The Giver
Chapter 4

Jonas rode at a leisurely pace, glancing at the bikeports beside the buildings to see if he could spot Asher's. He didn't often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Asher frequently fooled around and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with Twelve coming so soon and the volunteer hours ending, it didn't seem to matter.

The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a wonderful luxury to Jonas; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated.

He remembered when he had become an Eight, as Lily would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends. They almost invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their own interests and skills.

A male Eleven named Benjamin had done his entire nearly-Four years in the Rehabilitation Center, working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as skilled now as the Rehabilitation Directors themselves, and that he had even developed some machines and methods to hasten rehabilitation. There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his Assignment to that field and would probably be permitted to bypass most of the training.

Jonas was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew him, of course, since they had always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's accomplishments because such a conversation would have been awkward for Benjamin. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to. It was a minor rule, rather like rudeness, punishable

only by gentle chastisement. But still. Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break.

The area of dwellings behind him, Jonas rode past the community structures, hoping to spot Asher's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings. He passed the Childcare Center where Lily stayed after school, and the play areas surrounding it. He rode through the Central Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held.

Jonas slowed and looked at the nametags on the bicycles lined up outside the Nurturing Center. Then he checked those outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Asher's bicycle--leaning, as usual, instead of upright in its port, as it should have been--at the House of the Old.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona. Jonas liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it didn't surprise him that she was working with Asher today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building.

"Hello, Jonas," the attendant at the front desk said. She handed him the sign-up sheet and stamped her own official seal beside his signature. All of his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, an Eleven had arrived at the Ceremony of Twelve only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment. He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future.

"It's good to have some volunteers here today," the attendant told him. "We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up." She looked at a

printed sheet. "Let's see. Asher and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don't you join them there? You know where it is, don't you?"

Jonas nodded, thanked her, and walked down the long hallway. He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Old were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Each room was comfortably furnished, the floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and slow-paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred.

Jonas was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to do his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he was left with not the slightest idea-not even a *guess* of what his Assignment would be.

He laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Jonas? he teased himself. But he suspected that with the date so near, probably all of his friends were, too.

He passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Old in the hall. "Hello, Jonas," the young uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside him, whose arm he held, was hunched over as she shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked toward Jonas and smiled, but her dark eyes were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind.

He entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing lotions. He removed his tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put on the volunteer's smock that was folded on a shelf. "Hi, Jonas!" Asher called from the corner where he was kneeling beside a tub. Jonas saw Fiona nearby, at a different tub. She looked up and smiled at him, but she was busy, gently washing a man who lay in the warm water.

Jonas greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he went to the row of padded lounging chairs where others of the Old were waiting. He had worked here before; he knew what to

do.

"Your turn, Larissa," he said, reading the nametag on the woman's robe. "I'll just start the water and then help you up." He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and watched as the warm water flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be filled in a minute and the water flow would stop automatically.

He helped the woman from the chair.

"This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto," she told him. "It was wonderful."

"I knew Roberto!" Jonas said. "I helped with his feeding the last time I was here, just a few weeks ago. He was a very interesting man."

"They told his whole life before they released him," she said. "They always do. But to be honest," she whispered with a mischievous look, "some of the tellings are a little boring. I've even seen some of the Old fall asleep during tellings- when they released Edna recently. Did you know Edna?"

Jonas shook his head. He couldn't recall anyone named Edna.

"Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course," she added primly, "all lives *are* meaningful, I don't mean that they aren't. But *Edna.* My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here. She never even had a family unit."

Larissa looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, "I don't think Edna was very smart."

Jonas laughed.

"But Roberto's life was wonderful," Larissa went on, after a moment. "He had been an Instructor of Elevens --you know how important that is--and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And--

goodness, I don't know how he found the time--he also raised two very successful children,, and he was *also* the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course."

"Tell me about the celebration," Jonas said.

"Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely goodbye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing him well. I didn't, though. I've never been fond of public speaking.

"He was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let him go."

"Larissa," he asked, "what happens when they make the actual release? Where exactly did Roberto go?"

She lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. "I don't know. I don't think anybody does, except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness, I'd call it."

Jonas grinned. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

Larissa frowned. "I don't know why they don't let children come. Not enough room, I guess. They should enlarge the Releasing Room."

"We'll have to suggest that to the committee. Maybe they'd study it," Jonas said slyly, and Larissa chortled with laughter.

"Right.!" she hooted, and Jonas helped her to the tub.