

EVERLAND

BOOK 1

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2015027027

ISBN 978-0-545-83694-4


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, May 2016

Book design by Christopher Stengel

To all the Lost Girls whose
adventures ended way too soon and
cheer for me from beyond the stars—
Harriet, Shirley, and Andreae

• G W E N •

 Outside my window, plumes of gray smoke and steam rise from the decimated city into the polluted midnight sky. There they linger like ghosts of those who once walked the streets of London before the arrival of the Marauders. I briefly wonder what life was like before the German monarch's reign began and the world was without steam power.

In the distance, the faint glow of kerosene lanterns illuminates the remains of the city I once called home, daring me to venture beyond the safety of our dusty hideout above an old furniture warehouse. My heart aches to return to the house in which all of my childhood memories were made, but there is nothing left of it. Taking in a breath, I swing my legs through the broken window and onto the rusty fire escape, answering the city's quiet call.

"Where do you think you're going?" Her accusing whisper startles me.

Looking over my shoulder, I find my twelve-year-old sister, Joanna. She stares at me with reproachful eyes, her arms folded across her chest. Her small face scowls, reminding me of the look my mother used to give me after I had been caught doing something wrong. Now all that remains of my mother is my sister's uncanny resemblance to her: corkscrew curls, a turned-up nose, and high cheekbones.

"We're almost out of rice and are down to a few liters of water," I say, adjusting the leather straps on my rucksack. "I'm heading out to scavenge. I won't be gone long."

“Gwen, the Marauders are patrolling closer,” she says, pointing out the window. A zeppelin flies low, skirting the rooftops of the mangled buildings in the distance. The city’s lamplight casts a golden glow on its wooden hull. Even from here I can hear the whir of its engines and propellers. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I know,” I say with a sigh. “It’s time to move again. We should probably head north toward Cambridge. There is not much left this far outside of the city anyway. We’ll pack up and leave in the morning, but I have to find something for us to eat.”

Joanna reaches toward a shelf. She grabs an aluminum pot, turns it over, and places it on her head. Under the window’s ledge, she pulls out her chest armor, made of two cookie sheets held together with copper wire. My sister slips the armor over her head. “I’m coming with you.”

“Not this time, Joanna.” I place her makeshift helmet back on the shelf. Tilting her chin, our eyes meet. “You need to look after Mikey. He’s been having night terrors again.”

Joanna squints. “You know Mum and Dad wouldn’t approve of this.”

This again? I’ve lost count how many times Joanna has used our parents to try to stop me from venturing out alone. “We’re not going to discuss this.”

“You know I’m right,” she says with defiance.

Impatience wells up inside me and my words spill out harsher than I intend. “Mum and Dad are gone. I’m the oldest. I’m in charge now. We’ve been through this a hundred times.”

Joanna jerks her chin from my grip. “You don’t know that for

sure. They could still be out there waiting for us,” she says, waving a hand toward the window.

“It’s been a year since the invasion. If they were alive, they would have come for us. They are not waiting, nor are they coming back,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm but not succeeding. “Our parents are dead.”

Joanna is quiet, the sting of my words evident as her bottom lip quivers. She stares at her small bare feet and twirls the copper-button bracelet on her wrist. The military insignia on each button is worn. They once lined the lapel of one of our father’s uniforms. It is the only token my sister has left of him. Instinctively, I reach for my father’s military tags around my neck, comforted by the keepsake he left me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . . ,” I say, silently berating myself. After a year of caring for my siblings, my temper has become increasingly short. It seems to take so little to set me off lately. I try to pull her into a hug, but she recoils, unwilling to meet my gaze.

“You’ve changed,” Joanna says, her words hot and bitter. “You’re not the same. You promised, Gwen. What happened to our Sister Pact?”

Visions of our early childhood wash over me like an unexpected storm on a clear day. Dozens of stinging raindrops, each carrying a memory, invade my thoughts. Nights of sneaking from my bed and into hers to tell her stories of fairies, pirates, and mermaids. Pinkie-sworn promises to never grow up. Promises I couldn’t keep.

“That was then, this is now.” My voice is too loud, I warn myself, but I cannot contain the frustration bubbling inside me like an unattended pot of water over an open fire. “Do you think I

like this any better than you do? Do you think I enjoy being the responsible one taking care of you and Mikey? I would give anything, anything at all, to have my life back, to have just one more day being a child and not your guardian. Look!” I point toward the city’s blackened remains, a boneyard landscape of fragmented buildings. “London is gone! And by the fact that no one has come to England’s aid, I think it’s safe to assume the aftermath of the invasion has extended beyond the country’s borders. It’s time to face reality: There are no more private schools or fancy parties.” My words spill too quick and harsh from my lips, but I can’t stop them. “No more ballet or equestrian lessons. Our parents are gone. We are trying to survive, and this is not a childhood game or make-believe. This is real life. It’s time to grow up.”

An injured expression replaces the scowl on Joanna’s face. My stomach groans with hunger, but the ache is nothing compared with the immediate pang of guilt that fills me. I wish I could take back what I said. “Look,” I whisper. “Joanna, I . . .”

“You were a much better sister than you are a mother,” she says softly, tracing pictures in the layer of dust on the floor with her big toe.

A stab of pain pierces my heart like the tip of a sharpened sword. A mother? I had never intended to be her mother, but the stern tone in my voice echoes like a parent chiding her children. I am about to correct her, to convince her I am still her sister, only a child like her, when Mikey, our six-year-old brother, appears, rubbing his eyes. Dirt dusts his blond hair, making it look brown. I can’t remember the last time I bathed him. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I bathed myself.

“What’s going on? Why are you guys fighting?” he asks through a yawn.

“Never mind, go back to bed,” I say too sharply.

“I can’t sleep. Bad dreams.” He takes Joanna’s bandaged hand. She winces but doesn’t complain. The blisters on her fingers have worsened over the weeks and seem excruciatingly painful. Bloody and infected, the sores haven’t responded to any treatment: warm baths, tubes of salve, bandages, or an expired bottle of antibiotics I scavenged. I’ve tried to convince myself that it’s nothing to worry about. That her wounds will heal with time. Refusing to believe that she has contracted what has ravaged the adult population and left many of the children untouched. But even through the denial, the truth still haunts me with every corpse I stumble upon.

“Come on, I’ll lie down with you. Have I told you the stories about the mermaids in the city?” Joanna says, leading Mikey by the hand.

“Are they real mermaids?” Mikey asks with curious, wide eyes.

“Joanna,” I say, gently touching her shoulder. I want to apologize, to convince her that I am just looking out for her well-being, but the words stick in my throat, filtered by uncertainty. Instead I hear myself saying, “Don’t keep him up too late with those silly fairy tales. And no pirate stories, he’ll be awake all night. It’s late. Blow that candle out. We’re leaving when I return.”

She looks away. “I wish you’d never grown up,” she mumbles. I shudder, her words twisting a sharp blade in my chest. Joanna leads Mikey to our filthy mattresses and tattered blankets. They settle into the lumpy beds, whispering under the dancing flicker of

dim candlelight. Mikey giggles as Joanna waves her hands around as if she were in an imaginary sword fight.

Shaking my head, I turn back to the open window and take one final glance at England's structural ruins. A gray haze hovers over the city like a cloak of death and disease. The blackened remains of the once-bustling town of London provide mute evidence of the carnage and destruction caused by the Marauders, the pirate soldiers sent by Queen Katherina of Germany.

Years ago, Queen Katherina ascended the German throne after the unexpected death of her husband. But it soon became clear that ruling just one country would not be enough for her. England tried to stop her, working to have the International Peace Accords signed by the world's nations. It was meant to unify and create a utopic society for all time. It was a hollow gesture at best. Queen Katherina quickly defied the treaty, leaving the countries surrounding her kingdom in a bloodbath, earning her the nickname the Bloodred Queen.

So we are not her first invasion and certainly not her last.

I descend the fire escape to the rain-soaked streets below. Leaving my sister and brother to their fairy tales, I travel east on foot for an hour outside of our hideout before reaching a dilapidated suburban community.

A full moon casts its eerie glow through a break in the gloomy clouds, chasing away dark shadows in the alleys. The stench of death and rotting corpses still lingers in the muggy air, evidence of diseased bodies discarded into the sewage system by survivors and soldiers alike. Rumors of crocodiles let loose within the sewers to devour the dead circulated among the survivors in the days following

the bombs. Even after all this time, the smell makes me want to retch. Crouching behind the rubble of bomb-shelled buildings, I watch for movement. Other than scavenging rodents, the night is silent. Most of the houses lie in ruins, casualties of the war. Those buildings still standing loom with windowless gapes and graffiti-painted walls, an indication that they have already been looted. Weeds grow tall in the front lawns and through the thick cracks of the buckling streets as nature reclaims what once was hers.

My hopes rise as I stumble upon a single-story house that appears untouched. Other than a pile of bricks and mortar from what was a chimney, the structure seems undamaged. Thankfully, the windows remain intact, a sure sign that no one has scavenged the place. Still, I know I must be cautious. Assumptions will get me killed.

I step out of the shadows and into the milky moonlight. Glass crushes beneath my black leather boots. I cringe, cursing my careless mistake. The stillness of the night air remains unbroken, at least this time. I make my way to the side of the house, slipping through a broken board in the backyard fence.

With the palm of my hand, I wipe dirt from a dingy window on the garage door. It's too dark inside to see anything. Placing my rucksack on the ground, I pull out a small kerosene lantern and a book of matches. The cover flips open, revealing a single match.

Afraid of accidentally blowing it out, I hold my breath, run the match along the strike strip, and light the lamp. It sparks and the warmth chases away the chill from my fingers.

Once more, I survey my surroundings to be sure no one is watching, even though I know I'd hear the hiss of the military's steam tanks from a mile away. Searching the ground, I select a loose brick from

the crumbled chimney and hurl it at the window. The glass shatters, breaking into a thousand tiny shards, littering the stone walkway in a puddle of fragmented tears and leaving jagged teeth in the frame. I reach inside to unlock the door, careful not to cut myself. As I let myself into the garage, rusty hinges wail in protest.

Like most of the homes I have searched, empty boxes and plastic containers lay strewn about the dusty floor, evidence of a family fleeing for their lives from the bombs, the deadly virus, and the Marauders. More than likely, there will be nothing left to salvage, but I rummage through the shelves and drawers anyway. Other than a rusted torque ratchet and spool of copper wire, everything else is useless. I slip the treasures into my pack before trying the door into the house. Fortunately, it gives way with little resistance, allowing me to enter the living room.

Photos of a family hang on a pale yellow wall above a sofa. Naïve smiles greet me from the frames: a man with a square chin; a doe-eyed woman; and two kids, a boy and a girl. I trace my finger over the faces. Where are they now? Did they make it? Did they get out of the city in time? Questions I often ask about my own parents, but like the silent, ghostly images staring at me through these family photos, I'm left with more uncertainties than answers.

Stepping away from the pictures, I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in the glass. Blue eyes stare back at me, hollow and distant with dark circles beneath them. Loose tendrils of light brown, curly hair, having fallen out of my plait, frame my dirt-streaked cheeks. I pull out the hair ribbon and rake my fingers through my kinky waves, but it doesn't help. Rubbing my fingertips over the smudges on my face, I notice the dirt under my fingernails. My

breath catches as I remember that only a year ago I obsessed about perfect manicures. Now those worries seem frivolous as I inspect my calloused, filthy palms covered in cuts and scars. Another glance at my reflection and I notice that although I am just shy of my sixteenth birthday, I look as if I am twice my age.

A noise to my right startles me. Two yellow eyes peer at me before disappearing beneath a broken china hutch: a rat. *Figures*, I think. Along with cockroaches and children, rodents are among the last survivors of the war.

As expected, most of the food is gone or eaten by the rats. I'm lucky enough to find a tin of tuna packaged in spring water and a half-full canister of pasta in an upper cupboard. I add them to my pack. Placing a canteen beneath the sink faucet, I try to turn the water on. Pipes rumble for a moment, then go quiet. A few drops of muddy brown water drip from the dusty silver mouth, but hardly enough for a sip. I slam the handle.

I continue to search the house for other items to add to my stash: a kitchen knife, a colander, and an umbrella, a necessity for England regardless of the time of year. The master bedroom is empty aside from a metal bed frame and a broken kerosene lantern. A black frock with decorative silver knob buttons on the lapel hangs in the back of the closet. It's big, but it will suffice. I slip my arms through the sleeves and sling my pack over my shoulders.

Lying in the center of a bedroom painted flamingo pink is a tattered brown bear peering at me with a single black button eye. I pick it up and hold it to my chest, remembering my own room filled with too many stuffed animals. My nose tingles with the faint smell of chocolate, and I recall the strawberry-scented bunny

that sat at the head of my bed. I add the bear to my stash. If nothing else, it will be good kindling for a fire.

A shrill scream shatters the silence. I extinguish my lantern and race back to the sitting room. Leaning up against a wall, I hide from the window's view. The lantern rattles in my trembling grip. I sneak a glance through the single-pane glass. Footsteps hammer on the wet cobblestone street, soaked from the late evening's shower. A dozen Marauders in dark military attire halt in front of the sitting room window. Bronze chest and shoulder plates cover their uniforms. Full leather and metal helmets complete with night-vision goggles and gas masks obscure their faces. They scan the street, their geared and cogged metal rifles reflecting the full moon. My heart races at the terrifying sight of them as sweat prickles at my neck. One soldier gives an order, his voice almost mechanical through his helmet. The group splits into teams, smashing down the doors of the adjacent homes. I duck below the windowsill but keep my attention fixed on the soldiers storming through the houses.

Something shifts across the street, catching my attention. A girl with long blond hair peeks from a shrub. She looks to be about Joanna's age, just a child really. The girl scans her surroundings before dashing down the street. I bolt upright, watching her stop several houses down and jump onto a rubbish bin. On her back is a leather and metal rocket pack. She pulls a lever and a large brass cog, not unlike those found inside a clock, spins on the outside of the pack. Two delicate copper wings spring open. Steam spills from the bottom of the rockets and her feet leave the ground. Her petite frame flies over a wooden fence.

Something in me wants to follow her, a longing for human connection other than my own family. But I remind myself that Joanna and Mikey are waiting for me at home. They are my responsibility. Still, I haven't seen anyone else in months. Like me, they must hide in the shadows if they haven't already succumbed to the virus or been caught by the Marauders. I stare into the dark alley that the girl disappeared into, when suddenly two green eyes lined with black powder peer at me, separated from me only by glass. Alarmed, I fall back, catching myself with my hands. A teenage boy gazes through the window, unblinking. His wide eyes look me up and down, as if he is as shocked to see me as I am him. He looks back at his pursuers, then at me.

"Let me in," he pleads, the glass muffling his words as he pounds on the windowpane with his fists.

Immobilized by fear, I shake my head as my pulse quickens. My quaking hand reaches for my dagger. I unsheathe the blade and point it at him. He slaps both of his palms on the window, making the glass vibrate. Startled, I inch back farther from the window. He stares with such intensity my breath catches. The gruff voices in the street grow louder, drawing his attention. His clenched, stubbled jaw twitches and he turns his jade gaze back to me one last time. His face expresses something akin to frustration or disappointment—which, I am not sure. It ignites the sickening feeling of guilt I've become so accustomed to. He is not the first I have turned away, sacrificed for the good of my own family. Nor will he be the last, of this I am sure.

The boy pushes off the glass and darts across the residential street. Effortlessly, he leaps over the wooden fence, lands on the top

of a rubbish bin, springs onto a second-story balcony, and with the expertise of a gymnast, pulls himself onto the rooftop. Standing on the peak of the two-story Victorian home, he looks back at me with a curious expression. Other than his forest-green coat, its tails fluttering in the wind, he is dressed entirely in black.

The glow of the moon shines on his handsome face. Fixing his gaze on me, he bows and slips a pair of goggles dangling from his neck over his eyes. He holds his cupped hands to his mouth. With the call of a rooster, he cries into the broken clouds and star-embellished night sky before vanishing over the roof peaks of this suburb. Puzzled, I sit back on my heels and stare at the spot where he stood, half expecting him to reappear. The angry shouts grow louder and another group of military men passes the house. I duck below the sill, risking another glance out the window.

Two soldiers, only a few years older than me, stop just outside of the house.

“Which way did they go?” one of the Marauders asks, peering through the window.

I press my body and face to the dusty carpet. Fear chokes me as I listen to the other soldier respond.

“The girl took off up the street and the boy went over the roof,” the other soldier growls menacingly with a thick, deep German accent behind his helmet.

“Check the backyards for Immunes,” the first soldier says.

“Yes, sir.”

The two Marauders race across the street and climb the fence, disappearing behind the house. I sigh, letting go of the breath I did not know I was holding.

Immunes: the vile name they've given to children who have not died of the Horologia virus. We are the survivors of the outbreak and valued for our antibodies. The Marauders are our abductors.

Ten restless minutes slip by before I make my way to the alley behind the house. Sprinting, I keep to the rubbish-littered backstreets, haunted by ethereal shadows cast by jagged rooftops. With the Marauders out patrolling, I backtrack through unfamiliar passageways and find alternative routes. For the last few months, they have hunted for survivors, children orphaned and left on their own in the streets. However, I have never seen soldiers search the suburbs this far outside the borders of what once was London proper. Not London anymore, I remind myself; they call it Everland now.

After an hour, I hide behind a row of hedges and watch for movement along the dark street. I have the uneasy feeling that I am being watched, but see no one. Sprinting to the fire-escape ladder, I scramble as fast as I can, the cold metal leaving its bitter bite on my fingers. When I reach the landing of the fifth floor, I climb through the window frame and throw myself to the concrete floor. I sink my teeth down on my lip, trying to quiet my rapid breathing as I listen for anyone following behind. The night echoes my silence.

I let out a breath, relieved to be greeted with the quiet of our refuge, our sanctuary . . . for now, at least. Standing, I brush off the dust from my coat. A candle sputters on the far side of the room next to three empty mattresses. The sweet smell of rum stings my nose, and I know instantly something is wrong.

Joanna and Mikey are nowhere to be found.

My gaze darts throughout the room, searching for my brother and sister. I tiptoe across the floor, being as silent as possible. Something large rustles near the shelves to my right. An icy chill races up my spine. My fingers graze the copper hilts of the daggers sheathed on my hips. A whimper emanates from inside the metal rubbish bin. With caution, I lift the lid.

Two watery brown eyes glisten at me, the moonlight reflecting in their frightened gleam.

“Mikey!” I reach for him, pulling him from the bin. A colander covers his head like a helmet and he wears makeshift armor over his tattered pajamas. He looks like he’s ready for war.

“They came, the pirates!” he says, sniffing.

“Not the Marauders,” I beg, my voice weak.

“Joanna said they were pirates. She told me to hide. I did just what she said. I hid in the bin and was as quiet as a dormouse. Even quieter.”

My pulse races and my cheeks flush with panic as I settle Mikey to the floor and dart across the room, searching other hiding spots for my sister.

“Where’s Joanna?” I ask frantically, lifting one of the mattresses.

“They took her,” Mikey says in a fresh burst of tears. “They took her away.”

I run to the window, but the streets are quiet and there is no sign of the Marauders. Mikey rushes me, jumping back in my arms and burying his face in my neck. I look out into the distance and a deep ache festers in the pit of my stomach as a new realization settles over me.

To get my sister back, I will have to return to Everland.