

ESCAPE TO RETURN

Holly awoke suddenly, eyes wide open, staring up at the slatted ceiling. Her arm was cold. She pulled it back underneath her blanket. She lay there for a few moments, listening to the sleeping sounds of the others. The heavy curtains moved a little in the breeze, allowing some sunlight in. The Prefects insisted on leaving a window open, even in winter. Fresh air was an aid to good sleep, they said. The weak, winter sun lit up the room. It must be eight o'clock, she thought, nearly time to get up. The girls slept with the sun, rising at dawn and retiring at dusk. Winter was a time to sleep and recuperate, the Prefects said. She got up and stepping into her knitted slippers walked softly to the window. The view was of the perimeter wall, the Guardians and their dogs patrolling. Over the wall, she could just about see the tops of trees in the forest. The Guardians did not sleep by the sun but worked in shifts, guarding the perimeter, day and night. She pulled back the curtain and walked into the washroom. Taking her wash bag from the shelf allocated to her, she unbuttoned the flap and took out her toothbrush. The bristles were worn and would soon need replacing. Ignoring the washing instructions poster over the sink, she carefully washed her face and neck – the Prefects might be in the mood today to check. As she was finishing, the bell rang. She could hear her dormitory companions moving about and yawning, beds creaking as they got up. On her way back, she met Fern and Ash. They mumbled a sleepy greeting. She opened the locker and took

out her pinafore. It was almost due for washing, as were her night clothes. She dressed in grey woollen tights, vest, brown pinafore, and cardigan. She put on her sandals and brushed her hair. She waited at the door for the others to line up behind her. Ash, of course, was last; she always was. Holly opened the door and led out of dormitory 4. The girls walked along the corridor past instructional posters pinned along the walls. Girls from other dormitories were also coming out, led by their Dormitory Leaders, waiting for dormitory 4 to pass before following them to the refectory. The girls from dormitory 4 were first in the queue. As Dormitory Leader, Holly liked to have them all in first.

They collected their trays and accepted food from the counter. Dormitory 7 was on breakfast duty. They got berry juice, porridge with honey, and wholemeal bread with apple spread. All nine Governors were sitting at their table, checking the work plans for the day ahead. The girls chorused *good morning* as they passed their table. The Governors smiled and nodded through mouthfuls of porridge. It was usually the only time the girls saw the Governors, as they spent most of the time in their labs.

“The juice is watery”, Ash said, making a face.

When they were finished eating, the Prefects gave them their duties for the day. Dormitory 4 was in the schoolroom. Holly groaned; she hated the schoolroom. The girls lined up at the sinks and washed their dishes. Ash was about to throw her berry juice into the slop bucket when one of the Prefects shouted at her.

“How dare you waste a healthy drink! Get back to your table and drink it.”

The woman glared at her. Ash meekly went back to the table and sat down. Holly washed their dishes and Fern dried them. Ash came back with her empty cup, and they left for the schoolroom.

Of any room in the house, the schoolroom walls had the most instructional posters pinned to them. Apart from warnings about behaviour or punctuality, there were large posters on various subjects, such as how to grow vegetables and fruits, how to care for animals, and how to make paper. Holly had been ill and missed a few classes. The door opened, and one of the Prefects came in. She walked about the room, placing books on each desk. Today, the lesson was on the basics of bacteria and viruses. The class was already a few chapters into the book, and Holly found it confusing. She'd fallen so far behind the others. As the instruction droned on, her mind drifted. They hadn't had a free day in ages. Winter wore on, and the outside world was as dull as inside the house. Sometimes the grey clouds parted to reveal a little blue, but the sun was rarely visible. Even the pages of her book were dull. Holly found it hard to motivate an interest in bacteria that can harm fruit.

At break, the girls picked up their beakers of milk, put on their woollen hats and coats, and went outside.

"The milk's been watered down too," Ash said, frowning.

"Drink it," Holly warned, "or the Prefects will scold you again."

Ash shrugged.

"It feels like winter will never end. The food is so dull

and there isn't much of it."

Holly felt it necessary to defend the Prefects. Winter was nearly over; the growing season would soon come and, with it, more variety and colour. The girls went for a walk. They came to the wall and walked beside it. They could hear the Guardians high above them, talking to each other as they patrolled. The Guardians moved on, and it became so quiet, they could hear the wind whistling through the pine trees on the other side. They stopped to listen.

"I'd love to go outside, just once," Ash said.

"Shush," Fern warned, looking nervously about.

They linked arms and moved on, coming to the area where the wall ended and a large double fence began.

"I heard some of the Prefects say they have gathered enough stone from the new fields to extend the wall next winter, after the growing season," Fern said.

They went up to the wire and peered out. The pine forest grew right to the outside wire. However, the Prefects, with long-handled cutters, had cut away any branches too close to the fence.

"What harm would it be, just to go out for a few hours?" Ash asked.

The other two looked at each other.

"I'm so fed up, I just want to go out and see something different," Ash said wistfully, "it must be lovely in the forest."

They were silent. Holly knew this was what they were all thinking. What harm would it do? However, the wall

and fence were patrolled by the Guardians. The wall was impossible to climb, and the fence was secure.

"It's impossible," she said aloud, "there is no way out, certainly not over the wall. The fence is also secure."

Ash took both their arms and pulled them towards her.

"I might know of a weakness in the fence!" She whispered.

The bell rang for the end of break. The girls ran back towards the house and returned to the schoolroom.

As soon as lessons were over, and the girls had thanked the Prefect, they filed quietly out of the schoolroom and returned to dormitory 4. The dormitory was empty, so they sat on Holly's bed. She and Fern said nothing, but Ash looked slyly at each of them in turn.

"Don't you want to see where the weakness is in the fence?"

Holly moved uneasily. She knew she should report Ash to the Prefects for a talk such as this. Still, she was curious. It would do no harm to just go and see. If there really was a weakness, she could report it to the Prefects, after the three of them had gotten out and come back in again.

Ash walked between Holly and Fern, linking their arms as if they were out for a stroll before dark. They walked along the wall until they came to the fence. They walked past the greenhouses and the animal pens, past the ploughed fields. Holly began to get annoyed.

"Where is this so-called weakness, Ash?" She asked.

Ash jerked both their arms.

"Patience is a great virtue, as Prefect Electra keeps saying," Ash said, smugly.

They walked on. Ash suddenly stopped and looked back. Then she pointed towards the fence.

"Over here," she whispered.

The three girls crept forward.

"Look!" Ash whispered, pointing.

Holly and Fern gazed at the inner fence, at the small space between, no wider than their shoulders, and the outer fence. She was about to scorn Ash for bringing them on a useless errand when she saw the hole under the outer fence. It looked like a wild animal had been digging. It must have been quite a big animal because the hole was wide enough for them to push through, with difficulty certainly, but it was possible. However, there remained the inner fence. She voiced her doubts, but Ash was undaunted.

"We could do the same," she said, "dig a hole on our side. We could do it in our spare time from duties. It wouldn't take us long."

She was panting with excitement. Holly thought about it. This area of the grounds was quiet at this time of year. The winter crop was in, and it was too early for the spring planting to begin. They could not do it with their hands; the ground was too hard.

"We would need to somehow get gardening trowels," she said.

Ash grabbed her arm, her eyes shining wildly.

“Next time we’re on greenhouse duty,” she said, “we could get one then.”

Holly was still unsure, and her thoughts swung wildly from caution to longing. It would be wonderful to walk in the woods, see a little of the world outside the wall. Perhaps it wasn’t all forest. The Prefects and Governors had no interest in anything outside the wall. All they cared about was finding new ways to grow food and build up the herd. Fern said little. Holly could see she was frightened, but she would be led by her two friends.

It was several days before dormitory 4 was on greenhouse duty. They tended seed plants and helped mend the greenhouse wall. It was going to be up to her and Ash to take the trowels. When they were almost finished work, Holly slipped a trowel into the pocket of her pinafore. If she was spotted, she was going to say she stored it there while working and forgot to put it back in the toolbox. Several days later, there was still no uproar about the trowel, so they knew it had not been missed. On their next duty, Ash came away with one in her pocket. She wanted to try for a third, but Holly said that was too much; someone would notice three missing trowels. They were lucky to have gotten away with two.

At dusk one evening, all three slipped away during free time and went back to the fence. The hole on the outside was a bit bigger, they thought. Holly and Ash began to dig

with Fern standing guard. It took more evenings than they had expected to make a hole big enough for them to crawl through.

“Tomorrow night,” Ash said, her eyes bright, “we’ll go out. There will be a full moon. I heard Prefect Ariadne say it was going to be the first clear night in ages, so we won’t even need a lantern.”

The following night, they waited for the others to fall asleep. Holly must have dozed off because she suddenly felt Ash shaking her. She crept out of bed, trying to let it creak as little as possible. They had all gotten into bed early, fully dressed. Taking their hats and coats, they crept out of the dormitory. They had decided to go out one of the side doors, as the main door was opposite the great wall door where Guardians patrolled most often. When Holly opened the door, she was surprised at how bright it was. The full moon hung in the sky over them, its disk blindingly bright. It was so bright, Holly felt she could read a book if she had one with her.

They crept quietly away from the main house and through the animal pens, past the greenhouses. Suddenly, a cow mooed loudly. Holly stopped so suddenly that Fern almost ran into her. She could hear Fern’s frightened, wheezy breathing. They moved silently on until they came to the fence. They brushed away twigs and leaves that they had used to cover the hole. All three knelt in front of it, hesitating.

“I’ll go first,” Ash said, “try to hold up the wire.”

The other two held up the wire while Ash wriggled underneath and through the hole. The wire caught on her

coat twice, but she got through into the middle part of the fence. Holly turned to Fern.

“You go next while I hold up the wire. Then I’ll follow.”

But Fern pulled back, the moon reflected in her round, frightened eyes.

“I’m not going,” she said, “I don’t want to go.”

Holly could see she was almost in tears. Ash hissed at her from inside the fence.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she spat, “we’re doing this together. Holly, push her through.”

But Fern pulled back, ready, Holly felt, to run.

“I’m not going,” she said, through gritted teeth, “you can’t make me.”

Ash rattled the wire angrily, but Holly held up her hand.

“There’s no point forcing her,” she said.

She turned to Fern.

“You keep watch,” she said, “cover the hole with twigs and help us back in when we return. Keep out of sight of the Guardians.”

She could see the relief on Fern’s face as the girl nodded. She helped Holly through and began covering up the disturbed ground. Ash was already through the other hole and helped Holly out. They looked back at Fern, who held up her hand and waved. Ash snorted and turned towards the forest. They walked on a short distance and stopped. Moonlight came through the trees in shafts, and their dark trunks led, one after the other, into darkness.

“Come on,” Ash said, “this looks like a trail wild

animals have made.”

She walked forward, her feet crunching on pine needles. Holly hesitated.

“Will we be able to find our way back?” She asked.

Ash laughed.

“Of course we will. All we need to do is come back the way we came. If we don’t find the hole right away, we can just follow the fence until we find it.”

They walked on, Ash leading the way, zigzagging through the trees. Holly doubted it was really a path they were following until they came to a stream. As they stopped, something splashed into the water and made Holly jump. Ash laughed.

“This must be the stream that runs through our land,” she said.

The moon shone through a break in the trees over the stream. They sat down on a rock and watched the moonlight dance on the running water. A few clouds drifted across the face of the moon. Ash got up and began crossing the stream, jumping over stones so as not to get her feet wet.

“Let’s go on,” she said. She vanished from sight and then called back, “There’s a clearing!”

Holly stood up and began to follow, jumping over the stones and climbing up the bank, when she heard a shout. She froze, then ran forward, almost crashing into Ash, who was running back.

“Something’s out there, in the clearing,” Ash panted, her bravery suddenly deserting her. The girls stood and listened.

They heard a sound—a rustling of the pine needles as if something big was moving towards them. Then suddenly they heard a snort, like heavy breath blown through big nostrils. They turned together and ran back through the stream. They ran, sometimes tripping and almost falling, only stopping when their sides began to ache. They stood together, panting and listening. Something fluttered in the branches above them. Suddenly, back along the path, they heard a screech. They turned and ran again.

“We should be at the fence by now,” Holly called.

They stopped and looked about with no idea where they were or how far from the fence. Ash grabbed Holly’s arm and pulled her on until, suddenly, they came out through the trees and almost collided with the fence. However, it was not the place where they had entered the forest. Ash grabbed and shook the fence.

“We just follow the fence, as you said, and we’ll come to the hole,” Holly panted.

They walked quickly along by the fence when suddenly, lantern light appeared, and they could hear voices.

“Oh no, we’ve been missed,” Ash moaned.

She stopped suddenly and looked back into the woods.

“I think I can hear it,” she said.

She began banging on the fence.

“What are you doing,” Holly hissed, pulling her away.

“It doesn’t matter if they know we’re missing. We have to get back in.”

Suddenly, they found the hole under the fence. Fern was

not on the other side, but Ash threw herself on the ground and began pushing herself under the wire. But suddenly, Guardians appeared at the fence and began pushing rods through the inner fence, beating Ash back. Ash screamed.

“It’s me. It’s Ash, let me in!”

But they continued beating her back. Ash screamed and screamed, while on the outside, Holly looked on in horror. “Get back,” the Guardians shouted, “you can’t come back in.”

Ash had to drag herself backwards, tears running down her face. She and Holly stood staring at the Guardians, who were hastily repairing the fence on the inside. The girls stared at the fence, stunned with terror, while behind them the noise grew louder.