

Sneak Peek at **Bram's Deleted Chapter**

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The boy was small for his age, yet that suited him just fine. His thin frame fit into tight spaces, and his sparrow-light footfalls kept him undetected. He slipped through the cool darkness, feeling his way along the cavern passageway as he had done a hundred times before. This was once a small mining shaft—a tributary off the main tunnel—that served the boy as the perfect shortcut between two main sections of the cave system where his community lived. Exploratory mining shafts veined the rock here like tunnels in an ant colony. Some linked the series of caverns his encampment used, while others led off into the unknown. Like many of these passageways, this particular one was low, narrow, and entirely unused. It provided the perfect way to move without being noticed. And he required that now.

He needed to see.

Near the end of his tunnel, an orange glow gleamed warmly off the smooth rock on the passage's left wall, indicating the location of a sharp turn to the right. This shaft, he knew, would end as a narrow fissure on the wall of a cavernous room. Lantern light from that room currently reached into the tunnel, spreading glowing fingers across the bare rock. His movements slowed with caution, his footfalls hushed, as he neared the bend.

Voices echoed through the cavern and bounced around his small space. As he expected—and almost feared—each voice was tinged with either relief or wonder. They were no longer hushed. Their words were not heavy with acceptance and finality. So he knew what he would see. Sarah would be alive. But not only that—she would be healed.

He bit his lip. He knew better than to help people he knew, and he had promised his father he wouldn't do that. Ever. But he had liked Sarah, and when he had the dream—when he saw her in that place, drowning in the water, he couldn't help himself. He *had* to pull her out. The boy simply hoped she wouldn't remember. He couldn't risk exposure.

“We thought we lost you,” sounded another voice. It was gruff with emotion. Jacob.

The boy rolled his eyes. That man cared about everyone too much. He acted as if every person in this encampment was his responsibility. Well, everyone except for him. The boy was careful to keep his distance. Nothing good could come from Jacob's intensity.

“It couldn't have been that bad,” protested Sarah. “I don't know why you're all fussing. I feel fine.”

“But you weren't fine. You nearly died, Sarah.” Brandee's voice replied.

“We were making that trap in the far tunnels with Jeanine. Do you remember?” asked Jacob. “One of the rocks you were hoisting slipped. It hit you in the head and shoulder.”

Sarah gasped and there was a long pause.

“I don't feel anything.” Another pause. “On my head? Did it cut me?” Pause. “Oh ... It's a bit tender. But it feels okay. It's like a ... big scrape, maybe?”

“It did cut you.” That sounded like Omar. His voice was as kind as always. “Quite badly. We took the stitches out last week.”

“What? Last week? How long have I been out?”

“Two weeks,” answered Brandee. “But this past week was the worst. Your fever was so high.” There was a long pause. “We ... we actually can't believe you survived it.”

“Oh.” Sarah's voice was quiet and silence settled on the cavern.

The boy crept forward, and upon reaching the sharp turn within his tunnel, slowly peeked his head around the corner. From there, he could see out the fissure that was in the wall of their cavern. Sarah sat on the edge of her small cot, with Brandee beside her. Jacob hovered protectively nearby, and Omar was holding a mug out to her.

“It’s soup broth,” he told her. “You need to drink it.”

Sarah nodded and took the cup in steady hands. Her colour was good, the boy noticed, and aside from appearing alarmingly thin, she seemed healthy. She brought the cup to her lips and, just before taking a sip, she raised her eyes. As if sensing he was there, they locked on the boy.

“Bram,” she said, lowering the cup with a smile. “I dreamed of you.”

The boy froze, panic pulsing through his veins like liquid ice.

“Why don’t you come out?” she asked.

But Bram was already backing away, letting the darkness obscure him once more.