

## ***The Giver***

### ***Chapter 10***

"I go in here, Jonas," Fiona told him when they reached the front door of the House of the Old after parking their bicycles in the designated area.

"I don't know why I'm nervous," she confessed. "I've been here so often before." She turned her folder over in her hands.

"Well, everything's different now," Jonas reminded her.

"Even the nameplates on our bikes," Fiona laughed. During the night the nameplate of each new Twelve had been removed by the Maintenance Crew and replaced with the style that indicated citizen-in-training.

"I don't want to be late," she said hastily, and started up the steps. "If we finish at the same time, I'll ride home with you."

Jonas nodded, waved to her, and headed around the building toward the Annex, a small wing attached to the back. He certainly didn't want to be late for his first day of training, either.

The Annex was very ordinary, its door unremarkable. He reached for the heavy handle, then noticed a buzzer on the wall. So he buzzed instead.

"Yes?" The voice came through a small speaker above the buzzer.

"It's, uh, Jonas. I'm the new--I mean--"

"Come in." A click indicated that the door had been unlatched.

The lobby was very small and contained only a desk at which a female Attendant sat working on some papers. She looked up when he entered; then, to his surprise, she stood. It was a small thing, the standing; but no one had ever stood automatically to acknowledge Jonas's presence before.

"Welcome, Receiver of Memory," she said respectfully.

"Oh, please," he replied uncomfortably. "Call me Jonas."

She smiled, pushed a button, and he heard a click that unlocked the door to her left. "You may go right on in," she told him.

Then she seemed to notice his discomfort and to realize its origin. No doors in the community were locked, ever. None that Jonas knew of, anyway.

"The locks are simply to insure The Receiver's privacy because he needs concentration," she explained. "It would be difficult if citizens wandered in, looking for the Department of Bicycle Repair, or something."

Jonas laughed, relaxing a little. The woman seemed very friendly, and it was true--in fact it was a joke throughout the community--that the Department of Bicycle Repair, an unimportant little office, was relocated so often that no one ever knew where it was.

"There is nothing dangerous here," she told him.

"But," she added, glancing at the wall clock, "he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Jonas hurried through the door and found himself in a comfortably furnished living area. It was not unlike his own family unit's dwelling. Furniture was standard throughout the community: practical, sturdy, the function of each piece clearly defined. A bed for sleeping. A table for eating. A desk for studying.

All of those things were in this spacious room, though each was slightly different from those in his own dwelling. The fabrics on the upholstered chairs and sofa were slightly thicker and more luxurious; the table legs were not straight like those at home, but slender and curved, with a small carved decoration at the foot. The bed, in an alcove at the far end of the room, was draped with a splendid cloth embroidered over its entire surface with intricate designs.

But the most conspicuous difference was the books. In his own dwelling, there were the necessary reference volumes that each household contained: a dictionary, and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Book of Rules, of course.

The books in his own dwelling were the only books that Jonas had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed.

But this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling. There must have been hundreds--perhaps thousands--of books, their titles embossed in shiny letters.

Jonas stared at them. He couldn't imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules that governed the community? Could there be more descriptions of offices and factories and committees?

He had only a second to look around because he was aware that the man sitting in a chair beside the table was watching him. Hastily he moved forward, stood before the man, bowed slightly, and said, "I'm Jonas."

"I know. Welcome, Receiver of Memory."

Jonas recognized the man. He was the Elder who had seemed separate from the others at the Ceremony, though he was dressed in the same special clothing that only Elders wore.

Jonas looked self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own.

"Sir, I apologize for my lack of understanding..... "

He waited, but the man did not give the standard accepting-of-apology response.

After a moment, Jonas went on, "But I thought--I mean I *think*," he corrected, reminding himself that if precision of language were ever to be important, it was certainly important *now*, in the presence of this man, "that *you* are the Receiver of Memory. I'm only, well, I was

only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday. I'm not anything at all. Not yet."

The man looked at him thoughtfully, silently. It was a look that combined interest, curiosity, concern, and perhaps a little sympathy as well.

Finally he spoke. "Beginning today, this moment, at least to me, you are the Receiver.

"I have been the Receiver for a long time. A very, very long time. You can see that, can't you?"

Jonas nodded. The man was wrinkled, and his eyes, though piercing in their unusual lightness, seemed tired.

The flesh around them was darkened into shadowed circles.

"I can see that you are very old," Jonas responded with respect. The Old were always given the highest respect.

The man smiled. He touched the sagging flesh on his own face with amusement. "I am not, actually, as old as I look," he told Jonas. "This job has aged me. I know I look as if I should be scheduled for release very soon. But actually I have a good deal of time left."

"I was pleased, though, when you were selected. It took them a long time. The failure of the previous selection was ten years ago, and my energy is starting to diminish. I need what strength I have remaining for your training. We have hard and painful work to do, you and I."

"Please sit down," he said, and gestured toward the nearby chair. Jonas lowered himself onto the soft cushioned seat.

The man closed his eyes and continued speaking. "When I became a Twelve, I was selected, as you were. I was frightened, as I'm sure you are." He opened his eyes for a moment and peered at Jonas, who nodded.

The eyes closed again. "I came to this very room to begin my

training. It was such a long time ago.”

"The previous Receiver seemed just as old to me as I do to you. He was just as tired as I am today."

He sat forward suddenly, opened his eyes, and said, "You may ask questions. I have so little experience in describing this process. It is forbidden to talk of it."

"I know, sir. I have read the instructions," Jonas said.

"So I may neglect to make things as clear as I should." The man chuckled. "My job is important and has enormous honor. But that does not mean I am perfect, and when I tried before to train a successor, I failed. Please ask any questions that will help you."

In his mind, Jonas had questions. A thousand. A *million* questions. As many questions as there were books lining the walls. But he did not ask one, not yet.

The man sighed, seeming to put his thoughts in order. Then he spoke again. "Simply stated," he said, "although it's not really simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past."

"Sir," Jonas said tentatively, "I would be very interested to hear the story of your life, and to listen to your memories."

"I apologize for interrupting," he added quickly.

The man waved his hand impatiently. "No apologies in this room. We haven't time."

"Well," Jonas went on, uncomfortably aware that he might be interrupting again, "I am really interested, I don't mean that I'm not. But I don't exactly understand why it's so important. I could do some adult job in the community, and in my recreation time I could come and listen to the stories from your childhood. I'd like that. Actually," he added, "I've done that already, in the House of the

Old. The Old like to tell about their childhoods, and it's always fun to listen."

The man shook his head. "No, no," he said. "I'm not being clear. It's not my past, not my childhood that I must transmit to you."

He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. "It's the memories of the whole world," he said with a sigh. "Before you, before me, before the previous Receiver, and generations before him."

Jonas frowned. "The whole world?" he asked. "I don't understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean Elsewhere, too?" He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand exactly. Maybe I'm not smart enough. I don't know what you mean when you say 'the whole world' or 'generations before him.' I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now."

"There's much more. There's all that goes beyond--all that is Elsewhere--and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those, when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future."

He rested for a moment, breathing deeply. "I am so *weighted* with them," he said.

Jonas felt a terrible concern for the man, suddenly.

"It's as if ... " The man paused, seeming to search his mind for the right words of description. "It's like going downhill through deep snow on a sled," he said, finally. "At first it's exhilarating: the speed; the sharp, clear air; but then the snow accumulates, builds up on the runners, and you slow, you have to push hard to keep going, and--"

He shook his head suddenly, and peered at Jonas. "That meant nothing to you, did it?" he asked.

Jonas was confused. "I didn't understand it, sir."

"Of course you didn't. You don't know what snow is, do you?"

Jonas shook his head.

"Or a sled? Runners?"

"No, sir," Jonas said.

"Downhill? The term means nothing to you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Well, it's a place to start. I'd been wondering how to begin. Move to the bed, and lie face down."

Jonas did so, a little apprehensively. Beneath his chest, he felt the soft folds of the magnificent cloth that covered the bed. He watched as the man rose and moved first to the wall where the speaker was. It was the same sort of speaker that occupied a place in every dwelling, but one thing about it was different. This one had a switch, which the man deftly snapped to the end that said OFF.

Jonas almost gasped aloud. To have the power to turn the speaker *off!* It was an astonishing thing.

Then the man moved with surprising quickness to the corner where the bed was. He sat on a chair beside Jonas, who was motionless, waiting for what would happen next.

"Close your eyes. Relax. This will not be painful."

Jonas remembered that he was allowed, that he had even been encouraged, to ask questions. "What are you going to do, sir?" he asked, hoping that his voice didn't betray his nervousness.

"I am going to transmit the memory of snow," the old man said, and placed his hands on Jonas's back.