

BEYOND THE BUNKER

SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT WORLD



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2034

DIRT. THAT IS ALL THESE TWIN CHILDREN COULD SEE 'TIL THEY WERE 14. YOU AND I ARE PROBABLY ALLOWED TO GO OUTSIDE WHENEVER WE WANT AND DO WHATEVER WE WANT, LIKE CLIMB TREES OR MAKE MUD PIES. WELL, NOT SERENA AND NATHAN. THEY WERE BORN IN THEIR UNDERGROUND BUNKER AND HAD NEVER SEEN THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

SERENA WAS TALL AND SKINNY WITH LONG, DARK HAIR AND BRIGHT, GREEN EYES. NATHAN, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS SHORTER AND A BIT PLUMPER. HIS MULLET-LIKE HAIRSTYLE MADE HIS DARK, BLUE EYES NEARLY UNNOTICEABLE.

"TELL US AGAIN ABOUT THE HIGH WORLD, DAD," SAID NATHAN, ONE NIGHT AS THE FAMILY SAT DOWN ON THE POLKA DOT MAT FOR A SUPPER OF CANNED CORN AND CHICKPEAS.

"WHAT IS YOUR LAST MEMORY OF UP THERE?"

THE CHILDREN'S FATHER, CALEB, WIPED HIS MOUTH. HE'D BARELY TOUCHED HIS DINNER. IN A TREMBLING VOICE HE BEGAN.

"W-WELL, UM, I REMEMBER, AH, EVERY ONE W-WAS IN M-MASKS..." HE PAUSED AND CONTINUED.

"WE WERE STUCK IN OUR HOUSES, NO ONE COULD COME OUT AND MY FAMILY AND YOUR MOTHER'S FAMILY WENT INTO THE BUNKER CAUSE WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SAFER..."

CALEB'S WIFE, YAH, GRABBED HIS HAND AND CALEB SQUEEZED IT TIGHT. YAH CONTINUED THE STORY.

"YOUR UNCLE, WANG, DECIDED TO GO LIVE WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND. WE HAVEN'T SEEN HIM SINCE." YAH HAD A WAY OF SIGNALLING THAT THAT WAS THE END OF THAT CONVERSATION. "SO," SHE PIPED, MUCH MORE ENERGETICALLY THAN BEFORE. "BEDTIME!"

AS SERENA GOT INTO HER BRIGHT, BLUE SLEEPING BAG, SHE STARTED THINKING ABOUT HOW SHAKEN HER DAD LOOKED. MASKS. STUCK IN HOUSES. WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

"HEY NATHAN?" SERENA WHISPERED.

"YEAH?" HIS VOICE WHISPERED BACK IN THE DARK.

"I WONDER WHAT IT MEANS, ALL THE STUFF ABOUT THE HIGH WORLD, WAS THERE A TORNADO?"

"COME ON, SERENA, THERE ARE NO TORNADOS IN VICTORIA, OR AUSTRALIA FOR THAT MATTER," WHISPERED NATHAN, STERNLY. THERE WAS SILENCE FOR WHAT FELT LIKE 10 MINUTES. BOTH KIDS MIND WHERE BUZZING. THEN IT HIT NATHAN. "WHAT IF IT WAS LIKE A DISEASE? THAT'S WHY EVERYONE WAS IN MASKS. TO STOP SOMETHING SPREADING. AND EVERYONE WAS STUCK IN THEIR HOUSES BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T WANT EVERYONE TOGETHER. MAYBE THE DISEASE WAS SUPER CONTAGIOUS OR SOMETHING."

SERENA INTERRUPTED - "THAT'S WHY MUM AND DAD WENT INTO THE BUNKER BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T WANT CATCH IT!" SHE SAID, GASPING.

THIS THEORY MADE THEM SO EXCITED THAT THEY COULDN'T SIT STILL. AS YOU MIGHT HAVE GUESSED THESE TWINS LOVED MYSTERIES. THEY DECIDED TO CONFRONT THEIR PARENTS THE VERY NEXT DAY.

"MUM, DAD? WE HAVE A THEORY AND WE WANT TO KNOW IF IT'S TRUE," SAID SERENA THE NEXT DAY. IT WAS THE MORNING AND YAH WAS SERVING BREAKFAST. BAKED BEANS AND CANNED PINEAPPLE. SERENA NOTICED THAT HER MUM PUT NO PINEAPPLE ON HER OR CALEB'S PLATE AND WHEN SERENA OFFERED HER PINEAPPLE TO HER MUM, SHE SHOOK HER OFFER AWAY LIKE SHE HAD OFFERED TO LICK HER SHOE.

"GOOD MORNING SERENA, MORNING NATHAN," YAWNED THEIR DAD. "WHAT DID YOU WANT TO TELL US ABOUT?"

SERENA TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND BEGAN. "IS THE REASON YOU WENT INTO THE BUNKER BECAUSE OF SOME SORT OF DISEASE?"

YAH AND CALEB LOOKED AT EACH OTHER AND FELL SILENT.

"HOW DID YOU FIND OUT?" SAID CALEB IN BARELY MORE THAN A WHISPER.

"SO IT'S TRUE?! OUR THEORY IS TRUE THEN?" NATHAN ASKED, EXCITEDLY. "YES," YAH SAID, SORROWFULLY. "THE DISEASE KILLED ANYONE WHO CAUGHT IT. WE WERE SCARED AND WENT INTO THE BUNKER WHERE WE GOT MARRIED, WATCHED OUR PARENTS DIE AND HAVE YOU KIDS. WE HAVE NEVER GOT WORD THAT IT WAS SAFE TO COME OUT. IT'S BEEN YEARS SINCE WE WENT IN HERE." SHE FINISHED, GIVING THE TWINS THE LOOK THAT MADE THEM FEEL LIKE SHE WAS LOOKING INTO THEIR SOULS.

SERENA REALISED THAT THEIR DAD HAD GONE OUT OF THE ROOM.

"M-MUM? WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEFORE IT ALL HAPPENED?" SHE ASKED. THEY ALL SAT DOWN ON THE RUG AND YAH BEGAN.

"WELL, WE LIVED ON A BIG FARM AND YOUR FATHER AND I WERE NEIGHBOURS. THE TREES WERE ALWAYS GREEN AND IT WAS ALWAYS SO BEAUTIFUL WITH LIFE. EVERY NIGHT WE WOULD GO PLAY IN THE WOODS AND WHAT A FUN TIME WE HAD..." SERENA COULD SEE HERSELF PLAYING NEXT TO THE THICK, GREEN TREES. SHE COULD SMELL THE WILD FLOWERS, THE TALL GRASS, THE SMELL OF A BIG, CRACKLING FIRE. SHE COULD FEEL THE BUMPY WOOD ON HER FINGERS. THE WAY THE LEAVES RUSTLED OVER HER FACE. THE TASTE OF WILD BERRIES IN HER MOUTH. THIS IS WHAT SHE WANTED HER LIFE TO BE LIKE.

FROM THAT MOMENT ON SERENA AND NATHAN WERE OBSESSED WITH EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE HIGH WORLD. EVERY NIGHT, FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS, SERENA AND NATHAN WERE ALWAYS VERY EAGER TO HEAR STORIES ABOUT WHAT YAH AND CALEB USED TO DO. AND IN ALL THAT TIME, THE TWINS GOT TO WORK ON THEIR FAVOURITE HOBBIES. IF YOU LOOKED IN SERENA'S SPECIAL WOODEN BOX, YOU WOULD FIND A VERY, BIG PILE OF PAPERS WITH LOTS OF TINY WORDS ON THEM AND A STUBBY SORT OF PENCIL THAT SHE HAD MADE HERSELF OUT OF CHARCOAL. BUT IF YOU LOOKED IN NATHAN'S YOU WOULD FIND NOTHING BUT 10 DIFFERENT BOOKS: 2 NOVELS THAT SERENA WROTE HERSELF. AS THE YEARS WENT ON, THE TWINS BECAME OLDER BUT THAT DAY WHEN THEY FOUND OUT THE TRUTH WAS NEVER FORGOTTEN.