were still bent over the channels of sand and stones that guided fish into little pools of their own making.

“No, you’re not, I can see you,” Oliver called back. “Get your butts up here. Now! It’s pasta night!”

Reluctantly, the two boys abandoned their improvised fish traps.

As Theseus and Brody were scrambling up the hill towards them, Joe asked, “We passed a building on the way here. Concrete, fenced, creepy looking. What was it?”

He made a gesture towards the forest path.

“The old prison,” said Oliver. “People from around here say it’s haunted. We’re not allowed to go there.”

The two boys joined the teenagers. Theseus recognised Joe immediately and shouted, “Joe, you’re here!”

The six-year-old sprang into Joe’s arms and hugged him.

“There is my favourite Spartan.” He ruffled Theseus’s hair.

“Theseus was technically Athenian,” remarked Oliver matter-of-factly.

“Can I sit with you at the table tonight?” begged Theseus.

“I think not. We can’t have my beautiful suit getting all wet and dirty because of you. Besides, me and your brother have to talk.”

“Okay,” mumbled Theseus, visibly disappointed. He looked up hopefully.

“Later?”

“Later.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. Now off you go.”

Theseus and Brody ran in front of them back through the gate towards the tables.

“I thought Theseus was Greek,” said Joe.

“Yes. But not Spartan.”

“The Spartans were Greeks, were they not?”

“Yes.”

“That’s exactly what I said, then.”

“Forget it,” Oliver said, grinning.

The two of them arrived at the three long dinner tables. Almost everyone was already seated.

Oliver’s parents Simon and Verena, still wearing their dusty work clothes, were making their way around the

tables with large pans. They were serving generous portions of spaghetti Bolognese to everyone. Big bowls of fresh green salad were already waiting in the middle of the tables.

Oliver raised his voice.

“Everyone, this is my best friend, Joe.”

A chorus of friendly greetings, smiles and welcoming nods came back their way.

As if by magic, two places opened up between Rick and Thomas. Simon immediately set two plates of spaghetti on the table. Joe was already sitting down, but Oliver went to help his mother with the last few plates filled with steaming pasta.

“Hi, Joe. Nice to see you again,” said Simon when Joe had sat down. “We’re glad you could make it this year.”

“Indeed we are,” Verena added with a smile. “Oliver most of all.”

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Arkan. I’m delighted to be here,” Joe replied in his most polished business tone.

Oliver sat down beside his friend.

Then a third voice spoke, sending a chill down Oliver’s spine.

“Oh, and you must be the much-anticipated fiancé, then. What an exquisite pleasure to finally meet you.”

Oliver and Joe looked across the table.

Leandra.

“Since when have you and young Oliver been engaged?”

Across the table, Angelina snorted, and a few others chuckled.

Oliver felt his face grow warm.

Joe, however, remained perfectly composed.

The conversations around the tables noticeably quieted.

“Actually,” Joe said, “Oliver here is the perfect guy to be engaged to, I assure you.”

“What are you doing?” Oliver whispered to Joe.

“Being your wingman,” Joe replied calmly in a low voice.

“Oh,” said Leandra. “How adorable you guys are. So you’re speaking from experience, then?”

“No,” said Joe. “But it could be your experience.”

“Stop,” Oliver whispered more urgently to his friend.

Leandra looked at Joe.

“Thanks. That’s a very generous offer. But I’ll definitely pass.” She tilted her head slightly. “I don’t do boring.”

A faint smile crossed her face.

“Besides, I wouldn’t want to steal him from you and break up your engagement after all the trouble you two have obviously been through.”

“Oh, you can have him,” Joe said. “Free of charge. I’m in a generous mood today.”

He winked.

“Or we could, like, share.”

Simon cleared his throat.

“All right, I think that’s quite enough nonsense, kids. More corn, Leandra?”

“And please, have some more salad, Joe,” Verena added, a touch hastily.

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Arkan. Gladly,” Joe answered.

He sent a smug smile over to Leandra, who stared furiously back.

“If looks could kill,” said Joe and turned towards Oliver, who looked a little annoyed too.

“If looks could kill, you’d be dead for a long time,” Oliver mumbled and ate a mouthful of pasta.

“And already resurrected,” said Joe.

By the time dinner was over, the people around the tables had begun to scatter back towards their tents. Darkness was slowly falling over the compound.

Oliver and Joe soon found themselves inside their tent again, lit by the warm glow of the lantern.

Oliver was busy putting Joe's belongings in order. Joe, meanwhile, lay on his back on the inflatable mattress, staring at the tent ceiling.

"I forgot how terrible you were at this," Oliver said as he folded one of Joe's T-shirts.

"Terrible at what?" Joe replied. "I've already made you irresistible to her. She'll be in your arms in no time."

"Maybe I don't want her in my arms," Oliver said, stacking another of Joe's T-shirts. "She apparently doesn't want to be there."

Joe picked up a tennis ball Fred had packed, presumably in case there happened to be a tennis court nearby, and began tossing it towards the tent ceiling, catching it each time it fell back down.

"She's a piece of work. And a feisty one, I must say. But considering how little choice there is around here, beggars can't be choosers. Still, she's an excellent pick, I admit."

"*I don't do boring*," Joe said in exaggerated imitation of Leandra's voice. "That was a good one. You'll never be bored again, that's for sure."

"You're so stupid," Oliver said, though a slight grin appeared on his face.

“But you missed me,” Joe said. “And you’re overjoyed that I’m here.”

He tossed the tennis ball into the air again but had to roll onto one side to catch it when the throw went a little wide.

“I truly am,” Oliver admitted. “But you’re still terrible with people. Especially women. And especially this one.”

Joe turned his head towards Oliver.

“So you do like her.”

He caught the ball once more without looking at it.

“Seriously, you should just go talk to her.”

“She doesn’t even like me. And I’m not sure I even like her,” Oliver said quietly.

Joe frowned.

“Note to self.”

He tossed the tennis ball into the air again.

“Oliver, right here, is confused by this girl, Leandra, and he doesn’t understand her.”

He caught the ball cleanly.

“Which means he’s attracted to her and already in love.”

He grinned.

“We’re off to a good start, I’d say.”

“You’re such an idiot sometimes,” Oliver said, tossing one of Joe’s T-shirts at him.

“Well then,” Joe said, throwing back the T-shirt. “I have another question for you.”

He looked over at his friend.

“What does your sister like? You know, to win her over. Romantic candlelit dinners? Gifts? Jewellery? Meeting all the celebrities I know?”

“I’m not telling you anything about her,” Oliver replied.

“Oh, you’re afraid I might succeed in winning her over?”

Joe asked.

“With your talent for understanding women,” Oliver replied, “I’m not worried at all.”

“I’m a ladies’ magnet,” Joe said mischievously. “They just can’t resist me. Just ask my fans.”

“Some magnets attract,” Oliver said, folding another pair of Joe’s jeans. “Others just push everything away. I’m pretty sure you’re the second kind.”

“Ha!” Joe laughed. “But seriously, what are we even going to do out here in the middle of nowhere? My phone’s already dead.”

“Well,” Oliver said, finally returning to his mattress and sitting down, resting his folded arms on his knees. “There isn’t any electricity around here.”

“No worries,” Joe said. “As you’ve seen, I brought my generator. I can charge my phone.”

“You mean the generator you haven’t managed to start yet?” Oliver replied. “Besides, there’s no phone reception here anyway. So there isn’t much you can do with it around here.”

He smiled.

“Not even call the police. Nor Fred. Nor ol’ Bertha. That will be hard.”

“Jesus,” Joe exclaimed. “Seriously, I hope we find at least one case we can solve.”

“I hope so too,” Oliver replied. “But if we do get bored, we can always help my parents.”

“Doing what?”

“Over the past few years, they’ve finished the East Hut and the West Hut. They’re constructing a new building on pillars between the two big longhouses. It’s a granary. They’ve been at it all week.”

“And do what with your parents? Work?” Joe said. “No, thank you very much. It’s the holidays, after all. We’re not supposed to work.”

He shook his head.

“The people who are going to read about our adventures don’t want to see us working. Not ordinary work, anyway.” He threw the ball up so it touched the tent ceiling fabric over him.

“I’ll never understand your parents. They finally get a break from work, and all they do is... more work. Different work, sure. But still: work.”

Oliver folded one last pair of jeans and stepped away from the suitcases. He then piled Joe’s luggage up in a corner where it would not be in the way.

Somewhere outside, Walter’s voice drifted across the camp in song.

“Oh,” Oliver said. “I know what we can do now. They’ve started the campfire. We can go join them, if you want. It’s just a bit... happy-clappy.”

Joe jumped to his feet.

“Wonderful. Let’s work on our lady situation.”

“You might want to put on some insect repellent,” Oliver said as he got to his feet as well, handing Joe the spray can.

“We’re right next to the river, and there are quite a few mosquitoes around.”

Joe pulled off the cap and took a cautious sniff.

His face twisted in disgust.

He almost dropped the can.

“Whoa, that stinks,” Joe said. “But I guess it beats the bites.”

He sprayed himself.

“You shouldn’t put any on, Oliver, if you ask me.”

“Why?” Oliver asked.

Joe grinned.

“You don’t want to repel your blue-eyed ladybug as well.”

Oliver laughed.

“Apparently I manage that without the spray.”

He unzipped the tent and stepped out into the warm evening air.

Chapter 3: Campfire

Outside, an orchestra of crickets welcomed them.

In the middle of a wide field a little way beyond the tents and the reconstructed Neolithic houses, a large campfire burned brightly, its flames licking at the star-filled sky.

As Oliver and Joe approached, the faces around the fire gradually emerged from the darkness.

Walter sat at the end of a log, gently strumming his guitar.

He was singing an old song about forests and trees called *The Forest Is Growing*, a melody that sounded as though it had drifted from another age and another place.

The others sat around the fire on rough log benches and tree trunks. Some listened quietly, others chatted among themselves. Most of the men nursed bottles of beer, while many of the women cradled mugs of tea or coffee.

Oliver and Joe slipped into two empty places and took in the scene. Annette came over and handed the two of them mugs of hot cocoa.

A sudden cry broke the calm.

One of Theseus's marshmallows, which he was roasting with Brody over the fire, had burst into flames.

"I told you it would," Brody said smugly.

Barely a second later, he hastily pulled his own marshmallow out of the fire, blowing at it. It had caught fire too.

Soon the chorus began, and many of the people around the fire joined Walter in song.

Joe looked around with raised eyebrows, his face a mixture of amusement and uncertainty.

Oliver, meanwhile, sang along as if he had done so a hundred times before.

When the chorus ended and Walter began another verse, the voices around the fire gradually faded until only his remained.

“Grandpa has a good singing voice,” Joe commented.

“Walter,” said Oliver simply.

“This is actually quite nice,” Joe said, looking around.

“Oh?” Oliver replied with a grin. “And here I was thinking you’d find it all a bit too... happy-clappy.”

“Are you kidding?” Joe said. “A campfire, loud people, beer, marshmallows, and nobody telling me when to go to bed. What more could I ask for?”

He picked up a stick from the ground, grabbed a marshmallow from the bag lying at his feet, got up and held it over the fire.

At that moment, another figure emerged from the shadows.

Paying no attention to anyone, Leandra sat down on the end of an empty log, as far away from everyone else as she could manage. She opened a book, rested it on her knee, and began carving a piece of wood with her knife while reading at the same time.

When the next chorus began, she paid no attention to it. She didn't sing a single word.

In the meantime, Joe had wandered closer to Brody and Theseus, happily roasting and eating marshmallows with the two boys like there was no tomorrow. Each time Joe's marshmallow caught fire, the two boys laughed louder and louder at Joe's exaggerated outrage. Adults all around watched this scene with amused looks.

Oliver, meanwhile, quietly observed Leandra from across the fire.

When the song finally ended, Walter started another one, a lesser-known tune that fewer people joined in with. As a result, the conversations around the campfire gradually grew louder.

Joe's marshmallow caught fire and drew yet another wave of happy cheers from the two boys next to him. Theseus burst out laughing so hard he fell backwards on the ground. With a contented look, Joe returned to Oliver's side.

“There she is,” he said, pointing discreetly towards Leandra. “The angel of darkness has left her hellish den to perform her blood ritual.”

He clapped Oliver’s shoulder and pointed a finger at the girl.

“Target spotted.”

He paused for effect.

“New objective.”

Another pause.

“Close in on target.”

He looked at Oliver with a grin.

“Permission granted.”

One last dramatic pause.

“Fire at will.”

“And say what?” Oliver replied, still unable to take his eyes off Leandra. “I don’t even know what to say to her. We’ve been coming here for years now, and we have absolutely nothing in common.”

“Are you kidding me?” Joe said. “You’re both bored nearly to death by all this tralala. Now, go over there. Talk to her. Compliment her... I don’t know what. Ask her what she’s doing, and so on. It’s not that hard.”

Oliver reluctantly got to his feet and walked over to Leandra.

He tried to look confident as he approached, but he was fairly sure he only looked awkward.

Finding space next to her wasn't difficult. The nearest person was several metres away, leaving the two of them a little apart from everyone else.

"Hi," he said.

"Trouble in paradise with your fiancée?" Leandra asked, without looking up from her book or pausing her carving.

"Shall I send Puck over with the love potion? Or transform him into an ass?"

A faint smile flickered across her face.

"On second thoughts, he already is one, isn't he?"

"Huh... um, no. Why? I guess sometimes he is. An ass, I mean. Not my fiancée. Well... okay. Nice evening, huh?"

Leandra ignored him.

Meanwhile, Joe was back at the fire, where another of his marshmallows had burst into flames, once again drawing loud laughter from Theseus and Brody.

Judging by the theatrical way Joe was roasting the treats and complaining loudly, Oliver knew he was doing it on purpose. But despite the children's laughter echoing across the campfire, Oliver felt rather pathetic.

He tried again.

“So... what are you doing? I didn’t know you were that good with a knife. Where did you – “

“Listen.”

Leandra put her knife down and, for the first time, looked up at him.

“Listen, you pathetic excuse of a human being. Either you fuck off and leave me the hell alone...”

She held his gaze.

“...or stay and shut up.”

Oliver hesitated. He was about to get up, but then glanced at Leandra. She had resumed her routine of reading while carving her piece of wood and seemed perfectly content to be left alone.

So he stayed.

Quietly.

As Walter finished the song, Brody and Theseus were called to bed by their respective mothers. Amid loud protests, they were herded towards their tents, each stuffing one last unburned marshmallow into his mouth before disappearing into the darkness.

Next to the fire, Joe finished his final marshmallow, perfectly roasted and unburned, before returning to his place on the log.

Just then, Walter began yet another song, and Simon came over and sat down beside Joe.

“Hi, Joe. Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m very good, Mr. Arkan. Having fun with the boys, as you saw.”

Simon smiled.

“Simon, Joe. Call me Simon, please,” he said in a warm tone. “It was very kind of you to keep them entertained.”

He gazed into the fire and looked back at Joe.

“I still hope you’re not feeling homesick.”

“Are you kidding?” exclaimed Joe. “This place is great!”

Simon smiled.

“Still, if you need anything, you only have to ask.”

“Thank you, Simon. I appreciate that.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Simon made a small gesture around the campfire.

“Have you met everyone yet?”

“I’m not sure I have,” Joe admitted.

“Well, I don’t want to bore you. You already know our family, of course. And you’ve met Leandra, though perhaps not her brother, Josh. They’ve both been coming here every year since the project began more than ten years ago.”

Simon’s gaze wandered over the people around the fire.

“And you’ve already met Brody. He’s here with his parents Selina and Ryan this year, and every summer he and Theseus disappear together the moment breakfast is over.”

“Then there are Walter and his wife, Annette.”

Walter was still singing and his elderly wife Annette was sitting next to him, listening and watching with a happy smile.

“I suppose you’ve worked that one out already. Walter founded CEAR and now co-directs it with me.”

Simon took a breath.

“Over there are William and Helene Sieber. Lovely couple. Hard workers. And the two next to them are Rick and Thomas. They’re locals we’ve hired because we’re a bit short on manpower this year. Quite a few of the regulars couldn’t make it.”

“And then there are another dozen people, of course. But I’ll leave it at that for now.”

Simon smiled.

“We’re really just one big family here. Sooner or later, you’ll get to know everyone.”

After a while of listening to another of Walter’s songs, Simon spoke again. “I don’t think it’ll be too boring for you. I know it’s quite a change from what you’re probably used to. But when we invited you, we hoped Oliver might

be a little less lonely than he has been the past few summers.”

He looked back at his son, silently sitting next to Leandra.

“He’s explored every nook and cranny of this place.”

Simon smiled.

“And he doesn’t have many friends.”

Joe smiled.

“He only needs one anyway.”

He tapped a finger on his chest.

“And that’s me.”

Simon laughed lightly.

“That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

Then they sat in silence for a while, listening to Walter’s singing drifting across the campfire.

“So, Mr. Arkan... Simon,” Joe said, “is there anything – apart from building huts, of course, disrespect intended – that might require the services of two fine gentlemen? No murders, kidnappings, or other crimes taking place here at CEAR?”

“For God’s sake, no,” Simon exclaimed with a smile. “I’m afraid not.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Well... now that I think of it, there is one rather odd thing.”

His eyes became thoughtful.

“For the past two nights, small amounts of food have been disappearing from the West Hut. Nothing essential. Just snacks, bread, meat... little things like that.”

He frowned.

“At first I thought it had to be an animal.” He smiled faintly. “Until a few beer bottles disappeared as well. And I don’t think raccoons have developed a taste for alcohol just yet.”

Joe smiled.

“Interesting. I think we’ll look into it tomorrow morning. Even if nothing else goes missing tonight. After all, at the moment I’m the only person who’s one hundred percent innocent.”

“It’s really no big deal,” Simon replied. “But thank you. It might fit your detective adventures and keep you two guys occupied for a while.”

He smiled.

“And if you feel like doing some honest work instead, you’re welcome to come and help us with the granary anytime.”

At that moment, Walter’s last song came to an end, and the camp director put his guitar aside.

“Did I hear detectives?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

Thomas came over and joined Joe and Simon.

“Yes,” Simon replied with a smile. “My son and his friend Joe here like solving little mysteries back home in their spare time and helping people along the way.”

“Well,” Joe said, “it may sound like a game to you, but we did catch a thief this year who stole a couple thousand bucks.”

“Not bad,” Thomas said, raising his eyebrows. “But I don’t suppose you’ve ever caught an escaped murderer, have you?”

“No, not yet,” Joe admitted with a grin. “We live in a small town. Why?”

“Well,” said Thomas, getting to his feet. He spoke like someone starting to tell a story he had told a hundred times before – and still enjoyed telling.

“There is a story that most people in the county have forgotten. But we locals still remember it. The disappearance of Georges Lebron, the infamous murderer of little girls.”

He looked around the campfire.

“They called him the Sandman Killer.”

Chapter 4: The Tale of Georges Lebron

The conversations around the campfire died away as Thomas began his storytelling in a matter-of-fact yet engaging tone. Even Leandra had stopped carving her stick and reading her book. Her eyes were now fixed on Thomas.

He took a deep breath and looked around, visibly enjoying the moment.

“Georges Lebron was a murderer convicted of killing more than a dozen little girls in their beds about thirty years ago.”

He looked around.

“For him, killing was an art, and the girls were his works of art. He called his work ‘the Eternal Sleep.’ What he’d do was sneak into family homes at night, inject the girls with poison as they lay in their beds, and then, once they were dead, carefully position them so they looked as though they were peacefully asleep.”

A dramatic pause followed as Thomas let his words sink in.

Nobody spoke.

Everybody was listening.

“The next morning, their parents would try to wake their girls, only to realise that their daughters would never wake again.”

A deadly silence had descended on the people gathered around the fire. Even the crickets seemed to have paused their chirping.

“That’s why they called him the Sandman Killer. Because, like the Sandman, he brought sleep. Only his was eternal.”

Thomas shifted his position.

“His methods were meticulous. He never left a clue behind. He entered and left through the window, always took the syringes with him, wore gloves, and made his poison from ordinary household ingredients.”

He looked around to see whether his words had had the desired effect on his audience.

Everybody was staring at him.

Even Leandra hadn’t returned to her carving-and-reading routine, her eyes not leaving Thomas.

“The police ran around in circles and simply couldn’t lay their hands on him. Time and again he outsmarted them. They even tried setting traps for him, but Georges Lebron was far too clever to fall for any of them.”

As the pause grew longer, Joe finally spoke.

“So... what happened? Was he caught?”

Thomas gazed absent-mindedly into the fire.

“Yes. His luck ran out one evening as he was just about to inject his untraceable poison into a new victim – a girl named Michelle Flask... or something like that.”

Thomas shrugged.

“It was just bad luck, really. The girl woke up for no apparent reason at all and screamed her lungs out. As fate would have it, her father was in her room almost instantly, leaving Lebron no time to react. He knocked Georges Lebron unconscious with a baseball bat.”

He mimed the gesture.

“Lebron was arrested, convicted, sentenced to death, and incarcerated in the prison just over there, on the other side of the river, next to the cornfield.”

Another pause followed as Thomas stared into the fire, the flames illuminating only his eyes.

“Has the prison been shut down long?” Joe asked curiously.

It took Thomas a moment to answer.

“Oh yes. It’s in ruins now and completely empty. They never did tear it down. They just left it the way it is.”

Joe looked genuinely fascinated.

“Interesting.”

Thomas turned abruptly towards him.

“But the story doesn’t end there.”

Silence followed.

Nobody spoke.

When Thomas’s voice rang out again, it was more urgent.

“In his cell, Georges Lebron plotted for a few months.

Then, one night, he managed to set the entire prison on fire. In the chaos that followed, he escaped as the only prisoner.”

He made a gesture towards the river outside the compound in the dark.

“They say that he must have fled through the river, as they found no traces of him. Then he vanished. He was never found or seen again for thirty years.”

His eyes were unfocused for a moment, then he regained his composure.

“And every morning, people around here are still afraid to wake their little girls, fearing they may never wake again.”

An eerie silence settled over the camp, leaving only the crackling of the fire.

“He was really never found?” Joe asked, because it seemed that Thomas wasn’t going to continue on his own.

“No,” Thomas said, looking away. “Some people think that after his escape, Lebron fled to the other side of the world – South America, Thailand, somewhere like that. Others

believe he's still wandering these woods, waiting to resume his old work... waiting for the next little girl to put to sleep."

Next to Oliver, Leandra shivered.

"Some people claim they've seen him. There have been sightings, but no evidence of any kind has ever supported those claims. Others even say they sometimes still hear the lullaby he used to sing in prison."

"Oh yes," said Rick.

He reached for Walter's guitar. Walter passed it to him.

"I know this one. Everybody around here knows the song, actually. It has become something of an unofficial town hymn. Nobody is supposed to sing it, of course, but everyone knows at least part of it."

Rick awkwardly strummed a few chords, giving the performance an eerie quality, and began to sing.

Sleep, girl, sleep.

The world of dreams awaits.

*Your mother will soon weep
over your little angel's face.*

*Sleep, girl, sleep,
and never wake again.*

Sleep, girl, sleep.

*Lay still on your bed.
Never you shall wake,
because you now are dead.
Sleep, girl, sleep,
until I shall return.*

Rick put the guitar aside.

“There might be some more verses, but these are all I know.”

“There is at least one more about the fire, actually,” Thomas said. “I lived abroad for some years and only returned a few weeks ago, but even I still remember that song.”

Silence settled again over the campfire.

Everybody seemed lost in thought.

Joe smiled faintly.

Oliver glanced at Leandra, who was staring into the fire in front of her.

Then Verena broke the silence.

“That is horrifying and all, but I’m sure it’s only a good story to frighten children. There is absolutely nothing to worry about. I’m sure of it. And now, it’s bedtime anyway – for the teenagers, and probably everybody else.”

“Yes,” Thomas said reluctantly. “I have to pick up my fishing gear in town early tomorrow morning anyway. Good night, all!”

He turned and walked away, with Rick close behind him, who whistled the tune he had moments ago just performed. Slowly, the people around the campfire got to their feet, gathered their bottles, mugs, and other belongings. One after the other, they drifted back towards their tents, leaving the fire still burning brightly behind them.

Before long, only Leandra remained by the fire. Her knife, stick, and book were still in her hands. She sat perfectly still.

After a while, she yawned, got to her feet, and started walking back towards her tent, using the light of the knife to illuminate the ground.

Chapter 5: Investigations

The summer night air was still warm.

Even so, Leandra felt a shiver run down her spine as she walked back towards her tent.

Suddenly, a branch cracked somewhere in the darkness on her left.

She stopped and turned sharply.

Raising her knife, she swept its light across the trees.

There!

For the briefest instant, it seemed to have caught the silhouette of a man.

The beam had already passed him.

Leandra swung the beam of light back towards the spot where she thought she had seen him.

Nothing.

Only trees and shifting shadows.

She took a deep breath and shook her head dismissively.

Turning to continue towards her tent, she found herself staring straight into a white face.

She jumped back, almost screaming.

Only then did she recognise Angelina.

“What the hell are you doing?” Leandra exclaimed. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s only me,” said Angelina.

“You all right?” Angelina asked, a guilty look on her face.

“Yeah,” Leandra said as they started walking towards the tent again. “I just thought I saw someone. But it was nothing. Just shadows.”

“Okay then. Come on, let’s get some sleep,” said Angelina and turned towards their tent.

Leandra followed silently, looking back one last time at the forest.

Nobody was there.

Meanwhile, as the girls passed the boys’ tent, there was still a light inside, and the sound of voices drifted out.

Neither of the girls paid any attention to it.

“Fuck off... or shut up and stay. That is good news, my friend,” said Joe as he climbed into his sleeping bag and fell back onto his air mattress.

Oliver was still sitting on his own sleeping bag.

“What? Why?” he asked. “She called me a weirdo and a pathetic excuse for a human being.”

Joe pointed a finger at him.

“You, my friend, have just achieved another victory in conquering the lovely Lady Stonyheart.”

“But she told me to get lost!” Oliver exclaimed.

“But she gave you the option to stay as well! Don’t you see? She tolerates your presence, which means she enjoys it.”

“You really think so?”

“Listen. If she really couldn’t tolerate you, as you think, she would have just said, ‘Fuck off.’ Nothing more.”

“So?” Oliver asked.

“So nothing. But she gave you the option to stay if you wanted to.”

Joe grinned.

“And you did, you son of a...”

“But we didn’t even say anything. Not even good night,”

Oliver argued as he finally settled into his sleeping bag.

Joe’s grin widened.

“My friend, you spoke the language of the body – literally.

You showed her that you chose to stay... and that you like

her. You showed her that you can see right through her

little tough-girl act. Believe me, I know.”

“How would you know?” Oliver asked.

“My father always says that words are like mist and smoke,

but body language is like solid rock. When my father

closes a business deal, some clients reject his offer at first,

but they don’t leave the table. That tells him they’re still

interested in doing business and want to hear more of what he has to say.”

Joe shifted, making his mattress creak.

“Love isn’t all that different. You are the rock, my friend... and she’s still sitting at the table.”

“You’re talking bullcrap, Joe,” said Oliver.

Joe chuckled.

“You’ll see. And then I’ll have my usual ‘I told you so’ moment. I’m already looking forward to that one.”

He rubbed his hands and made his mattress creak once again.

“On another note... where was your sister tonight? I didn’t make any progress with her.”

“How should I know where Angelina goes?” Oliver replied. “She babysat us back in the day, remember? Not the other way around.”

Joe stared at the ceiling with a satisfied smile.

“Older women have always liked me. I think it’s my maturity.”

“Oh,” said Oliver with a grin. “Now I understand why ol’ Bertha likes you.”

Joe laughed.

“Well played, brother. Well played.”

Oliver reached for the lantern and switched it off.

Joe grunted after a few seconds in the dark.

“Man, I hope I can sleep. The racket those crickets are making outside is killing me.”

“You’ll get used to it,” said Oliver.

“I hope so,” Joe replied. “And I can still smell that freaking mosquito repellent all over me. Ugh.”

For a while, silence settled over the tent.

“And how creepy was that Sandman story?” Joe asked.

“Imagine if we found that guy Lebron. Biggest achievement in our career. Solving the mystery of the Sandman murderer.”

Oliver was quiet for a moment.

“Hmm,” he said then. “Thirty years later? He must be long gone by now. And it’s hard to tell how much of that story is history, how much is legend, and how much is just local folklore.”

“Yeah,” said Joe. “Still... there is some unfinished business there. Thomas enjoyed telling that tale. But Rick enjoyed singing that song a little too much for my taste.”

He lay silently for another moment.

“Imagine us catching him after all that time.”

Another brief silence.

“You know what? I’ll try to get some sleep now. Good night.”

“Night, Joe,” Oliver called back and closed his eyes.

Oliver was still asleep when the tent zipper was suddenly pulled open the next morning.

Joe stumbled over to him and shook him by the shoulder.

“Morning, sunshine!” he called merrily.

“Mmm...” Oliver groaned. “What do you want?”

“Come on,” said Joe, taking a step back. “Time to get up.

There’s a new problem that needs to be sorted out. We have a case to solve.”

Oliver rubbed away the last remnants of a restless sleep filled with Sandmen and murderers with blank faces, all of them chasing him and Leandra.

“A case!” said Joe, rubbing his hands together. “We do have a new case.”

“What?” murmured Oliver. “Who? What?”

“Come on, sleepyhead,” Joe said. “Because crime doesn’t sleep. First breakfast, and then on to the crime scene at once.”

Oliver groaned and turned onto his side, closing his eyes again.

Joe poked a finger in his back.

Oliver opened one eye.

“The sun isn’t even up yet.”

Then he closed it again.

“Oh yes, it is,” said Joe. “And crime has struck again during the night.”

There was a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

Oliver opened both eyes.

“What? It has?”

Joe grinned.

“I’m telling you. Someone took supplies again. Your father just told me. In secret. It is now the third time in a row.

Someone sneaked into the supply hut and helped himself.

It is our job to find out who did it. Nobody else can do it.”

“Okay,” groaned Oliver.

He felt more awake now and studied Joe.

“What has got into you? Normally, you never get up before the afternoon is halfway over.”

Oliver’s lips twitched.

Joe shrugged.

“I am sorry. It’s just impossible to sleep here with that chirpy cacophony. And man, do they turn on the lights early around here. It shone right through the tent and wouldn’t let me get back to sleep.”

“You mean... the sun?”

“Oh... that was what it was,” said Joe thoughtfully. “It woke me up. Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

Joe was already gone.

Smiling and shaking his head, Oliver swung his legs out of his sleeping bag and started getting dressed for the day, pulling on his jeans and a fresh white T-shirt.

After a quick, quiet breakfast of bread with chocolate spread, Joe and Oliver reconvened at the supply shed to meet Simon and examine the crime scene.

The small wooden shed, built according to a Neolithic blueprint, was packed with food, all of it neatly organised. Oliver could clearly see Annette’s hand – and mind – in the way the supplies had been arranged and extensively labelled on their respective shelves.

“Can you tell us what is missing?” asked Joe.

Simon frowned.

“Well, most of it isn’t essential, but still...” He checked the list on the notepad in his hand. “At least a dozen beers, some chocolate snacks, some bread and meat, and two bottles of white wine.”

Oliver looked around the shed.

“All of that this time?”

“No,” answered Simon. “That’s the total over the past three nights.”

“Are you sure?” Joe asked.

“Absolutely,” said Simon. “I counted the beers yesterday evening, because everyone who drinks one has to pay for it. Here is the list, and compared to the beers still here, there are indeed twelve bottles missing.”

Joe looked unusually thoughtful.

“Has anything turned up? Empty beer bottles or something?”

Simon frowned.

“None that I know of. But it really looks as though someone has been having a picnic somewhere around here over the last three nights.”

“Maybe,” interjected Oliver, “we should just put a lock on the door.”

“Well,” said Simon, “I don’t really want to do that, for two reasons. The first is that this is a Neolithic reconstruction of a hut, and a twenty-first-century lock simply feels wrong. Secondly, our community here is built on trust, and I don’t want that to change. We are a family here. I already asked everyone yesterday at lunch, and nobody came forward. And now there is new stuff missing.”

“Mr. Arkan... Simon, I mean. Don’t worry!” said Joe with conviction in his voice. “Me and Oliver, we’re going to find out who did it.”

Oliver nodded silently but continued examining the different shelves of food and supplies.

Simon walked to the doorway and turned.

“Thank you. Well, I have to go help the others with the tree trunks for the granary now, so you carry on, I guess. Here is the supply log.”

He handed Joe the notepad he had been holding.

“Maybe your young, fresh eyes will spot something useful.”

Simon turned and left the hut.

Joe immediately began going through the list, one item at a time. In the meantime, Oliver examined the door and the frame, looking for any traces of forced entry.

After a while, they reconvened in the middle of the hut.

“So,” asked Joe, “what do you think?”

Oliver gazed around.

“Another underage drinker, maybe. Or simply someone who doesn’t want to pay for it. Or can’t.”

Joe looked at him, amused.

“Maybe it’s your girlfriend. That would explain why her mood is always so dark. It isn’t her personality. It’s just a hangover.”

He spread his arms theatrically.

“Ta-da! One case solved.”

Oliver sighed.

“Well, she is certainly a possible suspect. I think we can cross the two boys and the two of us off the list. My sister seems an unlikely candidate too, although you never know. And it could be Josh, but he strikes me as a pretty straight-up guy. So... not very likely.”

Joe picked up a can of beans and studied its label.

“What about that Rick guy? Or Thomas?” suggested Oliver.

“So... the two locals?” asked Joe.

“It’s possible,” said Oliver. “They’re not paid much for being here, that’s for sure. And they both had beers in their hands at the campfire yesterday, if I remember correctly.”

“According to this list, they actually paid for those. I’d probably cross your parents off the list too, of course,” Joe continued. “And probably the Majorines too. They’re the directors of the project, and they seem like the sort of people who lead by example.”

Oliver thought for a moment.

“Hmm. But I wouldn’t cross the Siebers off the list. I know almost nothing about them, even though they’ve been coming here for years. Brody is their son, though, so I’m not sure.”

“Unlikely,” said Joe. “So, how do we proceed?”

Oliver pushed out his lower lip thoughtfully.

“Well, we could keep an eye on our suspects and see whether any of them appears drunk. And we could look for empty beer bottles. They have to be somewhere. There isn’t any recycling point around here where someone could dispose of the glass unnoticed.”

“Well,” said Joe, “I suppose that if someone stole that much beer, they must be accustomed to drinking. But looking for the bottles can’t hurt. You could show me around a little so I can get a feel for the terrain anyway. And perhaps we’ll stumble across your shady girlfr – ”

“Stumble on who?” a voice asked.

Both boys turned.

Leandra had just entered the supply shed.

“Oh, nobody,” said Joe with a shrug. “Certainly not you.”

Leandra looked at them.

“Oh, it’s the two engaged schoolboys looking for their mothers’ milk, is it? Missing your mummy already, Mr Darcy?” She crossed her arms and looked defiantly at Joe.

“I know you don’t miss yours,” Joe replied. “She spent last night with me.”

Leandra snorted.

“Not that my mother wouldn’t be capable of such a feat. But I figure you wouldn’t know how to handle her.”

“I’d be happy to show you, if you want,” said Joe. “Or Oliver here could show you.”

Leandra pulled a face.

“Ugh... pass.”

She walked over to a shelf and picked up a large bottle of cola and a bag of potato chips.

“You can’t just take that,” said Oliver.

Leandra smirked at him.

“Oh, I can’t? Watch me, baby boy.”

With that, she walked out of the shed carrying her loot.

“Ooh, I like it when they play hard to get,” remarked Joe.

“You’ve made a good choice, my friend.”

Oliver was still staring at the doorway through which Leandra had just disappeared.

“How so? She just called me baby boy. She must think I’m childish.”

“Quite the opposite,” said Joe. “She’s flirting with you, man. She’s clearly trying to impress you.”

Oliver threw up his hands in exasperation.

“She just stole from our supplies in front of our eyes!”

“Yeah,” said Joe dreamily. “She’s cool. As detectives, it’s perfectly normal to be attracted to the bad girls.”

He took a deep breath.

“I don’t think she’s the culprit in our case, though.”

Oliver still looked unconvinced.

“She just took cola and chips without asking permission.

So she could just as well have taken the other supplies over the past three nights.”

“Nah,” said Joe dismissively. “She’s only playing a game, if you ask me. I don’t think she’d steal beer or wine.”

“Why not?” asked Oliver suspiciously. “We need to look at the hard facts, the evidence.”

“I wouldn’t call what I have evidence,” said Joe, “but it strongly argues for dismissing her as a suspect.”

Oliver carefully studied the supply log that Joe had just handed him. Joe paced around the hut, thinking aloud.

“She’s a clever one, I’ll give you that. Look at the log. She only took things that aren’t on the paid list. They need permission from an adult and are as a rule reserved for the evenings at the campfire, if I read this correctly. But nobody keeps track of cola or potato chips. And she took such a small amount that nobody would ever miss it. I don’t think she did it by chance.”

Oliver checked the log more closely.

“No cola. No chips. They’re not on the paid list, as you say.”

“She’s definitely a bit shady,” said Joe. “And she has probably taken quite a lot from you people over the years.

That wouldn't surprise me one bit. But it's not exactly a crime. She's too smart for that."

He tilted his head.

"So I think she's innocent. At least when it comes to the series of thefts we're investigating."

"She's resourceful," said Oliver.

"I told you so."

He shrugged.

"You chose... wisely."

"Be quiet," said Oliver, but he smiled and hung the log back on its nail next to the entrance.

Joe continued: "I get your doubts. We lack hard evidence, and all of these are just assumptions."

He suddenly raised a hand.

"Oh! You know what we should do? We should do a stakeout tonight."

"Right," exclaimed Oliver. "Because if the person – or persons – stole three nights in a row..."

Joe finished the sentence.

"The probability is high that they'll steal again tonight."

"Great," said Oliver, smiling. "We're still going to look for the bottles now?"

"Sure," said Joe. "It can't hurt. And I really want to have a look around. You never know. And I'd like to find

Angelina. It's unfair that only you would get a girl. If this works out for me, we'll be like family. Not that we aren't already that, but like... we'd be even more family."

Chapter 6: Fencing

Both boys stepped outside into the sunshine.

Around them, the camp had already returned to its usual rhythm.

Between the two large huts, people were busy working on the granary. Under the direction of Simon and Walter, most of the men were securing branches and tree trunks that would form the walls and roof.

In front of the West Hut, Annette supervised the women as they mixed fresh clay with reeds.

Verena stood barefoot in a large wooden trough, kneading the mixture with her feet. The reinforced clay would later be used to repair the walls of the West Hut, which had begun to crumble during the months the camp had stood empty.

Interestingly, Josh was the only teenager helping with the work. Standing high on the granary framework, he was tying branches together to form part of the roof.

Oliver and Joe paid little attention to the activity around the camp and left CEAR through the large gate.

Joe glanced at the sturdy wooden structure and then at the massive padlock hanging loosely from the left gate.

“Why is this place even fenced off?” he asked. “You leave the gate open overnight anyway.”

Oliver's expression darkened slightly.

"Yes, we do. But for the rest of the year nobody's here.

Except when people are invited to visit the huts. Annette brings her students here quite often – school classes, workshops, even office groups. She acts as their guide whenever visitors come throughout the year. But the rest of the time, the gates stay locked."

"Huh," said Joe. "Still... that padlock is enormous."

Oliver chuckled.

"Yes. You know, it's nice down here by the river. People sometimes come here to have campfires, barbecue, and do the sort of things people normally do by a river. So the fence and the padlock keep most of them out. Of course, anyone could climb over if they really wanted to... but most don't."

"Right," said Joe. "Let's go look for those beer bottles."

Rick passed them, carrying a big load of reeds tied together with strings. As one fell down, Oliver automatically bent down to pick it up and placed it back on the bundle in Rick's arms.

"I thank you," said Rick and walked away, whistling with a strange grin on his face.

Joe followed him with his eyes.

“This one has a weird vibe. Is he whistling that Sandman lullaby?”

Oliver nodded.

“I didn’t talk with him much. But he is nice. He’s a character for sure.”

They followed the path west, alongside the river.

As they passed the broad stony riverbank, they waved to Theseus and Brody, who had already resumed building their fish labyrinths.

Keeping their eyes on the ground, the two boys searched both sides of the path for a place where someone might have stopped for a midnight picnic.

The farther they moved away from the CEAR compound, the denser the vegetation became.

Eventually, they reached a great oak tree.

“That’s a mighty tree,” said Joe.

“Yes,” Oliver replied. “We call it the Root Tree.”

Joe looked up into its vast crown before letting his gaze wander down the enormous roots twisting across the ground.

“I can see why.”

A voice interrupted their admiration.

“Are you two following me, you nerdy stalkers? Go away. I’m not giving up my spoils. Besides, they’re nearly gone already.”

Surprised, Joe looked up. Oliver tensed.

Leandra was sitting comfortably on one of the higher branches, reading a thick book while eating potato chips and drinking cola.

Joe gave her an exaggerated bow.

“Careful there, my lady. Your ego is such a heavy burden that the branch you’re sitting on might not be able to carry the combined weight much longer.”

Leandra chuckled.

“It’d be even worse if you climbed up here.”

“Well,” retorted Joe, “maybe I should send my sporty friend up there instead. He can climb up and carry you down.”

Leandra pulled a face.

“Not in my worst nightmare. And please don’t. I’m already bored to death. Little mummy’s boy over there might just be boring enough to deliver the killing blow.”

Leandra put on an exaggerated expression of mock agony, let her tongue hang out, and pretended to die dramatically. Before Joe could react, Oliver spoke.

“Can I ask you something? Why are you always so mean to me? I don’t think I’ve ever done anything to you.”

Leandra slowly raised one eyebrow, then the other.

“Maybe that’s exactly the problem.”

With a snap, she closed her book, jumped down from the tree, and landed lightly on the ground like a cat, drawing an astonished look from Joe.

“I’m done here anyway,” she said, starting to walk away.

“This place and its people... they’re literally the worst.

How can people be so mundane? So empty? If that’s what growing up means, I hope someone finishes me off before I come of age.”

“Well now,” said Joe, following after her, with Oliver just behind him. “That would be a terrible waste of resources. Anyway, we were bored too and were just about to get up to no good, if you care to join us.”

Leandra didn’t look back.

“There is absolutely nothing about your childish games that could interest me in the slightest. So leave me the heck alone. Now.”

Leandra quickened her pace.

“Well,” Oliver said timidly, “we were actually thinking about exploring the old prison over there.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Joe, slapping a hand against his forehead. “We were. But if that’s too boring for you, we’ll just go on our own and explore the ruins. Bye now.”

Leandra stopped abruptly.

Without turning around, she stood perfectly still.

“Nobody is allowed anywhere near it. It’s dangerous, they say.”

“Since when do you care what’s allowed and what isn’t?”

Joe asked mockingly.

“I’ve been there before,” Oliver added. “Well... as far as the fence, to be honest.”

“Well then,” said Leandra, turning up her nose. “That might actually just interest me.”

She started walking again.

“You two boys can tag along... if you’re quiet. And hold hands.”

Joe and Oliver had to quicken their pace to catch up with her.

Just before they reached her, Joe discreetly pointed a finger at Oliver, made an exploding gesture beside his head, then gave Oliver two enthusiastic thumbs-up and smiled, showing all his teeth.

The three of them passed the compound, crossed the parking area, followed the forest path, and turned right

onto the dusty track that ran alongside the cornfield towards the abandoned prison.

Despite the early hour, the sun was already burning hot.

When they reached the rusty metal fence, they stopped and looked across at the crumbling building beyond.

The prison looked as though nobody had set foot inside it for at least a generation.

Nature had begun to reclaim it.

Yet the building still stood.

Leandra looked over at the old brick building.

“I thought it would be bigger.”

“That’s for sure not what she said,” commented Joe.

Nobody reacted to this.

Leandra was already walking along the fence, obviously looking for a place where she could squeeze through.

“Wait,” said Oliver. “It might be dangerous.”

“What? Wet your pants already, bean boy?”

She patted the pockets of her trousers.

“Oh no. I left your diapers back at the tent. Oh dear, oh dear... how forgetful of me.”

She cocked her head and continued looking for a way through the fence.

“Oh my,” said Joe, beginning to search for an opening himself, “that would be really bad luck if it had stood here

for thirty years only to choose today of all days to collapse and bury us underneath.”

“Okay,” said Oliver. “Let’s be careful where we step, all right?”

Oliver and Leandra both looked at Joe.

“Yes, please. Don’t kill me.”

Leandra said with a mock-sad expression.

“And don’t die of fear either... or drown in your own pee.”

“Why not?” asked Joe.

“Because then your parents would make my life an even bigger hell than it already is, of course.”

Joe turned towards Oliver.

“And you’d miss us, of course. Especially Ollie here.

Wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Leandra, pulling a face. “I’d miss you two about as much as I’d miss itchy foot fungus and vomit in my shoes.”

She swiftly slipped through a gap in the fence just wide enough to let her pass.

“Why do I get the feeling she’ll kill us all?” said Oliver, watching her head towards the prison.

Joe patted him on the back.

“Come on. This was your idea, Romeo.”

“All I wanted was to spend some time with Leandra,” said Oliver. “Not die.”

“Don’t worry,” Joe laughed. “Your undying love for each other will keep us all alive. And if you do die, I’ll make you two famous. Like Romeo and Julia.”

“It’s Juliet, not Juli...”

Before Oliver could finish his sentence, Leandra’s voice called back from ahead.

“Schoolboys! What are you doing? Less talking, more walking. Come on! Or do I have to come back and push your strollers?”

Chapter 7: Visiting Hour

Leandra was already inside by the time they reached the two large, rusty metal doors, both torn from their hinges. It was quite dark inside. There was no electricity, but cracks in the stone walls let in thin shafts of daylight here and there. A smell of stale water, moss and rot seemed to separate the inside of the prison from the outside.

“Magnificent,” said Joe, his voice echoing through the darkness. “This is great.”

He stepped inside.

Oliver punched him lightly on the shoulder.

“I thought inmates like you usually break out instead of breaking in?”

“There is no place like home, caro mio,” Joe replied in a heavy Italian accent. “Don’t you dare use my own weapons against me.”

“I said no talking,” Leandra reminded them, walking a little ahead. “With your big mouth in the way, you might not see what’s beneath your feet and doom us all.”

“You know what?” Joe grinned. “You’re like a female, meaner version of me.”

Leandra, almost at the checkpoint, turned towards him and held a finger in front of his face.

“That’s probably the worst insult anyone – including my horrible mother – has ever thrown at me. And it couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“It was actually a compl – ”

Joe never finished the sentence.

He tripped over a loose brick on the floor. He crashed to the floor, and somewhere in the darkness a low rumble echoed as a few loose stones came tumbling down.

All three teenagers froze.

Silence.

Then everything became still again.

When nothing else happened, Oliver reached down, grabbed Joe’s arm, and pulled him back to his feet.

Leandra shook her head in exasperation.

Without another word, the three of them continued deeper into the prison. The darkness grew denser until it felt like it would swallow them all.

“Oh man,” said Joe after a few more steps. “I should have brought my flashlight.”

“I thought you were always prepared,” remarked Oliver.

“Yes, for lots of things I am.” He then called, “Hey, angel of death, could you please turn on your demon eyes now? We need someone to shine the way.”

Ahead of them, Leandra produced the multi-purpose knife that she seemed to always carry with her. With a click, a tiny LED light sprang to life, illuminating the narrow corridor they had just entered with surprising power.

“And the madam saves the day again,” remarked Joe. He continued walking along the dark corridor.

After a sharp turn, the way opened into a large hall with two levels.

“The cell block,” said Oliver.

The three of them entered it.

They looked around in the dim light but could make out very little. Leandra shone her little light around, but it didn’t illuminate much.

Fear and unease seemed to settle over all three of them.

Leandra shivered.

Without thinking, Oliver and Joe drifted a little closer together.

“Not exactly an all-inclusive resort here. If someone could show me the way to the spa and some gin and tonic, I’d be very grateful,” said Joe in an unusually high voice.

Slowly, Leandra swept the beam across the empty cells on the ground floor. Some still had their heavy doors hanging in place, some stood open, and others had lost their doors altogether.

“Where do you guys think that creepy guy lived?” asked Joe. “Labrun.”

“Lebron,” corrected Leandra. “Georges Lebron.”

Leandra walked slowly along the doors, shining her light on each one.

“I’d like to know that too.”

“Why?” asked Oliver.

“For no reason at all,” answered Leandra. “And if I had one, I certainly wouldn’t tell you.”

“Isn’t your family from around here?” asked Joe. “Any relation to the killer? That wouldn’t surprise me at all, I see some family resemblance there...”

In a flash of anger, Leandra spun around and strode straight towards Joe, stopping only inches from him, her little light shining directly into his face.

“Take that back, you little shithead.”

Joe instinctively took a step backwards before deliberately moving towards her again.

“Hey... whoa, whoa, whoa. It was a joke. Only. A. Joke.”

Leandra didn’t budge.

She stared at Joe.

Her face was as cold as the stone of the prison wall.

Her eyes were blazing with anger.

Awkwardly, Oliver stepped between them, forcing them a little farther apart.

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “He didn’t mean it.”

Leandra looked at Oliver.

Slowly, the tension left her face. She inhaled sharply through her nose.

A faint squeaking noise made her turn her head.

“Listen,” she whispered.

“What is that?” Joe whispered back.

“Rats, I think,” said Oliver. “Let’s get out of here.”

Leandra grabbed his arm and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Let’s continue.”

Oliver hesitated.

“I think we’ve seen enough. We can come back later, properly equipped. Flashlights and all.”

Leandra tightened her grip on his arm and held his gaze.

“I said we go on.”

Oliver looked away and turned to Joe.

Joe only shrugged.

“Sorry, buddy,” said Joe. “She’s the one with the light. And I’ve always preferred following curves to straight lines, as you well know.”

They reached a half-collapsed staircase at the end of the floor and awkwardly climbed up to the second floor of the cell block.

Suddenly, Leandra, who had almost reached the top of the stairs, gasped.

She took a step backwards, bumping into Oliver and letting the knife slip from her hand.

The moment she released the button, the tiny light went out.

Darkness swallowed them instantly.

Leandra, almost as a reflex, reached for Oliver's arm and held it tightly once more.

Complete blackness surrounded the three of them.

"What is it?" came Joe's voice through the darkness.

"Why's the light out? Are you hurt?"

"No," stammered Leandra. "I... I think I saw something. Or thought I did. I need to find my knife."

The pressure on Oliver's arm disappeared.

He heard Leandra feeling around on the floor.

Without a word, he dropped to his knees and did the same.

A few moments later, there was a click.

The tiny beam of light returned.

Leandra instinctively lifted it towards their faces, reassuring herself that all three of them were still there.

“Maybe we should get out now,” suggested Oliver.

“Brilliant idea,” said Joe.

He looked at Leandra.

“I’m starting to like his idea better than yours... curves and all.”

“No,” said Leandra simply, turning the light away from them again. “I’m not leaving. Not until we’ve found Lebron’s cell.”

She moved on, once again shining the light into one cell after another.

The two boys exchanged a glance. Joe raised an eyebrow and made an inviting gesture for Oliver to go first.

Reluctantly, Oliver advanced towards Leandra.

She had stopped in front of one of the cells and was shining her light inside.

“It’s this one.”

Her voice sounded hollow.

“How do you know?” asked Oliver.

Leandra pointed the beam at the metal plaque beside the door.

“It’s written here, you genius. Look. It’s still readable.”

Oliver stepped closer.

Indeed, it read:

G. Lebron

#080102

Leandra entered the cell.

Both boys followed.

She slowly swept the light across the damp stone walls and the rusty remains of a bedframe.

Nothing.

“Cozy,” commented Joe.

He absent-mindedly touched a grimy object.

“I think,” said Oliver, “that was the toilet.”

“Urgh!”

Joe jerked his hand back and flung the object away.

Oliver suppressed a smile.

Leandra didn’t react.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “There is absolutely nothing here.”

“No, of course there isn’t,” said Joe. “What did you expect to find? The names of his next victims?”

“The name of his last one, actually,” said Leandra.

“Why would he write that on the wall?” asked Oliver. “He never intended to stay here. He escaped and was never seen again.”

“Or maybe he died,” added Joe.

“I thought...” Leandra said quietly. “I thought maybe he would still be here. Maybe he’d come back.”

She slowly lowered the light.

“But I was wrong.”

She sounded almost disappointed.

“This was never his home.”

She looked around the tiny cell once more.

“I wonder if he ever thought about what he’d done while he was in here.”

A brief silence.

“And whether he planned to go after the one who got away.”

Suddenly –

Footsteps.

Somewhere in the darkness.

Leandra spun around.

“Who’s there?”

Oliver looked around. There seemed to be someone in the block with them.

“Okay... I think we need to leave now.”

But none of the three of them moved.

The footsteps seemed to be getting closer.

Then, out of the darkness, a voice began to sing.

An eerie, familiar tune echoed off the walls, coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

*“Sleep, girl, sleep.
The world of dreams awaits.
Your mother will soon weep
over your little angel’s face.
Sleep, girl, sleep,
and never wake again.”*

The three teenagers stared at one another.

Beneath her dark hair, Leandra’s face had turned as white as stone.

Joe reacted first.

Without waiting for the light, he bolted out of the cell.

Oliver grabbed Leandra firmly but gently and pushed her through the doorway.

Together, the three of them raced along the second-floor corridor towards the staircase, Leandra’s beam swinging wildly in every direction.

They were halfway down the stairs when the steps gave way beneath them.

Everything seemed to crumble at once.

At the same moment, daylight suddenly flooded into the prison as a large section of the outer wall and roof collapsed around them.

Oliver, Joe and Leandra tumbled to the ground. Bricks, stones and chunks of wall and ceiling came crashing down all around them. Clouds of dust arose, pierced by rays of light.

Above them, gently... almost tenderly... the voice continued to sing, louder, firmer.

*“Sleep, girl, sleep.
Lay still upon your bed.
Never shall you wake,
for now you are dead.
Sleep, girl, sleep,
until I shall return.”*

Sitting back up, Oliver immediately looked for Leandra and helped her to her feet. She seemed unharmed but in shock.

In front of them, Joe was already up, sprinting through the corridor, past the checkpoint and out through the shattered entrance into the wild meadow beyond.

Behind them, a deep rumble shook the prison.

Panic drove them onwards.

They did not stop running until they had climbed back through the fence and reached the crossroads beside the cornfield leading back to CEAR.

Only then did they stop.

All three were covered in dust and gasping for breath but miraculously seemed unharmed.

Tears had carved pale streaks through the dust on Leandra's face.

Joe looked as though he had just finished a marathon.

Oliver's heart hammered against his ribs as if it wanted to burst out of his chest.

"What the hell was that?" gasped Joe, still struggling to catch his breath.

"You heard him, right?" said Leandra, almost hysterically.

"You heard him! Georges Lebron... he's still here! He's still alive!"

Oliver was still bent over, trying to catch his breath.

"How could he be?" he panted. "He should be dead... or very old."

"You heard him!" Leandra cried. "He's back!"

Joe brushed the dust from his summer jacket.

"I heard something for sure," he said. "But I'm not sure what."

Then he pointed a finger at Leandra.

“And you, lady... you nearly got us all killed.”

“It was my idea,” Oliver said quietly. “And I heard the voice too. Someone was there.”

Joe wasn’t listening.

“That’s crap!” he shouted. “We nearly died!”

He walked a few steps back and pointed a finger at Leandra.

“Stay away from us, you brainless queen regent!”

He turned on his heel.

“I’m leaving.”

He stormed back towards the camp.

Oliver watched him go before turning back to Leandra.

“He’s just scared,” he said softly. “Are you all right?”

Leandra slowly sank to the ground.

“Leave me alone.”

“But...”

“Go away.”

She looked up at him. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Go back to your mummy and leave me the hell alone, you worthless dipshit! I never want to see you again!”

Oliver stood frozen for a moment.

His eyes stung, but not from their escape from the prison.

Without another word, feeling torn, he turned and followed Joe back towards the camp.

Chapter 8: Water

By the time Oliver caught up with his friend, Joe had made his way down to the stone beach, where Theseus and Brody were still busy building what looked like a miniature fish enclosure.

As Oliver reached him, Joe was throwing stones into the river with much more force than was required.

“You all right?” Oliver asked.

“Your girlfriend nearly got us killed in there with her weird fascination for that creep,” Joe muttered.

But his voice sounded much calmer than before.

“Well...” Oliver picked up a flat stone and skipped it across the river. It bounced five times before disappearing beneath the surface. “To be fair... it was my idea in the first place.”

“Your idea, yes.”

Joe still wasn’t looking at him.

“Love has blinded you, my friend. Just like Eve blinded Adam with that juicy apple.”

Oliver picked up another stone.

“Actually, the Bible never says it was an apple. It only calls it a fruit.”

“And did they get the serpent wrong as well?” Joe shot back.

He tried to skip his own stone, but it bounced only twice before sinking.

“They should have called it Leandra. That would have been a much better name for that twisted, poisonous, snake-faced temptress.”

Joe took a few steps back.

Then, without warning, he sprinted towards the river and jumped in, clothes and all.

He waded in until the water reached his waist before diving beneath the surface.

Laughing, Oliver followed him.

The cold water seemed to bring them both back to reality.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

“Whatever that was,” Joe finally said, “we looked death straight in the eye.”

“That we did.”

“And your undying love saved us all.”

Oliver smiled faintly.

“But you heard the voice?” he asked.

Joe shrugged.

“I heard... something, sure. Or maybe our minds played tricks on us.”

He rubbed the water from his face.

“Let me explain something for once. It’s called a collective hallucination. Stress can do funny things to people.”

He pointed towards the camp.

“It’s all the fault of that girl of yours. She put crazy ideas into your head. She’s crazy, man. Crazy dangerous.”

He looked at Oliver.

“Maybe you chose... poorly after all.”

Oliver let another handful of water run through his fingers.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

He stood up.

“We still have a case.”

He smiled.

“And we haven’t made any progress at all on the stolen supplies.”

Joe sighed and got to his feet.

“Fair enough.”

He wrung out his soaked summer jacket.

“Sounds better than chasing ghosts with a crazy chick.”

At the edge of the cornfield, Leandra brushed the last tears from her face.

Her breathing gradually became steady again.

Slowly, she looked back towards the prison.

Through the narrow gap where one of the great metal doors still stood, she caught sight of the silhouette of a man.

She froze.

In horrified disbelief, she squeezed her eyes shut.

When she opened them again and looked back, the ghostly figure had vanished.

Leandra sprang to her feet and hurried back towards the camp, trembling even more than before.

At lunchtime, everyone at CEAR gathered around the long tables.

Oliver and Joe, still dripping from their improvised swim in the river, sat quietly eating.

Leandra had not appeared.

Nobody seemed particularly surprised.

Oliver noticed his sister Angelina and Josh chatting and giggling at one end of the table.

When dessert arrived – mousse au chocolat – Simon turned to the boys.

“So, boys, we have a task for you this afternoon. Thomas just came back from town with his fishing gear and will be

fishing. He'll need some additional people to help with all his rods. Are you up for it?"

Joe grinned.

"Of course, Mr. Ar...Simon. With pleasure."

Oliver merely nodded.

Behind Joe's back, he saw Leandra leave her tent and head towards the Root Tree, her black book tucked under one arm.

"Wow, Oliver," said Verena. "Your enthusiasm is overwhelming today. Cheer up. You normally love fishing."

"Yes, Mum," Oliver said grimly. "I do."

He took another spoonful of mousse au chocolat.

In the warm summer sun, Thomas, Oliver and Joe spent the afternoon fishing.

Beside them, Theseus and Brody wandered along the shore with tiny fishing nets of their own. They rarely caught anything, but they seemed to enjoy cheering every time one of the older boys or Thomas landed another fish and placed it into the keep net Thomas had set up near the shore to keep the catch alive.

Joe quickly grew into the rhythm of fishing.

It still fell to Oliver to bait his hook with fresh worms and remove each fish from it afterwards. But whenever Joe caught one, the grin on his face grew a little wider.

After a while, he turned to Thomas.

“These fish are really small. Are you sure we shouldn’t use bigger hooks for the big ones?”

Thomas laughed.

“Sure. We don’t want the big ones today. These little ones are for the starter.”

“But their bones are tiny too, aren’t they?” said Joe.

“Won’t it take ages to clean them and gut them?”

Thomas smiled.

“We won’t clean them like that. Their bones are so fine you can eat them without even noticing them. We’ll just gut them, coat them in flour and grill them over the fire. As simple as that.”

Joe pulled a face.

“You eat them with the bones... and the heads?”

“Of course,” Thomas replied. “You’ll like them. You’ll see.”

Joe looked unconvinced.

“I seriously doubt that.”

His rod twitched and a few seconds later he again had a fish dangling from it.

“Oh, there’s another one!”

He lifted his rod and handed the fish to Oliver, who carefully removed it from the hook.

When Oliver returned from placing it into the keep net and Joe handed him back his rod, Oliver looked towards the distant ruins of the prison.

“Thomas... have you ever been near the old prison over there?”

From where they stood, one corner of the crumbling building was just visible.

“No,” the older man replied. “And I’m not planning to. It’s closed for a reason. People aren’t allowed in there.”

“You mean because it’s haunted?” Joe cut in.

Thomas smiled faintly.

“That’s what people say. They say old Georges Lebron still lives there... or at least his ghost does. But if you ask me, they’re just old stories. Wind. Animals. Strange noises. There are usually perfectly natural explanations for those things.”

Joe waved his hand dismissively.

“Enough ghost stories, please.”

He cast his line back into the river.

“So... when do we catch the big fish?”

Joe and Thomas drifted into a discussion about how to catch larger fish, while Oliver kept thinking about the prison, Georges Lebron and Thomas’s words. For a brief moment, he saw Leandra’s pale face streaked with tears again.

He looked up. Far away he saw a lonely figure sitting on the Root Tree’s highest branch, reading.

Over the tree, grey clouds were gathering.

He sniffed the air.

“Smells like rain,” he murmured, more to himself than to anyone else.

A rumble answered him.

In the late afternoon, Thomas announced that they had caught enough fish. He and Oliver began cleaning them by the river, while Joe watched the whole process with obvious disgust. As they were finishing up, the first drops of rain began to fall. They all headed back towards the camp.

As they hurried through the gates of CEAR, the light drizzle quickly turned into large, heavy drops, forcing all

five of them into a run. Oliver led his brother and Brody towards their respective tents while Joe ran towards the safety of the tent by himself. Thomas ran off to deliver the cleaned fish to the East Hut kitchen.

Oliver first made sure Brody and Theseus were both safe in their tents before finally slipping into his own, completely soaked.

“Well,” Joe remarked as Oliver changed into dry clothes,

“I guess that’s it for tonight’s stakeout.”

“Yes,” Oliver replied as he sat down on his bunk. “I suppose we should have built a trap instead.”

“You know what?” Joe said after a moment. “I bet the thief is just as discouraged as we are tonight. Besides, he probably still has enough food left from yesterday. I reckon he’ll wait until tomorrow.”

He grinned.

“And then he’ll walk straight into the trap waiting for him. What do you think?”

“Yes,” Oliver said quietly as he lay back on his mattress. Somebody knocked on the tent.

Oliver got up, unzipped the entrance and pulled the flap aside.

Standing outside beneath an umbrella was his mother, carrying a bag full of sandwiches.

“Hey, boys. I couldn’t let you go to bed without something to eat, could I?”

She looked into the bag.

“So... what’ll it be? Ham, cheese, roast beef, salami or tuna?”

“Salami for me,” Oliver said. “Thanks, Mum.”

“And you, Joe?”

“Roast beef, please,” Joe replied. “Thank you, Mrs Arkan.”

Verena smiled.

“Verena, Joe. Verena. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Joe grinned sheepishly.

“Verena. Thank you.”

Oliver took the two sandwiches.

“Thanks so much, Mum. Good night.”

“Good night, boys.”

Then Verena disappeared into the rain beneath her umbrella, the bag of sandwiches tucked under her arm.

Oliver zipped the tent closed again.

The two of them ate in silence.

When they had finished, Joe lay back on his mattress and began tossing his tennis ball towards the ceiling again, just as he always did whenever he was bored.

Oliver simply stared up at the canvas roof while the rain drummed relentlessly above them.

“This tent is waterproof, right?” Joe asked sceptically.

“Because it sounds like the Great Flood out there.”

“Yes, see for yourself. All your things are dry and safe. My father buys all our tents from a specialist outdoor-equipment shop,” said Oliver, pointing towards the ceiling. Joe caught the ball and lifted an arm to smell his armpit.

“Oof. I smell like I haven’t showered in days. Oh, actually, I haven’t showered in days. How do you even survive that? Bathing in the river isn’t really washing, you know. That water stinks.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Oliver said. “And tomorrow we’ll have access to showers after the canoeing. So we’ll shower properly then. Just take your toiletries with you. It’s a communal shower, though.”

“So much fun,” said Joe. “To show everyone my best parts. Not that anybody could compete.”

“It’s separated by gender, of course.”

“Which is better for you if you still want to hold on to that girl of yours.”

Oliver threw the first thing he could find at him. It happened to be a dirty sock.

Joe batted it away just in time and laughed. Then he started tossing his tennis ball into the air again while Oliver lay back down on his mattress.

“Leandra grabbed my arm in the prison,” Oliver said.

“When the light went out.”

“Really?” Joe looked over at him. “In my book, that’s progress. At least it was progress before we all nearly died under tons of concrete, or got struck down by the ghost of a mass child murderer, or were driven mad by your lady friend.”

“But she hasn’t killed us yet.” Oliver sighed. “Well... tomorrow is another day.”

“Another day, another death, they say,” Joe concluded.

“Tomorrow we can all drown while canoeing. Yippee-ki-yay.”

Around them, the rain continued drumming steadily against the tent.

Chapter 9: Downriver

It was two in the afternoon the next day when Simon and all the kids stepped out of the little bus that had brought them from CEAR to the starting point of the canoe trip. With a bright smile and a wave of his hand, Rick drove the bus bearing the CEAR logo away.

As every year, two-person canoes were waiting for them by the water. As there were fewer this year than in previous years, only four boats lay on the stony shore.

Simon handed out life jackets to everyone, and soon the group gathered in a circle for his final instructions.

“I know we do this every year,” Simon said in a clear voice, “but don’t get cocky on me now. So I’ll repeat the rules.”

He looked around in the circle. Theseus looked like he was about to wet himself from the excitement, while Brody stepped from one foot to another. Josh and Angelina stood next to each other, almost touching, but not quite. Joe stood next to Oliver, taking in the scene, while Oliver smiled. Leandra stood apart from the group, looking away across the river like she was not part of their group. Simon continued his speech.

“No taking off your life jackets, and no swimming except during the supervised picnic break at the little island.”

He looked directly at Theseus.

“Yes, I’m looking at you.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the group.

“No jumping into the water from the boats. Despite life jackets and all. You can bathe at the island where it’s safe and supervised. And this is not a race, okay?”

He looked from Oliver to Leandra.

“If you need help at any time, shout for it, and I’ll get to you.”

He looked once more around the circle.

“Now then... please pair up with the partner you’d like to canoe with.”

In a flash, Angelina stepped over to Josh so that their bodies finally touched.

Theseus and Brody immediately threw their arms around each other in a tight, boyish hug.

That left only Joe, Oliver, Leandra... and Simon.

Simon glanced briefly towards Angelina before turning back to the remaining group. He looked at the two smallest kids of the group.

“This is definitely not going to happen, boys. And you know it.”

He smiled.

“I’ll take one of you youngsters, and I need another experienced volunteer to do the same.”

He turned to his son.

“Oliver, I suppose you should take your brother, and I’ll take Brody – ”

Joe stepped forward.

“I can take Theseus, Mr. Arkan.”

Simon looked at him uncertainly.

“Joe... this is your first time here. I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. And it’s Simon, Joe. Mr. Arkan is my father...”

“First time here, yes, um, Simon,” Joe replied. “But I’ve been canoeing quite a bit with my father and my brothers. As long as I don’t have to swim, I’m absolutely fine.”

“Can I go with Joe, Daddy?” Theseus cried. “That would be so cool!”

Joe’s smile towards Oliver grew even wider.

Oliver looked at him in slight bewilderment.

Simon shrugged.

“Well... all right. If you can row, then Theseus can go with you. It’s all downstream from here anyway to the island, just follow me.”

“Yay!” Theseus shouted, letting go of Brody and running over to Joe.

“You can be the captain,” Joe said with a grin, pulling him up in his arms. “Come on, buddy.”

Together, they headed towards the second canoe and Joe set the little boy in the front seat and pushed the boat into the river expertly.

Oliver could almost feel Joe’s triumphant smile rather than see it, as his friend had his back turned to him and was rowing away.

He sighed.

Beside him, Leandra stood as still as ever, wrapped in her usual air of calm detachment, but her eyes had shifted from the river towards Simon.

Farther downstream, Angelina and Josh were already gliding down the river and rowing lazily while the current carried them away.

“Well then,” Simon said. “That leaves you two.”

He looked from Oliver to Leandra.

“Is that all right? I think this is the first year you’ve ever been in the same canoe.”

He smiled.

“So there won’t be any competing this year, which might actually be a good thing. I’d rather get my deposit back this year,” he said with a smile.

He picked up his paddle.

“Put on your life jackets and get going. Come on, Brody. Fair winds and following seas you two.”

Simon helped Brody into the canoe while Oliver carried the waterproof canisters containing lunch and supplies over to his father’s boat.

A moment later, Simon pushed away from the shore and followed the two boats ahead with steady, fast rows, quickly taking the lead while the other canoes followed. Only Oliver and Leandra remained beside the last canoe, its two paddles resting quietly inside.

“Well then,” Oliver said, nodding towards the three canoes that were disappearing already behind a river bend.

Leandra didn’t answer.

She simply helped him push the canoe into the water before climbing in herself, taking the front seat, turning her back to him.

A moment later, Oliver took his place in the back and off they were.

For a while, they followed the others in complete silence, paddling left, then right, as they had done year after year, just in separate boats.

The awkward, brooding atmosphere gradually became too much for Oliver.

“I know I might not be your first choice of partner for this,” he said at last. “But could we at least pretend to be interested in talking? Just... small talk or something?”

The words sounded clumsy and rang false, even to him.

“You’re wrong,” Leandra replied immediately.

“I am?” Oliver asked quietly. “Of course I am.”

“No. You’re really wrong,” she insisted. “You’re actually the one person I mind the least sharing a canoe with.”

She paused.

“I mean, I’d rather drown than share a boat with that sexist, manipulating friend of yours.”

“He’s my best friend,” Oliver remarked dryly.

“And your only friend, I reckon. We all take a wrong turn sometimes.”

Oliver gave a deep stroke with his paddle.

“So... what you’re actually saying is that I’m the least terrible partner you could have for this trip?”

“Don’t push it.”

“All right. Sorry.”

“No, dumbass. I meant the paddle.”

“What?”

“The paddle. Don’t push the paddle, idiot. We’re drifting.”

“Oh... I meant – ”

“I know what you meant.”

She glanced back at him, turning her head for the first time.

“You were wrong again.”

“I was.”

Oliver smiled faintly.

“Again. Sorry.”

He adjusted his paddling, and the canoe straightened with the current.

“You apologise too much,” Leandra said after a while, having turned her back again towards the front. “Why are you always apologising?”

Oliver kept his eyes on the river ahead.

“Because...” He hesitated. “Because I’m not right all the time. And I want to show you that I respect you and your feelings.”

Leandra sighed.

“People do not care about other people’s feelings. All they care about is themselves and how to manipulate others to serve their own purposes.”

She paused for a moment.

“So, Oliver... what are you trying to get out of me?”

“I...”

By now, their canoe had slowed so much that the other three had disappeared around another sharp bend in the river.

Oliver searched for the right words.

“I... Maybe I’d like you to like me as much as I like you,” he said honestly.

“So, let me get this straight,” Leandra remarked. “Actually, you want someone to like you because you’re unable to like yourself, and you hope that if someone else likes you, you’ll like yourself?”

“That is... that is not what I meant.”

“That is exactly what everyone means when they want someone to like them, and I absolutely hate it. You should first learn to love yourself before asking someone else to love you.”

“O... Okay,” said Oliver.

“You know who you remind me of?” said Leandra. “You sound exactly like my mum. She’s so unable to live with herself that she throws herself at any guy who walks past and shows the slightest interest in her. No dignity at all, stupid bitch. Why are people all like this? Actually, don’t answer that. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Of course, being my mother’s daughter, I’d end up attracting people exactly like her.”

“Okay, but... that’s not what that phrase means,” said Oliver a bit more calmly. “The apple doesn’t fall far from

the tree means that you'll turn out like your parents, not that you'll attract people who are like your parents."

"Yeah," retorted Leandra. "And that's exactly what I meant, just a tad differently. It means that I'll turn into my mother and attract people who are like my father, which is, considering the cowardly, useless piece of shit he is, and subsequently you must be, even worse."

Oliver looked stricken.

"I'm so sorry."

"God," burst out Leandra. "You drive me crazy. Why are you apologising again?"

She looked back at him over her right shoulder.

"Because, obviously, you feel hurt," said Oliver, looking at her. "And I feel sad that you're hurt. So by apologising, I want to share that hurt with you, so you can feel safe and it hurts less because it's shared. It's called empathy, I believe."

"Pha," she said, and faced front again. "I don't want your empathy. And I don't need anything you'd like to share with me."

"I think we should row," interrupted Oliver firmly.

"You're really taking the joy out of everything. Can we row now, please?"

“I can,” said the other, and rowed so fiercely that the boat almost turned half a circle.

Chapter 10: Upriver

The afternoon picnic was held on the usual little island in the middle of the river, just large enough for the group and their four canoes.

They all ate their sandwiches together, with only Leandra sitting on an overturned canoe apart from the others, eating in silence and, once again, reading her book.

After dessert, while Simon was swimming with Theseus and Brody, and Angelina and Joshua were throwing a half-deflated volleyball to each other, Oliver and Joe sat together and talked, as nobody was really paying any attention to them.

“So, how’s our little romance going?” asked Joe with a wink.

Oliver glanced over at Leandra, who was sitting on the other side of the island, completely absorbed in her book.

“It’s not going at all, as you can see.”

Joe flashed a grin.

“All I see are two people brooding on opposite sides of an island, wishing they could sit next to each other and hold hands like the teeny tiny little lovebirds they are.”

“I’m quite sure she doesn’t want that. And I’m starting to think I don’t want it either anymore. I don’t get her, and she doesn’t get me. It’s like we live on different planets.”

Joe put on a mockingly dreamy expression.

“Ah, young love. So confusing. So enthralling. So intoxicating.”

“Seriously,” said Oliver. “Can you please stop?”

Joe’s face suddenly turned matter-of-fact.

“Oliver, look at her. Just look. She is unhappiness in person. And man, she looks broken. So broken. Even a lonely fish in a glass bowl feels less alone than she does. But you’re affecting her, and she has a grip on you that’s stronger than anything I’ve ever seen before. And you both want to be together. Maybe you’ve always wanted that, all these years you’ve been coming here.”

“Please stop with your movie dialogues,” said Oliver.

“Your life is like one big scripted movie, isn’t it?”

Joe chuckled.

“Wait and see, brother. Wait and see. When I say action, amazing things do happen.”

Oliver punched him on the shoulder.

“You’re such a dickhead. I’m sure she’ll ask to change partners this afternoon.”

A loud shout and a splash came from the group in the water. Simon had just playfully thrown Theseus into the river before jumping in after him.

“Change partners? With whom?” asked Joe. “Literally no one can stand her. And she can’t stand anyone. Except for you, of course.”

“How do you know?” said Oliver.

Joe shrugged.

“I am an expert in astrology. There are signs, and I can read them. A little sign here, a little look there. I can read the stars. And they form an arrow that’s pointing at the two of you enamoured angelitos.”

“That’s not how astrology functions,” said Oliver, raising an eyebrow.

Joe laughed.

“I know. It just sounded cool.”

Cries of protest rose from the river as Josh grabbed Angelina and, with a splash, threw her into the water. Looking around for another victim, Josh spotted his sister, who was cornered at the edge of the island.

She tossed her book aside and jumped into the water herself to escape him.

“Sis!” exclaimed Josh in mock protest. “That’s not fair! That’s not how this works!”

“In my book,” said Leandra sulkily, “that is exactly how this works.”

“Ah, you’re such a bossy killjoy,” said Josh.

“That is the whole purpose of my existence, apparently,” replied Leandra.

She glanced over at Oliver but looked away almost instantly as she caught Joe’s eye, who immediately smiled faintly and gave her a small wave, getting a blazing look back from her.

The young woman climbed back out of the water, returned to her spot, wrapped herself in a towel, picked up her book, and continued reading.

It was shortly after mid-afternoon when the group returned to their boats.

Once he had loaded the sealed waterproof container in his boat, Simon came towards Joe and Oliver.

“Guys, I can take both boys if you want to ride the boat up together. I’m sure Leandra can handle hers on her own.”

“No,” said Oliver almost instantly. “It’s fine.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leandra turn her head away.

“Yes,” said Joe, grinning widely. “It’s very fine.”

He patted Theseus’s hair next to him.

“Besides, I wouldn’t want to take the command away from my great captain. That would be mutiny, and we can’t have that. Can we?”

“No!” cried Theseus. “Let’s go, mutants!”

Simon put a hand on Oliver's shoulder and walked towards his boat. He lifted Brody in and they were off. Oliver joined Leandra, who was already waiting in the boat, back turned to him.

Like in the morning, Leandra and Oliver were the last boat behind the others. As they were heading upstream on the way back, it took considerably more effort to row back. Oliver had just settled in for another long ride, trying not to stare at the girl's back in front of him. After a moment of heavy silence, Leandra suddenly spoke.

"I am a killjoy, aren't I?"

Oliver gave a timid smile she couldn't see.

"No. You... you just try very hard to be one, I think."

"Duh," exclaimed Leandra. "Yes, because I'm not like you. I don't want to be loved by everyone. Hello, I'm Oliver, and I'm the good-looking, charming, kindest, and most generous person you'll ever meet. And if you ask me, I'll lick your shoes, do your bidding, and never tell you what I really think – that you all actually suck."

"You think I'm good-looking, charming, kind, and generous?"

"I didn't say that," said Leandra, sending a quick glance back at him. "I was mocking you. It's hypothetical. And

even if I did, those are bad qualities. They're repulsive to me."

Oliver felt the frustration mounting inside him and took a deep breath.

Another long silence ensued.

Then Oliver seemed to gather his thoughts.

"I think you're the repulsive one."

Leandra looked at him in surprise and took her paddle out of the water.

Oliver continued to row, paddling between fragments, his words accompanied by the physical effort.

"Because you're the meanest... most arrogant, and coldest person... I've ever met... And do you know why?...

Because deep down, you're a coward... You're afraid of letting anyone in... I wondered what you were... so afraid of losing... But actually, I don't see anything... there that could be lost... You're just a sad and lonely girl... who craves companionship... like the rest of us... You just won't admit it to yourself."

Suddenly, everything had fallen silent. Oliver had stopped rowing too. Leandra had turned her head forward again.

The boat drifted slowly downstream.

In front of them, the other canoes gradually increased their lead.

Nobody seemed to notice them.

“Is that hypothetical enough for you?” asked Oliver, addressing Leandra’s back. “Was that outspoken enough for you? Was that what you wanted to hear from me?”

He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Leandra put a hand to her eyes and then down again, like she was brushing an insect away.

Then a second time.

“And you know what? What comes next isn’t hypothetical. It’s the truth. And it’s probably what I should have said instead of everything I just did.”

He saw how Leandra’s back tensed.

“You may not understand that I like you. Or maybe you don’t want me to like you. Maybe you don’t understand why I’m attracted to you. But I do. And here’s why.”

His voice grew steadier.

“I think you’re beautiful. I like that you read a lot. That you think for yourself. That you’re an independent person who takes shit from no one. I think you’re strong, adventurous, and a little mysterious. The kind of mystery you want to solve over and over again, even if I never can. And that’s okay.”

He looked down into the river and put one hand into it, enjoying the cooling effect it had on him.

“You keep up this shield of coldness and indifference. But I seem to be the only person who can see a little way through it.”

He set the paddle down across his knees. Leandra was still like a statue. He wasn’t sure if she was even listening. Nonetheless, he went on.

“And yes, I’d like to hold you, to kiss you, to be there for you. Even as far away and as quietly as you’d like me to be, as long as I can be with you.”

The silence went on.

“Okay,” said Oliver, breaking the silence. “Maybe I went a bit overboard there.”

He got up, laid his paddle down, and jumped into the river, swimming with strong quick strokes toward the next canoe, which happened to be his father’s.

“Oliver!” Simon shouted. “I said no swimming! Did you go mad?”

He helped his son climb into the canoe.

Oliver sat down between his father and Brody, who looked at him in a mixture of amazement and fascination.

“You stay here now. What got into you?” Simon said, but his tone was not a reprimand.

Oliver stared ahead blankly.

“I’d like to know that myself,” he said quietly.

Chapter 11: Traps

Later that evening, returning from the supply shed on his way to bed, Oliver ran into Walter.

“Hello, Oliver. How are you?”

Walter’s eyes twinkled over his beard.

“Hey, Walter. I’m fine, thank you. How are you yourself?”

“Fine as a bird soaring in the heavens. The granary is coming along well. Everyone has been helping.”

Oliver looked away.

“I didn’t help much this year. I’m sorry.”

Walter looked at him.

“Oliver. I remember you when you were this big.” He made a gesture the size of a watermelon between his hands.

“It’s almost as if you were born here.”

He nodded towards the entrance in the distance.

“The wooden shield at the entrance is your creation. I remember how proud you were when you brought it to me, and then again when I showed it to everyone. Since then, countless members of CEAR have walked past it. It became part of this place.”

He looked back at Oliver.

“You take exceptionally good care of your brother and Brody. When Cheyenne was homesick last year, you

looked after her until she felt at home here. This year, you brought your friend here. I call that exceptional work.”

Oliver found no words other than, “Thank you.”

“Good night, my young friend,” Walter said with a smile as he turned away. “Until we meet again. Tomorrow or so,” he added cheerfully.

Oliver followed the old man with his gaze and couldn’t help smiling.

It wasn’t until much later that evening that Oliver and Joe finally found a quiet moment together in their tent, waiting. Outside, the crickets’ nightly concert was in full swing. From the campfire came the fading sounds of laughter, conversation and the occasional song. One by one, the voices faded into the warm summer night until only the steady chorus of insects remained.

The two boys sat cross-legged on their mattresses, facing each other in the soft glow of the lantern.

“I hope the trap will work,” Oliver said. “I checked it one last time.”

“It will. No reason why it shouldn’t.”

“Well... last time back home it didn’t work so well.”

“Yeah,” Joe admitted. “But we still got the guy.”

“Three days later,” Oliver remarked. “And half the money already gone.”

“Yeah. Still, made the newspapers, the socials and half the internet. It’s cool,” said Joe. He finally lay back on his mattress, took his favourite ball and began throwing it towards the ceiling.

“So, now,” he said between throws, “ladies and gentlemen, it is time for a new episode of *Young Summer Love*.

Previously on *Young Summer Love*, our two star-crossed lovers were still unable to connect. But as we will see in this episode, it is just a matter of time until their sparks ignite the burning fire of passionate love.”

“Will you shut up?” said Oliver. “And be quiet. I’m sure the whole compound and the entire forest around us, including freaking Lebron’s ghost lullabying in his prison, has heard you.”

“So sorry,” said Joe with a grin, catching his ball again.

“But do tell. You jumped out of the boat, did you? Must’ve been an unbearably *hot* moment...”

At the campfire, only the Siebers remained, sitting with Leandra, who was carving one of her wooden sticks while repeatedly glancing at the same page without making any real progress with her book.

After a while, the Siebers got up and wished Leandra good night. They walked hand in hand towards their tent.

Leandra continued, almost frantically working on her stick. Suddenly, a crack.

Her head shot up and she looked around.

As no other sound followed, she turned her attention back to her stick and book.

Then a voice arose.

*“Sleep, girl, sleep.
The world of dreams awaits.
Your mother will soon weep
over your little angel’s face.
Sleep, girl, sleep,
and never wake again.”*

Leandra stood up, looked around in fright, brandishing her little knife in front of her.

There, in the shadows of the trees on the other side of the meadows, something was moving.

Back in the tent, Oliver had just told Joe what had happened in the canoe.

“Right. A little overboard,” commented Joe. “Ha! And then you jumped? That could have been one of my moments! It’s brilliant!”

He clapped his hands together in enjoyment.

“I’m not sure it is,” said Oliver. “I’ve said mean things to her. And she must really hate me now.”

“Are you kidding?” said Joe, sitting up. “You did great! Checkmate, man! Bam, bam, bam!”

He made the appropriate gunshot gestures.

“And there he goes,” he resumed in his presenter’s voice.

“Our lover boy Oliver did not disappoint our audience today! In a moment of high bravery, he placed his heart in the girl’s hands! Will she be brave enough to accept it??? We will see next time in our brand new episode of *Young Summer Love*. Spoiler alert: she will. But it wasn’t me who told you.”

Oliver took a sharp breath through his nose.

“You’re like the only one here who thinks that this went well.”

Joe laughed.

“Ha! Yeah. Think about it, brother. If it doesn’t, you will not see her again for a year. So whether you fail or succeed this year is, after all, secondary. Because nobody will be able to tell the tale back home, you see? And I won’t. I for sure won’t tell.”

A cacophony of noises suddenly erupted.

Hundreds of little clinks and clanks echoed through the night. The crickets seemed to go instantly silent.

Joe shot up from his mattress.

“Our trap! Quickly, before the thief gets away!” he shouted, rushing through the tent door, almost ripping out the zipper in his haste. Oliver was on his heels.

Barely half a minute later, they burst into the supply shack. Oliver turned on the LED light that was hanging next to the door.

A figure was lying on the floor beneath an entire collection of metal pans and jars, hopelessly entangled in a fishing net.

Simon arrived almost at the same moment, followed by Walter and Annette, all still in their nightclothes.

“What is going on here, boys?” asked Simon.

“Mr. Arkan!” Joe exclaimed excitedly. “...Simon, we did catch your thief, exactly as you wanted. Look! He tried to get beer again.”

Indeed, beer bottles lay scattered all around the floor.

“But who is it?” asked Walter.

Simon knelt beside the struggling figure.

“Help me free him.”

More and more people arrived, and the little hut quickly became crowded as Simon and Walter untangled the thief. An all-too-familiar face appeared beneath the net, heavily battered by the kitchenware.

“Josh!” Simon exclaimed. “For God’s sake, you were the person stealing from us? Are you even allowed to drink?”

Angelina appeared in the doorway, let out a cry and rushed to Josh’s side, helping him to his feet.

“What did you do to him?” she cried. “He’s hurt!”

Walter looked at the tangled nets and the remains of the trap.

“Ingenious.” He turned towards Oliver and Joe, pointing a finger at them. “You boys did that? But what releases it?”

“A simple mechanism, really,” said Joe. “Just a thread that triggers it. It releases the net and the kitchen accessories and...”

“Oh my God!” cried Angelina. “He’s bleeding! Help him!”

Indeed, a thin stream of blood ran down Josh's forehead.

"It's okay... I'm okay," he panted.

Simon and Walter helped him into a chair while Angelina rushed out with Annette to fetch the first-aid kit from the East Hut.

When Angelina returned a few seconds later with the kit, Simon began bandaging Josh's wound.

"I am very disappointed in you, Josh. Very." Simon's face showed genuine hurt. "I just want to know one thing. Was it you who did the stealing the last few nights as well?"

"Yes, Mr. Arkan," said Josh, hanging his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Arkan."

Simon sighed.

"Who did you drink the beer with? And continue to be honest."

"Just myself, really," Josh answered after a second or two.

"I find that hard to believe," said Simon. "And the two bottles of wine too?"

Josh looked up.

"I... I drank them yesterday, as it was raining."

"Where are the bottles?" asked Simon.

"In a bag, in my tent," said Josh.

"Jesus. There are two boys in there who aren't even seven."

“I drank them outside,” said Josh. “I just brought the empty bottles back.”

“Really?” Simon asked sceptically, looking Josh in the eye.

“It was raining heavily yesterday. So, you still insist you drank the wine outside?”

“Yes,” said Josh. “I don’t mind the rain. I can prove it. I put my wet clothes right next to the empty bottles.”

By now, everyone at the camp seemed to have gathered in the shed. Even Leandra was standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the frame as she observed the scene in her usual detached manner.

Next to Josh stood Angelina. She was gently tending to his wounds, absentmindedly stroking one of his arms.

“It’s only a small cut, thankfully, Dad,” she said. Then she pointed at Joe and Oliver.

“I want the boys punished.”

“Well now,” said Simon as he got back to his feet. “The only one awaiting punishment here is Josh.”

Angelina looked at him in disbelief.

“They nearly killed him!”

Simon glanced at the remains of the trap.

“I don’t think he was in any grave danger. Still, I admit it was a little more excessive than what I had asked for.”

Angelina stared at her father.

“You asked them to do this to Josh?”

“No,” said Simon. “I’ve turned over the investigation of our disappearing food to the boys. They acted on my behalf after nobody had the courage to come clean.”

“Yes,” admitted Josh. “I did steal it. It is my fault.”

Joe stepped forward.

“So, you confess to the present crime?” he asked in his best police officer imitation.

Josh looked at him.

“Yes. I do. I did it.”

“But...” exclaimed Angelina.

“I did it alone,” Josh continued, cutting her off. “I deserve some punishment. Will you send me home?”

It was Walter who answered this time.

“Well, you did act wrongly, and against our community here and our trust, Josh. But still, no one was harmed seriously, and I think your encounter with the boys’ ingenious trap has given you a slight concussion. But to exile you, that would be, pardon me, a little excessive. You do good work here. We still have a few days to go, and so what I say is this: the boys are relieved of kitchen duty, which instead falls entirely to Josh. And he has, of course, to pay for the goods he stole so we can replace them. And promise he won’t steal again.”

“I agree with that,” said Simon.

A murmur of agreement and a round of nods spread through the crowd.

“Well,” said Angelina loudly, “I don’t. And I don’t think it is fair or right to reward violence that way. I will help Josh with all the kitchen duties.”

This earned her a strange look from her father.

“Very well, then,” said Simon. “It is decided. And peace, everybody. There shall be no reproach or bad feelings towards Josh. We have indeed all been young at some point, and all of us have done our fair share of things we’re not proud of. Nobody is holding them against us either, so let us not hold them against our youth.”

He looked around the crowded shed.

“And now you’re all off to bed. Yes, you too, Angelina. Josh will help clean up the mess here, and I will bring him back to his tent.”

He turned to Verena.

“Verena, love, and Martha, could you just please go and check on our boys?”

Almost instantly, the crowd dissolved.

A few minutes later, Joe and Oliver returned to their tent.

Without a word, Joe walked over to his mattress, climbed into his sleeping bag and turned onto his side, his back to Oliver.

Oliver lay down on his side.

He noticed his friend's unusual silence.

"That went well," he said. "I didn't expect that."

Joe did not reply.

"Joe?"

Still nothing.

"Hey, what's the matter? We solved the crime."

"My love interest is no more, my dear detective," Joe said flatly.

"What does that mean?"

"Your sister." Joe sighed. "I'm telling you, your little summer love story isn't the only one going on here."

"What do you mean?" asked Oliver.

"Blind as ever, my dear friend. You have eyes. Look. Your sister has a soft spot for that irksome thief."

"You mean... she and Josh?" asked Oliver, raising his eyebrows.

"Of course. Who else? I should have known. I was so stupid. I was blind myself."

He let out a deep sigh.

"I'd rather see my sister with you than with that Josh."

“It gets worse, my friend. He’ll be your double brother-in-law. The brother of your wife and the husband of your sister. Isn’t that incest?”

“No,” said Oliver. “Don’t worry. My sister just has a summer crush. It’s nothing more.”

“...Or is it?”

Joe finally turned to face Oliver.

“Man, that is so bad.”

“Dad’s going to kill her when he finds out.”

“You think they drank the beer together?”

“Probably.” Joe shrugged. “And the wine. And the snacks. Well, your sister apparently likes bad boys. Which isn’t surprising, considering who you were after this summer. Seems to be a family thing.”

Oliver smiled faintly.

Joe stared at the tent ceiling.

“But sure. Me and your sister. It was never going to happen. Not here, and not back home.”

“I’m sorry,” said Oliver gently.

“Why do they always have to go for the bad boy? Maybe I should have stolen the beer myself instead of being the ingenious, heroic good guy who catches the thief.”

“Well, to be frank, you’re a pretty wicked badass yourself in my book,” said Oliver. “Even if you’re solving crime instead of committing it.”

Joe nodded.

“Right,” he said. “Right. Thank you, Frank.”

Oliver laughed and shrugged.

“That’s what friends are there for.”

“Friends,” said Joe.

He turned onto his side again.

“And brothers.”

“And brothers,” said Oliver.

“Good night, brother of another mother,” murmured Joe as Oliver switched off the lantern.

“Night,” said Oliver.

“Speaking of your mother...”

“No,” said Oliver.

Both of them smiled as they drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 12: The Sleepover

As Oliver and Joe left the tent the next morning and headed towards breakfast, Leandra, who had apparently been waiting just across the field, stormed straight towards them.

She stopped in front of Joe and jabbed a finger into his chest.

“I know it’s you. Stop playing dumb. Are you, like, a ventriloquist or something? Stop lurking around and trying to scare me. It is not funny, you bloody paedophilic peeper.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, lady,” said Joe, though he didn’t take a step back. “What are you babbling about? What am I supposed to be doing?”

“Don’t even try,” said Leandra. “You tried to scare me by singing Lebron’s freakish song. You memorised it at the campfire, and now you’re using it. You keep appearing everywhere in disguise, trying to scare me.”

She pulled out her pocket knife, flipped open the blade and held it in front of Joe’s face.

“You see this? You do your Lebron thing one more time, and I’ll stick this into your gut until you scream for your mama.”

She held his gaze for one last moment, then turned and walked away.

Both boys stared after her.

“What was that all about?” asked Joe.

“I don’t know,” said Oliver, looking worried. “You weren’t doing anything of the sort, were you?”

“No, of course not,” said Joe. “I was with you the whole time. But seeing how it drove her mad, I almost wish I had done something to tick her off like that. This way now I can’t even take the credit.”

“I think she believes that you were singing Lebron’s song back at the prison. That was you?”

“How? By singing the song as a ventriloquist? I don’t even remember the lyrics. I never do with songs. Or people’s names, for that matter. Melodies stick in my head, but words? Nope.”

Oliver looked towards the compound gate through which Leandra had just disappeared.

“Should we be worried?”

“Nah,” said Joe dismissively, waving a hand. “But if you get the chance, please stop her from sticking that thing into me, will you?”

“I’ll try,” said Oliver, “but there isn’t much stopping her. Luckily for you, there is not much time left for her to do the deed. Camp ends in two days.”

“Thanks for your support, brother,” said Joe. “Very reassuring. Now let’s go get some breakfast.”

After lunch that day, Joe and Oliver were sitting on the hill above Brody and Theseus, who were building yet another fish trap down by the river. From where they sat, they could easily keep an eye on the two boys and just make out Leandra sitting high on the Root Tree, reading.

Joe nodded towards her.

“I know your lady friend is a bit gaga, but this morning was extreme, even for her. What do you reckon is going on?”

Oliver glanced at the lonely figure on the tree. He picked up a stone and threw it into the river.

“She thinks somebody’s following her,” he said.

“Apparently they’ve been singing that freaking lullaby to her. The same one we heard in the prison.”

Joe frowned.

“Okay,” he said. “I still don’t know what we heard in that prison. But if she’s right, someone’s stalking her. Who? And why?”

Oliver threw another stone into the water.

“Who? I have a suspicion. Why? No idea.”

He threw a third stone.

Joe chuckled.

“I know where you’re going with this. Who do we know that knows that lullaby?”

Oliver looked towards the forest.

“Everyone who was at the campfire on your first evening.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Almost nobody can remember a song after just one pass. So, who actually enjoys singing it?”

Oliver looked back at him.

“That was my guess as well.”

This time Joe looked towards Leandra.

“Okay. She acts tough, but why would Rick want to stalk her? Or scare her? Or whatever he’s doing?”

Oliver shrugged and threw yet another stone down in the river.

“I really don’t know.”

He looked back at the compound.

“I saw him helping the others on the granary just a while ago.”

“Yeah, that’s very odd behaviour, is it not? Just after robbery and murder.”

Another stone flew down and made ripples in the water.

“Let’s go help the boys,” said Oliver and slid down the little hill.

“Great. Work again. It’s like a slave camp here,” mumbled Joe and followed.

That evening, Oliver and Joe lay in their tent, reflecting on the day.

“Well,” said Joe, “that was an uneventful day, for a change. Well, except for the part where your crazy lady threatened to kill me this morning.”

“She’s not...” Oliver began.

But a voice from outside interrupted him.

“Boys?”

Oliver and Joe looked at each other.

“Who’s there?” asked Joe with an annoyed look.

“Me, dumbass,” came Leandra’s voice. “Open sesame.”

“How was that?” Joe shouted.

“Please. Open your tent,” snapped Leandra. “Or do I need to send Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves in first to get you?”

“Sorry,” Joe shouted again in a high-pitched voice. “I didn’t catch that. How was that?”

Leandra sighed.

“May I come in, please?”

“Why?” shouted Joe.

“Because I gave the tent to Angelina and her lover boy. So, can I please come in?”

Hesitantly, Oliver got up and unzipped the tent.

Leandra stepped inside, dragging her sleeping bag behind her.

Oliver zipped the tent shut again and slipped back into his own sleeping bag.

Leandra sat down between them on the floor.

“Come again? You did what?” said Joe. “You gave the tent to Angelina and that scumbag Josh?”

“That scumbag happens to be my brother, too.”

“Not sure that makes it any better,” said Joe. “And besides, what did they give you to make you leave the tent? Their souls? Their hearts? All their money?”

“Nothing. I offered to give them the tent myself.”

“Since when do you” – he pointed at her – “give up anything on your own free will?”

Leandra glanced at Oliver.

“Since someone told me I should try to do it more often.”

She turned back to Joe.

“Not that it’s any of your business, filthy stalker. And I thought you boys would be happy to have some double-X presence close to your faulty XYs. Besides, you have a big tent. And I wasn’t keen on going to the two baby boys in Josh’s tent. So the two weird ones here will have to suffice.”

Joe chuckled.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the great and only Leandra, who takes everyone for granted. Nothing is safe from her dark aura. She’ll take everything you have. Even if you have nothing at all. And if you have nothing, she’ll suck the souls right out of your bodies instead.”

“God, do you ever shut up? No wonder the little friend here is always so quiet when he should be the one talking.” Another glance flicked towards Oliver, accompanied by the ghost of a smile.

“So... can I bunk here, please? I guess it’s all right for you, of course, and I know I’m not really leaving you much choice... but still. I asked.”

Joe looked back at her, amused.

“You certainly did. And you certainly can bunk here. But... I’m afraid you can’t sleep on my air mattress.”

Leandra raised an eyebrow.

“I am a very disturbed sleeper. I kick and throw my arms around during the night. I might hurt you. And I fart in my sleep. It keeps my sleeping bag warm. But the smell might wake you. Nothing can contain it. Old family tradition.”

He paused thoughtfully.

“And I’m allergic to sleeping too close to other people. And I’m afraid of the dark. So your darkness should stay away, please.”

He looked at her pocket.

“Besides, I’m still not keen on getting impaled accidentally by your little knifey thing.”

Leandra stood up, picked up her sleeping bag, rolled it out beside Oliver’s, gently pushed him a little to one side, then slipped inside.

Without a word, she took Oliver’s arm and draped it around herself until they settled into a remarkably comfortable spooning position.

Only then did she speak.

“Not a word about this to anyone, or I’ll kill you both.”

She pointed a finger at Oliver without opening her eyes.

“First warning for you, Oliver.”

Then she pointed at Joe.

“Second warning for you, big mouth.”

She closed her eyes.

Oliver's and Joe's eyes met.

Joe broke into a wide grin, gave him a double thumbs-up and silently mouthed:

"Told you so."

Oliver grimaced... but couldn't help smiling.

"Not a word," Leandra muttered. "Sleep, dumbasses."

Joe got up and, for the first time, he was the one who turned out the lantern.

He was still smiling to himself.

Chapter 13: The Last Day

The sun shining through the open tent flap woke Oliver and Joe almost simultaneously the next morning.

They looked around and realised they were alone in the tent.

“Don’t be sad, my friend,” said Joe to Oliver. “She needs time. Give her that.”

He began getting dressed.

“Do you think she regrets it?” asked Oliver, remaining in his sleeping bag and staring at the ceiling.

“Not at all,” replied Joe, pulling on his shirt. “I think it’s just new for her. Boy, I honestly don’t think she has the slightest idea how any of this works.”

“Neither do I,” said Oliver.

“I’m not sure anyone does, honestly,” said Joe.

Then he left the tent.

At breakfast, Oliver and Joe were eating bread with chocolate spread while Angelina and Josh sat at the other end of the table.

As it was already fairly late, most of the people from CEAR were working on the outer structure of the granary. Simon glanced over.

Then, in an unusually brisk stride, he walked straight towards the table.

Without a word, he struck Josh so hard that the teenager tumbled from the bench.

Angelina screamed.

Everyone nearby jumped to their feet in shock.

“Why did you steal again, Josh? Huh? Why?” shouted Simon, standing over the stunned teenager, who was holding his face.

“Dad!” Angelina cried. “What are you doing? Have you gone insane?”

A circle began to form around them.

“I gave you a chance, and this is how you repay us?”

Simon shouted coldly. “By stealing again? At least six beers are missing.”

“What?” Josh said, horrified. “I didn’t steal anything.”

“Once a liar, always a liar,” said Simon.

Josh looked utterly defeated.

“I swear...” he pleaded, getting to his feet. “I didn’t steal anything.”

By now, everyone had gathered around. Low murmurs spread through the crowd.

“Simon,” said Verena, stepping forward. “What’s going on? Please, everyone, calm down.”

People all around looked at her.

“Dad just punched Josh for no reason!” Angelina cried.

“For no reason?” Simon snapped. “He stole again, Verena.”

The murmurs from the crowd got louder again.

“Maybe,” came Walter’s deep, quiet voice. “We should all take a step back here, please.”

Simon instinctively stepped back. People made way for the thin figure of the camp director.

“Thank you. Now,” Walter said, stepping in front of Josh.

“Josh, did you or did you not steal from our supplies again?”

Walter looked him straight in the eyes.

Josh held his gaze.

“I didn’t.”

Then he lowered his eyes.

“I swear.”

“Now, Josh. After what happened, you must understand that we have a hard time believing you. Do you understand that?”

Josh looked stricken and let his head hang.

“He didn’t steal last night,” Angelina said.

“And why would you know that?” Simon asked his daughter.

Angelina hesitated.

“Because... I was with him last night. The whole night.”

“What?” Simon stared at her in disbelief. “You and him? You’re... together now?”

Verena calmly placed a hand on her husband’s arm.

“We’ve been together for a while. We just didn’t know it.”

Angelina’s eyes looked pleading. “Please don’t be mad, Dad.”

“I thought better of you, Angelina.” Simon shook his head.

“I... I don’t know what to say to you. Are you just saying this to protect him?”

“No. I was with him all night in my tent. He didn’t leave. He didn’t bring back any beer or anything. I swear.”

Walter spoke again.

“Then it seems to me that we have another thief running around our little camp.”

He looked around the circle.

“All right, everyone. Back to your workstations. Give the Arkans some space. Josh, come with me. I’ll take a look at that bruise.”

The crowd slowly dispersed.

People returned to the jobs they had been doing before the confrontation.

Only Simon, Verena and Angelina headed towards the supply hut, while Walter and Josh walked to the East Hut to fetch the medical kit.

That left Oliver and Joe alone at the table.

“You see?” Joe said. “I was right about your sister.”

“Yes,” said Oliver, taking another bite of his bread with chocolate spread.

Then all hell seemed to break loose as raised voices erupted from the supply hut.

Neither boy reacted. Oliver just squinted his eyes, while Joe finished his bread.

“I hope your parents won’t be too hard on her,” Joe said quietly, licking his finger. “And man... your dad packs quite a punch. One hit and Josh was down, and he’s like muscly and all.”

“Yes.” Oliver frowned. “And we were wrong.”

“All this time we assumed there was one thief.”

“But there might have been two all along.”

“Or someone took over after Josh,” Joe said, finishing the last of his breakfast.

“We need to find out what’s going on.”

“I guess another trap is pointless now that our first one has been sprung.”

Thomas passed them with a ball of reeds, waving at them with his free hand.

“But a stakeout might just work,” said Joe, waving back.

“Yes,” Oliver agreed. “It just might. But do you really think the thief will steal again on our last night here tonight?”

“Yes. And if not, all the better. The game is on.”

“Afoot.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

As the two boys were leaving the table, Annette was bringing the last few dishes into the kitchen in the East Hut, where the ones from last evening were still piling up. While everybody else was working or going about their activities, Annette started washing the dishes peacefully. She didn’t look up as another figure joined her and quietly began scrubbing a pan next to her.

“Thank you,” said Annette quietly, continuing her own work beside Leandra.

That afternoon, Rick volunteered to drive all the women to the nearby orchard to pick mirabelles with the CEAR minibus.

Angelina and Leandra sat beside him on the front bench seat while Rick drove the short fifteen-minute journey to the orchard, whistling some eerie tune.

“Thank you for letting me use the tent last night,” Angelina said.

Leandra shrugged but said nothing.

“Where did you sleep?” Angelina asked.

“At your brother’s.”

“In the boys’ tent?” Angelina exclaimed.

Leandra nodded.

“And tonight too?”

“I guess.”

“Pretty girls like you...” started Rick.

Angelina grimaced.

“You creep,” Leandra retorted. “Call me a pretty girl again and you’ll spend the night in a prison cell with a nice fat hairy guy.”

Angelina laughed.

Rick nodded curtly and concentrated on the road.

After arriving at the orchard, the women dispersed among the trees. In the dappled shade, they picked ripe mirabelles from the branches.

As the afternoon wore on, the women gradually dispersed farther apart throughout the orchard. Verena moved among

them with bottles of water and snacks, keeping everyone refreshed under the hot summer sun.

The third time she stopped by Leandra to hand her a bottle of water, she said, “I heard you and Oliver had an argument the other day.”

Leandra looked at her sharply.

“I mean no offence or disrespect,” Verena said with a smile. “Oliver is a good boy. He doesn’t talk very much, but I know he likes you a lot. Just so it’s said.”

Verena smiled one last time before moving on towards Angelina a few trees away.

While the adults had been working all day and preparing the last dinner that evening, Joe and Oliver spent the time with Theseus and Brody down at the riverbed, swimming, playing, and enjoying their last full day at camp.

By late afternoon, everyone from CEAR and their families had gathered around the campfire, where a table had been laid out with a generous apéro and plenty of food.

Somehow, Annette and Verena had managed to bake the freshly gathered mirabelles in big mouthwatering tarts.

Rick and Thomas were grilling big piles of meat, sausages

and vegetables on a grill over the campfire. Simon was cutting big slices of bread, but set the knife down as Walter stepped forward. The people of CEAR stood around the old man in a semicircle.

“Well, here we are again, my dear friends and children. We’re done for one more year,” said Walter and looked around at everyone in turn, a twinkle in his eye.

“Simon and I would like to thank everyone who once again contributed by donating their free time and energy to build and contribute to this little project of ours. Our thanks go to the Arkans, the Siebers and, of course, to our two helpers from the nearby city.”

Walter named a few more of the present members gathered.

“I’m delighted to say that we almost managed to finish our granary this year, which means we’ll have to start thinking about what we’ll build next year, if we are all still here and able.”

He looked at the children and teenagers.

“I’m also very happy that so many of our youngsters continue to join us and be part of our summer adventure. And this especially in an age where media and technology encourage everyone to stay at home, constantly connected to their devices and sitting in front of their screens.”

Joe chuckled, but Walter didn't pay attention to him.

"May their youth also remind us of our own, and let us keep no hard feelings over the few altercations we've had during the last few days."

Walter looked around solemnly.

"As long as someone cares for CEAR, there shall be a welcoming place here for all who desire to be part of it. Enjoy your last evening, enjoy the feast!"

Everyone raised their glasses and cheered.

"Before we do that, there is something else that needs to be said."

Simon stepped forward. "This morning, I wrongly accused Josh here of stealing again. Even worse: I hit him, even though he was innocent. I would like to apologise here to him, and to everybody else, for my grave mistake in judgement, my anger and having lost my temper. Even though I have no excuse, it would mean a lot to me if you, Josh, and you all, would accept my apology here. I can only promise you that I will do my best to be better in the future."

Silence ensued.

Then Josh stepped out of the crowd, walked towards Simon and they shook hands, a gesture that then ended in a friendly hug.

A wave of cheers and claps arose from the people of CEAR. Walter nodded his approval. Angelina cried in her mother's arms. Simon smiled, looking vulnerable.

"And now, eat and drink, my friends!" shouted Walter. People cheered even louder.

While the adults formed small groups around the loaded table, eating and talking, Brody and Theseus played swashbuckling pirates with sticks across the meadow.

Oliver and Joe sat a little farther away, eating sausages and drinking lemonade.

"That's quite the little telenovela you guys have over here. I like it." Joe took a bite of his sausage. He glanced over at where Angelina and Josh were sitting and talking like they were in their own little world.

"It's a shame, really," he said, looking back at Oliver.

"That you have to end this almost on a cliffhanger."

Oliver nodded but said nothing. He looked over at Leandra, who sat even farther away, her back turned to the group, reading and munching chips.

"One lost, ten found," Joe said.

Joe reconsidered.

"On second thought... with this one, maybe it's more like ten lost, one found."

Oliver did not move. Joe straightened up.

“Well, we still have time to catch the bottle thief. And I have a feeling tonight’s the night. We’ll go home with a good story... and one more case solved.”

Oliver nodded slightly.

Joe continued.

“Well... okay, it’s not solving the mystery of Georges Lebron, of course. But it’s still something.”

Oliver looked towards the old prison.

“It’s thirty years later. He must be either dead or in South America or something,” he said.

They stayed silent for a while.

Oliver glanced back at Leandra.

Joe sighed.

“Okay then. What is she even reading?”

“Pride and Prejudice,” Oliver said without missing a beat.

“Ugh. Sounds like her life story,” Joe commented dryly.

“Good thing, then,” said Oliver, smiling slightly, “that she’s not reading Sense and Sensibility.”

“That indeed wouldn’t make much sense. And it sounds too... boring,” said Joe.

Oliver couldn’t help smiling this time.

“Ah, there he is,” said Joe, giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “So, let’s get ready for tonight.”

Oliver nodded.

The two of them got up and headed towards their tent.

Chapter 14: Stakeout

Night had finally fallen. It was dark and growing colder, but a still warm summer breeze carried the sound of crickets from the fields to Oliver's ears.

He was crouching by the door of the East Hut in his sleeping bag, armed with his flashlight.

Joe suddenly appeared, looking annoyed.

"Well, everyone's gone to sleep now. And, FYI, your dear and tender is in our tent again, just so you know."

"Leandra is in our tent?" asked Oliver.

"Yes. She's expecting you, of course, not me."

"I won't leave you here alone."

"Thanks for that," said Joe. "I hope our thief shows his face quickly and doesn't wait until first light to commit his evil deeds."

"Or doesn't steal at all."

"Well, from here we can see everyone who enters the hut. Thankfully, prehistoric people apparently hadn't invented back entrances to sheds yet."

They waited in silence and darkness as time passed.

Suddenly, a voice arose from the West Hut.

Sleep, girl, sleep.

The fire of hell ablaze.

*The devil smiles at you
while infernal demons dance.
Sleep, girl, sleep,
and never wake again.*

Oliver looked at Joe.

“That’s not you, is it?” said Joe, looking back at him.

“No. You hear it too?” asked Oliver.

“It’s Lebron, I think,” said Joe.

“It can’t be,” said Oliver, pushing himself upright as his sleeping bag slid down. “We need to go and see.”

Joe held him back.

“No. Are you mad? If it’s Lebron, he’s dangerous. He’ll kill us both.”

“Oh, I thought Lebron was a collective hallucination.”

“Maybe not. I can hear him.”

In the night, the words echoed again.

*“Sleep, girl, sleep.
The fire of hell ablaze...”*

Joe’s face grew pale.

“It’s the last third verse, I think. Nobody sang it to us.”

“It’s bad poetry. At any rate, we need to go and see.
Come.”

“I think I just wet myself,” whispered Joe. “Or was that
you?”

But he followed Oliver anyway.

Two boys lit their flashlights and ran towards the West
Hut.

On the way, Oliver picked up a branch from the ground,
while Joe grabbed a sturdy stick.

They rushed through the doorway, only to stagger back in
horror.

The entire back wall was engulfed in flames, and smoke
rapidly filled the hut.

“Oh God!” screamed Joe. “Fire! Fire!”

The two boys stumbled back outside, already coughing.

The flames were now already visible from outside, lighting
up the darkness of the compound.

“Fire! Fire! Help! Help!” Joe shouted.

Oliver joined in.

“The West Hut is burning! Please help!”

Light flared up from the tents as people stuck their heads
outside.

Meanwhile the fire was rapidly consuming the West Hut. It spread quickly to the reed roof and the wooden frame. Clay crackled and broke away from the wooden wall structure. Simon was the first to reach the helpless boys. Verena followed only moments later.

“Theseus and Brody, Verena! Take the kids.”

Verena immediately ran back towards the tents.

“Everyone, leave the compound!” Simon shouted. “There is nothing we can do!” He looked at the burning longhouse illuminating the place like daylight.

Walter appeared out of the dark, clutching his head in despair.

“My God... all that work going up in flames!”

Simon grabbed him by the shoulder.

“We need to leave, Walter, now! Boys, you have lights. Guide everyone up to the road by the cornfield and stay there!”

Rick appeared, white as a sheet in his boxer shorts and tank top.

“I’ll take the bike to town to get help!”

Rick disappeared into the darkness, running barefoot as fast as he could.

Simon grabbed Oliver. Verena had just come back with the two little boys who looked utterly terrified. The heat was unbearable even dozens of metres away from the hellfire.

“Son, listen. You need to take the lead and lead the people out now! Angelina!”

Angelina and Josh appeared, their hair tangled and in disarray. The Siebers arrived with them, followed by Annette with Brody and Theseus, holding their hands.

“I’m here. With Josh.”

A motorbike howled.

Simon ignored it.

“Follow Oliver and Joe out. Verena, you too. And Annette. Siebers? Ah, there you are. Follow Oliver to the road.

Everyone, go! You’ll be safe there.”

He shot a look at Walter.

“Walter and I will try to contain the fire.”

A tremendous crack echoed through the night as part of the roof of the West Hut collapsed.

People screamed in terror.

“Follow me!” shouted Oliver.

“Come on, everyone! We need to leave!” shouted Joe.

He and Oliver took the lead while the rest of the people stumbled hurriedly behind them.

The large group exited the compound through the gate and continued their escape.

Until the clearing, the fire was so bright that nobody needed any light, but once the group had entered the small forest patch beyond the parking area, they regrouped around Joe and Oliver and the few others that had lights.

Theseus was now crying loudly, so Joe picked him up and carried him. The rest of the group managed to remain relatively calm, but the expression they all shared was one of deep anguish and sadness.

When they reached the cornfield, they stopped. Most of the people sat down on the ground. Annette was crying, her head in her hands. Helene took her in her arms and gently rocked her.

“Everyone all right?” asked Oliver of no one in particular.

“Yes, my dear,” answered his mother. “Shaken up, but we’re all right.”

“All right,” said Joe, handing Theseus over to his mother.

“Is everyone here?”

“I think so,” said Angelina. “Except for Dad and Walter.”

“Wait,” said Oliver, looking around. “Where’s Leandra? Leandra?”

Angelina frowned.

“Shouldn’t she be with you?”

“No,” said Oliver. “We were doing a stakeout at the hut to catch the supply thief.”

“I think I saw her moving around in your tent after we left. After you shouted ‘Fire!’”

“Oh God... Leandra.”

He turned to Joe.

“Joe, you stay here.”

Oliver took off running back towards the compound, his flashlight sweeping wildly through the darkness.

“Oliver, come back! It’s too dangerous!” his mother shouted after him. Oliver ignored the shouts.

He ran back past the parking area, through the gate, then turned right towards the tents.

The West Hut had become a blazing inferno.

The heat was palpable even from the tents on the far side of the compound.

Frantically, Oliver searched the area with his eyes but couldn’t see Leandra anywhere. Far away he saw the two shapes of Walter and Simon. They were trying to contain the fire as best they could while keeping a safe distance from the flames.

Oliver ran to his tent and found it open.

He shone his flashlight inside and stepped in.

The tent was empty.

Leandra's sleeping bag lay in a heap, as if she had left in great haste.

He stepped on something hard.

As he moved his foot aside, his flashlight revealed Leandra's pocketknife that doubles as a flashlight.

He picked it up, slipped it into his pocket, and hurried back outside.

Instead of leaving the compound, he ran straight to his father.

"Dad!" he shouted.

"Oliver! I told you to stay with the others!" Simon shouted without turning around. "Go back there this instant!"

"Joe's with them," Oliver shouted back. "They're safe! Dad, Leandra is missing! Have you seen her?"

The cracking of the fire was deafening and Oliver felt like his body was cooking.

"What? No. I'm sure she's fine."

Oliver looked at the burning hut.

"She's not with the others. What if she's in there?"

He started towards the hut, but his father caught hold of his arm.

"Son, listen. I'm sure she's safe. She must have left on her own. She's a tough girl."

"We haven't seen her! Maybe she's in there!"

Oliver struggled, but his father held him firmly.

A cacophony suddenly arose. Lights suddenly erupted through the night.

People were approaching.

Blue lights flashed through the darkness.

Firefighters arrived in their vehicles, broke through the barriers, and immediately began fighting the fire.

They lowered their pumps and hoses into the river and started drawing water.

Oliver, Simon and Walter watched as the flames slowly but steadily came under control.

All three had tears in their eyes.

As the flames slowly died down, Oliver's eyes remained fixed on the inferno, fearing for Leandra's life.

Once the fire was under control, Simon and Walter met the fire sergeant in the parking area.

"Thank God Rick got to us as fast as he could," said the sergeant. "He must have driven like the devil himself."

"I'll thank him personally tomorrow," said Simon. "He's asleep now I think."

"Even so, the building has burned down completely, and I'm sorry for all the work you folks put into it."

"That's all right," said Simon and sighed. "Scientifically, it was very interesting to witness. We can document it quite

well. And nobody was harmed. When that happened millennia ago, people must have felt an incredible loss at a tragedy like this.”

“I’ll leave two firefighters here with a fire engine to guard the site in case the fire flares up again. Your people are safe in the tents. It’s after two in the morning; you should all get some sleep.”

“Thank you very much, Sergeant.”

Just then, Oliver and Joe arrived from the parking area, their flashlights still in their hands.

“Dad! Leandra is still missing!” said Oliver, out of breath.

“And her bike too. We need to call the police!”

“There’s a girl missing?” asked the sergeant.

“A teenage girl,” answered Simon. “She’s a troublemaker, this one. I think she fled the compound again. She does it every year. Maybe it is unrelated to the fire. You didn’t find...”

Simon did not finish the sentence, but the fire sergeant immediately understood the unspoken question.

“None, I can assure you. But it does look as though someone set the fire deliberately. It looks like fuel to me. The two firefighters I leave here will investigate, but there were no human remains in the fire. I have informed the

police. They'll come by as soon as possible to question everyone. Until then, you can all sleep safely."

"But Leandra is missing," Oliver insisted. "Nobody has seen her."

Thomas appeared next to them, looking sombre.

"I saw the girl, I think. I may have seen her on my way out. I think she rode past me on her bike."

"That's not possible," said Oliver. "She'd never leave without telling someone."

"I'm sure she's fine, Oliver," said Simon. "She runs away every year when she's had enough, remember? Maybe tonight was the night. And she never warned anyone before."

"She'd never leave," Oliver insisted. "Not this year."

Simon placed his hands on Oliver's shoulders.

"Son, Leandra is complicated. She does this every year when she can't bear it anymore. Why would it be different this year?"

Oliver looked down.

"Because... I know. We were becoming... friends."

Simon turned to Joe.

"Could you take my son back to your tent? We'll call Leandra's mother tomorrow. She'll turn up, I'm sure."

The sergeant intervened suddenly.

“Oh, you’re talking about Miranda Berger’s daughter, right?” he asked.

“You know her?”

“Everyone does around here. And I can confirm that she probably just ran away again. She does it every now and then. Eventually she always turns up somewhere in the district. Her mother doesn’t even bother reporting it anymore.”

“Why does everyone know her? They’re not from around here, I think.”

“They were once. Let’s just say it’s a complicated family. You’ve heard of the famous killer Lebron, right?”

“I’ve told them the story,” said Thomas.

“Well, then you have heard of Miranda Flosk?” asked the sergeant.

“Was that his last victim?” asked Joe.

“Or, after her marriage, Miranda Berger,” said the sergeant. “So technically yes, his last intended victim. They say she never really recovered after Lebron nearly got her. And Lebron himself has been missing for thirty years. People say she lost her mind a little when he vanished. Her family left shortly after Lebron disappeared.”

Silence followed this.

“Leandra’s mum was Lebron’s last victim,” said Joe, lost in thought. “The one because of whom he was caught.”

The sergeant looked at him appreciatively.

“The one and only, kid. The one and only.”

Oliver stared at them in disbelief.

Then, suddenly, he understood.

“Lebron wanted revenge on the person who had destroyed his life,” he said. “He must somehow have discovered that Leandra was Miranda Berger’s daughter.”

“Kid, believe me,” said the sergeant. “That guy disappeared thirty years ago. I’m sure he’s dead as a doornail. The police searched for him for years. They never found him.”

“You’re wrong,” said Oliver quietly. “He’s still out there.”

He looked towards the black forest beyond the camp.

“He’s still here.”

“We’ve heard him sing his lullaby,” explained Joe.

“Tonight. And back at the prison the other day.”

“The prison?” said Simon. “You were at the prison?”

“He must have set the fire tonight to distract us while he took Leandra to get his revenge,” said Oliver.

“But to take her where?” answered Joe. “He used a fire tonight, just like he did thirty years ago during his escape from the prison.”

Oliver began pacing back and forth, thinking frantically.

“Where would he have taken her? Where did he live the past 30 years?”

Suddenly he stopped. Joe looked at his friend as their eyes met.

“The only place I can think of is...” he continued.

“Boys, what – ” Simon said, but neither of them paid any attention to him.

“The prison. Come on!” Oliver shouted, waving Joe on.

“The place is dangerous,” the sergeant shouted.

But neither of the boys was listening anymore.

With their flashlights in hand, they were already running towards the forest and the prison.

“The prison may be dangerous!” Simon shouted after them, but to no avail.

The boys had already disappeared around the next bend.

Only a dangling flash of light was seen here and there.

Chapter 15: Georges Lebron

The two of them reached the prison quickly and slipped through the hole in the fence just as they had a few days earlier. They ran into the building through the main entry. Everything looked different.

In a blur, they ran past the checkpoint. The corridor was halfway collapsed but still accessible. The two boys hurried through it. Just as they reached the cellblock, Oliver's feet hit a metal tube that was sticking out and he tumbled over it. His flashlight rolled away, but the building held firm. Joe rushed to his friend instantly.

"You all right?" asked Joe, helping him back to his feet.

"Yes, I think."

Joe swept his flashlight across the ruined building.

"Man... this place looks different by night. And after we made it fall in..."

"Shh," said Oliver. "Do you hear anything?"

"Nothing."

A deadly silence filled the room.

"Leandra?" Oliver called loudly.

No answer came other than a faint echo.

"Leandra... andra... dra..."

The two boys let their lights glide through the cellblock. Quickly their lights revealed that the upper floor, where Lebron's cell had been, was now unreachable. Part of the wall had collapsed, and the staircase had come down with it. A lot of the east cells had fallen in, including Georges Lebron's own cell.

Oliver shone his flashlight around in despair.

"Leandra?" he called again.

"Leandra... andra... dra..."

Silence fell again.

Oliver shivered.

"There's nobody here!" he said, standing at the remnants of the stairs and looking up. "There is nobody here."

Joe didn't answer.

Instead, he kept his flashlight fixed on the floor, where a huge block of concrete had crashed through, leaving a gaping hole.

"Oliver."

"She's not here! We were wrong. Lebron isn't here."

"Oliver! You should come here," Joe repeated in a strange tone.

At that moment, Simon, Walter, Thomas and the fire sergeant burst in, followed by two more firemen.

“Boys!” Simon shouted. “You come with us right now! This place could bury us under it at any moment! Out! Are you mad! There is no Lebron or Leandra here! It’s just an old building.”

“Look, Mr. Arkan! Ehm... Simon.”

Joe still had his flashlight pointed into the hole.

Everyone gathered around it.

“Holy mother of God,” whispered the sergeant.

“Is that...” Simon breathed.

Joe’s flashlight illuminated a skeletal corpse.

Fragments of a light brown prison uniform still clung to the mummified remains.

“The block must’ve fallen last time we were here. It caused the floor to collapse and exposed the corpse!” said Joe in fascinated horror. “That is so awesome!”

The sergeant knelt beside the remains.

“It must be one of the convicts,” said the sergeant. “He apparently tried to escape the fire through a tunnel beneath the floor. Maybe a vent or a pipe.”

“But the police said everyone was accounted for...” said Simon.

“Except for...”

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes, I do. This is...”

“Georges Lebron...” Thomas finished the sentence, looking pale.

“It must be,” said the sergeant. “It can only be him. He was the only one missing after the prison fire...”

“Impossible...” whispered Thomas, shaking his head.

“It has to be him,” said the sergeant. “I will call the police. They have to come right now. But I think you kids just solved a thirty-year-old mystery.”

He looked down at the skeletal corpse once more.

“The mystery of Georges Lebron...”

An hour later, Oliver and Joe were sitting by the prison gate. The night was already shifting into the grey of morning, but it couldn’t be much later than four in the morning.

Half a dozen police cars surrounded the old prison, their blue lights flashing.

Nearby, Simon, Walter, Thomas and the fire department sergeant were talking animatedly with the police officers. They had thoroughly interviewed the two boys, and despite

the reprimand they got for having entered a building that was off-limits, it was clear that the officers were impressed by their discovery.

Now, the two boys were just waiting. Despite having been up all night, neither of them was tired.

“Man,” said Joe. “I still can’t believe it. Georges Lebron. We discovered Georges Lebron. We did what the police couldn’t do for thirty years. Well, admittedly, we were lucky, but still, we solved the case. We did what everyone was unable to do.”

He looked at his friend. Oliver didn’t budge, his face a mask of deep sorrow.

“Ol, what’s up?”

“We haven’t found Leandra,” said Oliver. “And nobody cares except me. They didn’t even want to send a unit out. Something must have happened to her.”

There was absolute conviction in his voice.

“Still, there is good news, right?” said Joe. “It means Lebron can’t have taken her. She must’ve run away after all.”

Oliver threw up his hands in frustration before letting them fall again.

He slipped them into his pockets to warm them.

His fingers touched Leandra’s knife.

He pulled it out and looked at it for a long moment.

“She’d never leave without her knife on her own. I’m sure of it,” he said, examining it.

“What do you mean?”

“Her knife. I found it on the floor in our tent when I went back for her tonight. Have you ever seen her without it?”

Joe shook his head but said nothing.

Oliver looked frustrated. “Why would she leave it behind?”

“Because she was in a hurry? Because of the fire? Panic?”

Oliver shook his head vigorously.

“When she dropped the knife in the prison, in a moment of panic, she got down on all fours and searched for it. I think she’d never leave it.”

“We don’t know that. We don’t know what happened,” said Joe. “We were shouting ‘Fire!’, and she must’ve left in a hurry.”

“She’d take her knife!” Oliver insisted.

“So what?” said Joe. “The ghost of Lebron took her?”

Oliver didn’t answer.

“Oh.”

Joe slapped his forehead.

“Thomas saw her riding towards the city,” he remembered.

“He told us back when we were talking to the firemen. You see? It’s all right! He saw her!”

Oliver didn't look convinced.

"He joined us again a short while after you left for the compound," Joe continued. "I was even surprised you two didn't meet halfway."

"Why should we have met halfway?" asked Oliver. "I ran back to the compound, and he should've come back from the city, which lies in the opposite direction."

Joe frowned.

"Mate... I saw him coming from the direction of the compound."

"That can't be right," said Oliver. "He went to the city to get help."

Joe slowly shook his head.

"No. I'm sure he came from the compound."

"That makes no sense," said Oliver. "How could he have seen Leandra on her bike then, and you didn't?"

Joe shrugged.

"It was all dark and confused. Maybe we missed her."

Oliver shook his head.

"All of you sitting here at the cornfield and missing Leandra on her bike?"

Joe nodded. "Yes. Unlikely, I agree."

Another thought occurred to him.

“Maybe he didn’t go to the city,” said Joe. “Maybe we were wrong about all of this. Maybe he got confused, crossed the forest on his way back, and ended up coming from the direction of the compound.”

Oliver considered it.

“That would explain why I didn’t meet him. He would’ve only joined the path on the last stretch before reaching you.”

Joe thought back for a moment.

“He didn’t seem out of breath to me, now that I think about it. In fact, just the opposite. Why would he even go on foot? He has a motorbike.”

“Why would he lie about all of this, then?”

“Because he wasn’t actually getting help. The firemen told us Rick went for them.”

Oliver looked at him with big eyes.

“Rick went for the firemen! Now I remember.”

“Then Thomas went with him,” suggested Joe.

Oliver shook his head. “I remember having heard only one bike.”

“And he was on foot,” Joe added. “We didn’t see or hear any bike until the firemen came back with Rick.”

“I don’t understand. Why would Thomas lie about seeing Leandra, then? If anything, she should have left long

before we made it to the cornfield. But Thomas joined us when we were all already here. Why would he lie about seeing Leandra then? That doesn't make any sense."

Joe gave him a meaningful look.

Oliver raised his eyebrows.

"Why would he kidnap her?" he asked. "I've literally never seen them interact. Never."

"Still, think about it," said Joe. "The timeline matches. He was away during a big portion of the fire. So was she. I think we know where everybody else was."

Oliver frowned. Then he remembered something.

"The morning we went to the prison, he had taken the morning off."

"Right. To run some personal errands," said Joe. "Fishing gear, I think."

Oliver's eyes widened.

"It must've been him all along. He knows the song. He told us so on the first evening. It must've been him singing at the prison when we were there with Leandra."

"We thought it was Rick, but Rick has an alibi."

"And tonight, at the West Hut. He set the fire as a distraction and sang again."

"So, we weren't crazy after all."

Both boys looked back at Thomas, who was still talking to the police a short distance away.

“Still,” Joe said thoughtfully, “it makes no sense at all.

Why would he do this? Assuming all the apparitions Leandra talked about were real, why would he try to impersonate Georges Lebron? Stalker? Paedophile? Copycat? The way he talked about Lebron at the campfire... He obviously admires that guy.”

“I don’t know,” said Oliver. “It was a local myth until tonight. People like what makes them special. What gives them an identity. Humans have always liked that. In fact, since the beginning of time.”

“Thank you, thank you,” said Joe. “I’ve just got the feeling I’m talking to your father. You even look like him when you make your science speeches. Like father like son.”

Suddenly, Joe held his breath and stared at Oliver.

“What?” said Oliver. “Joe, what?”

“I... Wait. I need to check something.”

Joe ran over to one of the police officers and spoke to him. The policeman left and returned a few minutes later with a folder and handed Joe something. Joe looked at it, then hurried back with it to Oliver.

“Look.”

On the page in the old police file was a picture. Oliver looked at it.

“Why are you showing me a picture of Thomas with short hair and a beard? And why does he have such a big nose and ears?”

“Because it’s not Thomas,” said Joe. “It’s Georges Lebron.”

Oliver straightened up.

“What?”

“Yes. We were all absolutely blind.”

“But then, Georges Lebron was Thomas’s father!” exclaimed Oliver.

“Yes. Holy moly. It must be.”

“He must be behind this after all. Quick, we need to tell the police while he’s still here.”

Both of them ran towards the police officer Joe had talked to just moments earlier to get the Lebron folder. In a few words, they quickly explained their reasoning.

The officer looked at them a long time.

“Boys, even if Thomas is Georges Lebron’s son – and I am not saying he is – that does not prove he did kidnap anyone. What you gave me is circumstantial at best.”

“But...” exclaimed Joe.

“Still, I will talk with my superior about it. You boys wait here,” the officer said and walked away to a group of cops. Oliver and Joe exchanged anxious looks.

“Oh no,” said Joe then, looking over to the prison fence. “What?”

“He’s not here anymore.”

Oliver turned.

Indeed, Thomas was gone.

“Look,” said Joe. “He’s there, on the way to the compound.”

“If we don’t follow him, we will lose him!” exclaimed Oliver.

Joe ran to the police officer but was back almost instantly unaccompanied.

“Thomas told them he would go back to sleep,” he blurted out.

“And they believe him?” asked Oliver.

Joe looked helpless.

Oliver looked determined. “I am going after him. Look, he just disappeared behind the trees. You stay...”

“The hell I am,” Joe said. “He’s gone, come on.”

Discreetly, the two boys followed Thomas as he passed the compound and continued towards the Root Tree.

Carefully, they stayed on his trail, passing the mighty tree where Leandra used to sit and read.

Farther downstream, Thomas crossed the river at a small stone beach and continued along the bank.

Very carefully, the boys followed him through the reeds. They watched him enter a small fishing hut that stood all alone behind a bend in the river.

Silently, the two boys crept closer and crouched in a small bush out of sight of the hut.

Oliver went over and carefully peeked through the window. He hurried silently back to Joe.

“Leandra is in there with him,” he whispered to Joe. “We were right!”

“What is he doing?” Joe whispered back.

“Just talking. She’s tied to a post and gagged, but she seems all right.”

Oliver sounded relieved.

“That bloody bastard! But what do we do now?” asked Joe.

“Do we confront him? He’s alone. There’s two of us.”

“He’s probably crazy, and he’s stronger than we are.” He considered. “No. I’ll stay here, ready to intervene if anything goes wrong. You go get Dad and the police. They have to believe you now!”

“I won’t leave you here alone with that creep,” said Joe.

“I’m not alone. And I have to make sure he doesn’t escape.
Or kill Leandra. Just go.”

“No.”

“Time is running out. We need help!”

“Forget it. I’m staying,” Joe hissed.

“If you don’t go get the police, we could all end up dead.
And even worse, Thomas might escape and continue his
father’s work. If you leave now, you’re the key witness,
and you can tell the story, even if I’m not here.”

“You’re so stupid,” said Joe.

“And besides, Leandra is here. So, our undying love will
protect us, remember?”

“You dumbass.”

Joe smirked, nodded, then slowly backed away and
disappeared into the reeds.

Oliver pressed himself against the hut’s wall and listened.

Chapter 16: Return

“...I thought I might draw him out. If he was still alive, he might recognise his handiwork and finally meet me. I even infiltrated that stupid CEAR place so I could keep an eye on you.”

Thomas spoke calmly, but in a very different voice from the one he normally used.

“But your stupid little detective pals found him dead in the prison. He was dead all that time. Now he can never see what I have become.”

Oliver carefully peeked through the window again.

Leandra made a muffled sound through the gag, but he couldn't understand what she was saying.

“What are you saying?” Thomas continued. “I can't hear anything. And anyway, there's only shit coming out of your mouth. Your mother doomed my father. Because of her, I never got to know him. And maybe he didn't even know he had a son.”

Another muffled protest came from Leandra. Thomas crouched down in front of her and took her chin in his hand.

“At least I still have you now. So, in a way, I can accomplish what my father couldn't do. I have to now. By killing you, your mother will face the eternal grief I face.

Georges Lebron couldn't kill Miranda Flosk, the girl. But Thomas Lebron can make Miranda Flosk, the mother, suffer and find her daughter dead."

Leandra struggled against the gag again.

"What was that? We'd better get this over with."

She fought harder, desperate muffled sounds escaping through the cloth.

"I do have poison, but I think I'll simply drown you instead, now that the plan has gone haywire anyway."

Leandra tried to kick him, but Thomas swiftly dodged the kick and then slapped her.

"God, for such a horrible person, you were awfully hard to get alone. How does it feel to be hated by all and missed by no one? Not even by your family... Take your brother, for example! He helped me kidnap you, his own sister, and he doesn't even know it. He only wanted to be with his little blondie Angelina. All he needed was a little push. Still, I had to set the fire to get you tonight. Just like my father, we Lebrons strike at night!"

His voice had a proud edge to it.

"You're a real pain in the butt for your age, you know that? Georges Lebron's son, almost beaten by a bunch of teenagers, still wet behind their ears. Six bottles of beer

were all it took to snatch you. Some master detectives they are!”

His laugh sounded half mad.

“I guess you’ve earned the pain of drowning. And poison might be too kind a way to go for your filthy mouth. The water might even wash those insults out of it. Then I can lay you down as though you were sleeping here in this hut, just like my father would’ve. And I’ll be there when the police bring the news to your mother. Hell, maybe I’ll give her the news myself. She’ll be crushed. And maybe I’ll just take care of her then too, once she knows. Settle two scores. That will be glorious.”

“You’re wrong.”

Somehow, Leandra had managed to force the gag from her mouth.

“No, I’m not,” Thomas replied.

“You are.”

“My mother won’t be crushed by my death. She’ll be relieved. Everybody will be. So, you might just free me – and everyone else – from the burden I am.”

“Shut up, little girl,” said Thomas, taking one step forward.

“You’re so stupid. Parents say and do stupid things, drive us mad, and leave us in disbelief. She shielded you from

the past all these years. All parents love their children, without exception.”

“Maybe they love some of them,” Leandra shot back in a small voice. “My mother definitely loves her little shining knight, Joshua. But she certainly doesn’t love her fallen dark angel, Leandra. So get on with it, daddy’s boy. I don’t have all day. And I haven’t really slept all night, so I’d really like to go to sleep now.”

Thomas smiled.

“Oh, believe me, she’ll be crushed by losing you. Even if it’s only a little bit, that is enough for me.” He took a step closer. “I can tell you that your little Oliver will weep bitter tears over you, and his heart will be crushed forever.

Pathetic boy. You should’ve seen him running around, shouting your name with tears in his eyes, believing in true love and all. He and his stupid rich friend are such pathetic little sucker detectives. I hope they’ll be honoured for having discovered my father... only to be deceived by me, the great Thomas Lebron.”

“Where?” asked Leandra.

Thomas looked a bit stung. Leandra just continued.

“Where is somebody great? I don’t see anyone great around here. Certainly not you.”

Her voice grew slightly in confidence.

“Oh, are you trying to scare me? You’re not even able to impress the girl who’s half your age and tied to a wooden post in the middle of nowhere, alone, at your mercy. Oh, wait... I think I feel a little impressed just now.”

She paused.

“Ah, no. Wait. It’s only an itch.”

Thomas laughed and then hit her again. Leandra slid down the post to the floor but managed to stagger up again almost instantly.

“You’ve got tough armour, I’ll give you that. But I’m about to break it,” said Thomas coldly.

Oliver heard movement inside the hut as Thomas began untying Leandra.

“If you have any last words... or a prayer... now’s the time.”

“Well, okay,” said Leandra.

Her voice shook, but she went on.

“Please, God, give Thomas here, professional loser and ambitious asshole, the strength and courage to finally shut up and kill me instead of postponing the deed forever because he’s such a coward and can’t bring himself to step into his father’s stinky, thirty-year-old shoes.”

She shrugged.

“And... that’s it. Thank you, I guess. Amen.”

“Cool to the end,” Thomas chuckled. It looked like he was about to hit her again, but then he seemed to change his mind. “I’ll tell that to the little boyfriend of yours, if I get the chance. I’ll tell him you loved him too... even though you were obviously never brave enough to tell him yourself.”

Leandra remained silent.

“He didn’t say the words, did he? Oh, that is so sad. But he didn’t have to, of course. It was written all over his face.”

Leandra still said nothing.

“No clever comeback this time?” Thomas teased.

Leandra smirked. “Actually, I’m thirsty. Could you push my head under the water already, please?”

Thomas smiled.

“Ah. There she is. And now...”

Oliver turned away from the window, ready to intervene.

He heard footsteps.

Then a loud thud.

Something crashed.

Then, suddenly, Leandra burst out of the hut, her hands still tied together.

She ran straight past Oliver without noticing him.

“You little brat!” Thomas shouted, laughing. “No, no, no! You won’t escape me that easily!”

“Like mother, like daughter, you fucker!” Leandra shouted back.

Thomas rushed out after her, but Oliver threw himself at him.

“Leandra, run!” he shouted as he tackled Thomas to the ground.

The two rolled through the mud. Reeds cracked around them as they struggled.

Thomas was stronger and bigger. Slowly, he forced Oliver towards the river until they both tumbled into the water.

In one swift movement, Thomas pinned Oliver beneath him and wrapped both hands around his throat.

“Ah...” Thomas gasped. “Young love.”

Then he smiled.

“Well, I’ll kill you first. Then your girl. It’ll be over quickly. Say hello to the fishes for me.”

He shoved Oliver’s head beneath the surface.

Oliver fought back with everything he had. He kicked, clawed, and tried to push Thomas away, but it was useless.

Thomas was simply too strong.

The air in his lungs began to burn.

His vision blurred.

Just as he knew he couldn’t hold his breath any longer...

...he heard a dull crack.

Thomas's grip suddenly loosened.

The weight lifted from Oliver's chest.

Thomas collapsed sideways in the water, away from him.

Oliver burst to the surface, coughing and gasping for air.

Beside him, Thomas lay motionless on his back.

A thin ribbon of blood curled through the water around his head.

Thomas began to get up when a heavy branch came down violently on his head a second time.

Leandra stood over him, her still-tied hands holding a heavy wooden branch.

Thomas lay completely still now.

"Fuck you, creep," said Leandra, slightly out of breath.

"I'm not my mother."

She reached out a hand, panting, and helped Oliver to his feet.

Then she ran back to the hut and returned with some rope.

The world was still spinning around Oliver, but together they managed to tie Thomas's hands behind his back, then let the unconscious man fall back onto the riverbed, where he lay motionless.

"I told you to run away," Oliver said quietly. "Joe went to get the police."

“I don’t follow other people’s orders, remember?” said Leandra. “Not anyone’s. Besides, I like you far too much to just let you drown here.”

She smiled.

“Thank you,” said Oliver. “I think you saved my life.”

“You’d better think so,” replied Leandra. “What were you even doing here?”

Oliver went slightly red in the face.

“I came to find you and help you.”

“I’m here. You certainly found me.”

He reached into his pocket and handed her the knife.

“I think this is yours.”

He glanced at Thomas.

“Not that you needed any help, apparently. Least of all saving.”

“No,” said Leandra. “I’m no lonely princess locked in a dark tower waiting to be rescued, least of all by you. And that was a pitiful rescue attempt.”

She looked at him, her eyes flashing with anger.

“How stupid are you? Were you trying to get yourself killed instead of me? Who would’ve been helped by that?”

Oliver lowered his eyes.

Leandra’s tone softened.

“Still... you came.”

She looked at Thomas again.

“And if you hadn’t tackled him... I can’t imagine what he would’ve done to me if he’d caught me again.”

She looked back at Oliver.

“You were ready to die. You were about to die for me.

That’s more than anyone has ever done for me... and probably ever will.”

She shook her head.

“You’re so pathetic.”

“You’re... mad at me?” asked Oliver, disbelief in his voice.

“Yes, of course I’m mad at you!” she shouted furiously.

“You could’ve died. And my life was definitely not worth such a sacrifice.”

“You’re wrong,” said Oliver.

“It would’ve been worth it. To me.”

He paused.

“And I’d do it again.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“Well... I hope I won’t have to. But I’d do it again.”

“You’re a stupid idiot,” said Leandra.

There were sounds in the reeds.

Dozens of footsteps were approaching fast.

“Joe is coming with the police,” said Oliver.

“So... what are you waiting for?” asked Leandra.

“I don’t know. Should I be waiting for something?” asked Oliver.

“You moron. You have, like, five seconds to kiss me.”

“Do you want me to...?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Leandra grabbed his face and kissed him on the lips.

As the police still didn’t appear, they kissed a second time.

Out of breath and overwhelmed, they stepped apart just as

Joe appeared, followed by half a dozen policemen and

Simon.

“Oliver! What happened? You...”

The policemen flooded the clearing and took hold of the unconscious Thomas.

“Holy shit,” said Joe. “You took him out?”

Oliver shook his head.

“No. Leandra did.”

“Oliver helped, actually,” she said smugly and patted him on the back like he was some kind of good dog.

Simon rushed out of the reeds towards them.

“Son, are you all right?”

He pulled Oliver into a tight hug. Then he gently led the still-shivering boy away, leaving Joe and Leandra alone while the policemen rushed around the scene.

“Took you long enough, stalky boy,” said Leandra.

“Hey, I ran as fast as I could.”

“It was almost not fast enough. But hey, no surprises there.”

“Yeah, but...”

Leandra held up her hand.

“But still... I owe you my thanks.”

Joe raised his eyebrows.

“You know that word? I didn’t even think you knew it.”

“I... didn’t think I’d ever need it.”

They both smiled.

“Friends?”

Joe held out his little finger.

“Friends.”

Leandra hooked her little finger around his.

Chapter 17: Until we meet again

Later that afternoon, the camp had been completely dismantled, and everyone from CEAR was packing the last of the equipment into the boots of their cars. Everyone had been thoroughly interviewed by the police and then by the local press during the morning. A medical team had also examined everyone involved and had already left. Thomas had been taken to hospital under police guard. He had suffered a severe concussion and a deep cut on his forehead but was otherwise stable.

A few policemen and firefighters were still walking around the site, though they no longer interacted with the people from the camp.

People were hugging and saying their goodbyes.

Angelina was crying in Josh's arms.

"Don't worry, love. I'm only three hours away," Josh said, gently patting her back.

"I know... but still. I don't want to leave you yet,"

Angelina said through tears.

"I'll come and visit next week, I promise. I'm still on holiday, and I'm sure I can convince my mum. Now that the Lebrons are gone... I guess. Only, of course, if it's all right with you and your parents."

“Of course it is,” said Verena as she walked past.

“Anytime. And now it’s time to get in the car. We have a long drive ahead of us.”

Oliver was helping Joe load the last suitcase into Fred’s car.

“Are you ready, Master Sanders?” Fred asked, lifting the generator up.

“I am, Fred.”

“Very well. I’ve planned the route so we can stop at your favourite burger place.”

“Where is it?” Simon asked as he joined them. “We should all meet there and have one. My treat. I think everyone has earned one.”

“Oh yes,” said Oliver.

“It’s a date, Simon,” Joe said with a grin.

While Simon and Fred exchanged addresses, the two friends shook hands.

“Another case solved, my dear Detective.”

“One?” asked Oliver. “I count at least three.”

Joe counted on his fingers.

“A theft solved, a missing killer’s whereabouts discovered, and a murder prevented. Not bad for two underage detectives.”

“I helped with at least two of those,” said Leandra, who had just joined them.

“You did,” Joe acknowledged with a slight bow. “You’ll be getting an honourable mention. And so will your undying love that kept us all alive.”

He grinned.

“See you soon, Flick Chick. See you at the burgers, bro.”

He shook hands one last time with his friend.

Joe then headed off to say goodbye to the others from CEAR.

“He’s actually not that bad, that friend of yours,” said Leandra, watching Joe walk away. “He smells a bit too much like money, though.” She frowned at the black sedan.

Oliver laughed.

“Yes. He’s my best friend. My only friend.”

He smiled.

“How will you get home?”

Leandra shrugged.

“The police found my bike in the river. They think Thomas threw it in to make people believe I’d left with it. It still works, though. Luckily.”

“Okay. But you and Josh will be going home by bike? Nobody is picking you up?”

“No. I don’t need anybody, remember? But I guess I owe it to my mother to set things right. Or at least, a talk.”

A heavy silence settled between them. Leandra looked him in the eyes, her blue ones piercing his.

“Anyway... I guess this is goodbye, then.”

“Yes,” said Oliver simply.

“See you next year?”

“Next year.”

As they hugged, Leandra quietly slipped something into Oliver’s trouser pocket.

Then she walked towards her bike, where Josh was already waiting with their large backpacks.

The Majorines’ car left first, followed by the Siebers’.

Then Joe and Fred drove away.

Rick rode off on his motorbike, waving to everyone, shortly followed by Josh and Leandra on their bikes.

Both of them glanced back one last time.

Leandra offered an almost imperceptible smile.

Oliver breathed in deeply. He felt tears welling up in him and tried to keep them down.

“You all right there, buddy?” asked Simon.

“Yes, Dad. Yes.”

“What will you do now with the compound?”

“Rebuild, my son,” Simon answered. “Only the West Hut burned down. The East Hut is unharmed, miraculously. And so is the new granary. I’ve discussed it with Walter. We’ll come back to CEAR. Just not next year.”

“Rebuilding is a good idea. So... the Amazon next year?”

“Yes. Though I’m not sure we’ll be able to take everyone with us.”

He paused and looked at his son.

“Before we get in the car, I just wanted to say something. You and your friends did a lot of stupid things this summer. You put your lives in danger more than once.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” said Oliver.

“Yes. And you should be. Still, you helped people. You saved people. And you brought some peace to the victims of Georges Lebron. That’s a good thing too.”

He smiled.

“I think we’ve all grown this summer. I also wanted to apologise. I should’ve taken your concerns about Leandra more seriously. And apparently I’m really bad at hiring people.”

“It’s okay, Dad. You did what you thought was right.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

They walked towards the car, where the three other members of the family were already waiting.

As they drove away, Oliver looked back at the campsite and the gate, now closed behind them.

The car passed the cornfields. Oliver glanced at the remnants of the prison, abandoned and still again.

Oliver thought about the past week.

Next to him, Angelina and Theseus were already asleep.

His thoughts drifted back to Leandra.

Her kiss.

Their kiss.

Their last hug.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and took out what Leandra had slipped into it.

It was her pocketknife.

A folded piece of paper was wedged beneath the screwdriver.

He carefully pulled it free and unfolded it.

It was a phone number.

Oliver smiled as the car pulled into the car park of the burger restaurant, where Joe was already waiting.

The End