



# ONE

Everyone knows you don't go out into the forest. That's why the village elders built the Wall—years and years ago, longer than anyone can remember. They built it to keep us safe from all the deadly forest creatures: the ruthless wolf packs, the huge ravenous bears, and the wildcats with

their razor-sharp claws.

It's why they built the watchtowers and the gates, why the rules are so strict about who can leave the village and how far they can go.

The forest is wild and dark and full of nothing but danger.

At least that's what everyone thinks.

And that's what I thought too, until the morning of my ninth birthday.



Some kids are terrified of their ninth birthday, and you can't really blame them for that. You wake up and there's a letter waiting



for you, telling you what Assignment you'll be doing for the next two years.

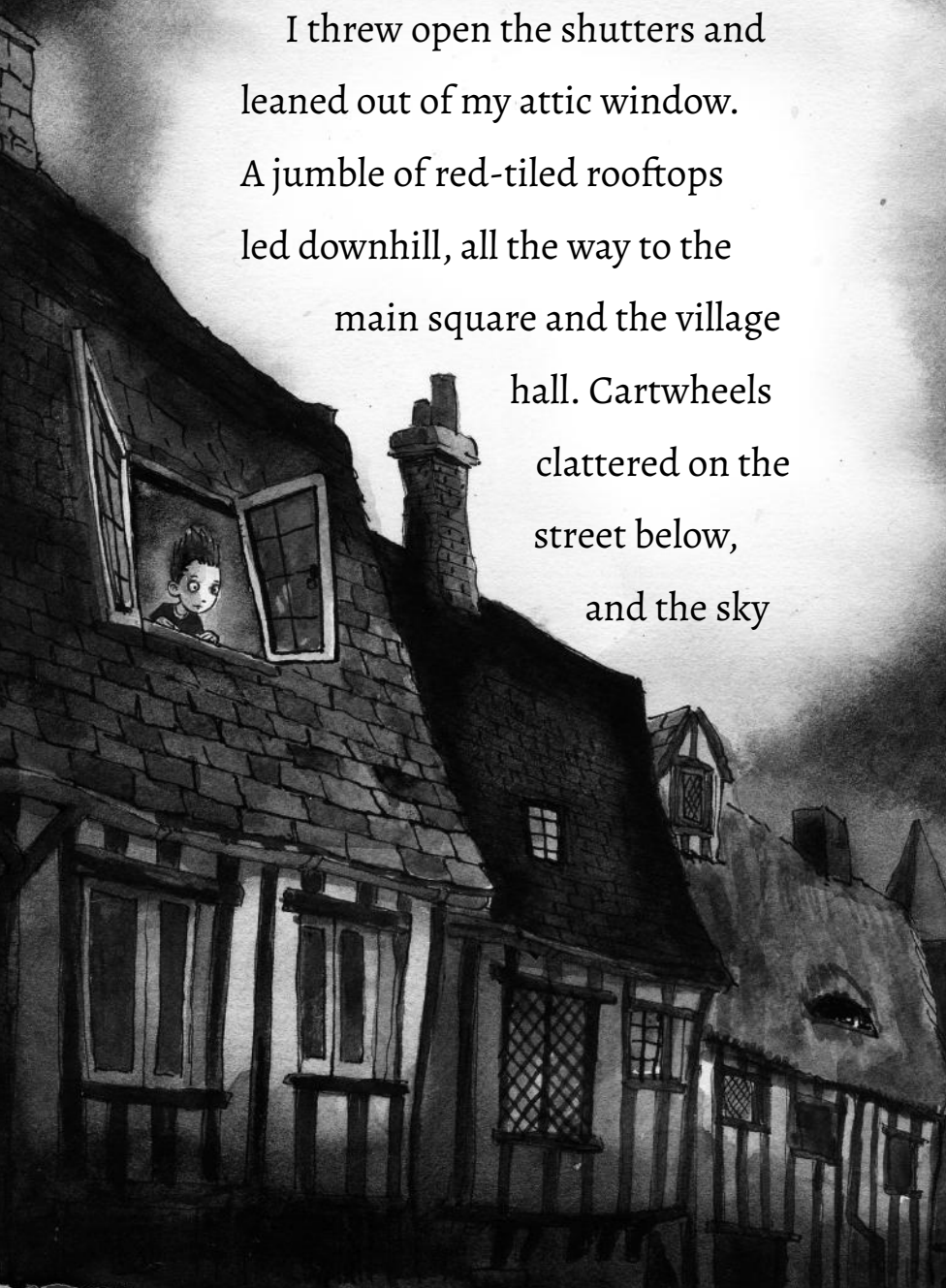
All you get is a word or two: goat-tender, muck-shoveller, wood-chopper—whatever the elders decide. And that's the next two years mapped out for you, just like that.

But me? I wasn't scared at all.

I was pretty sure the elders would assign me to the Records Office where my best friend Jacob already worked. They tried to match your Assignment to your talents, and I was good at reading and writing. I was also really good at staying indoors. It was going to be great.

So when I woke up on my birthday, I climbed out of bed feeling pretty excited.

I threw open the shutters and  
leaned out of my attic window.  
A jumble of red-tiled rooftops  
led downhill, all the way to the  
main square and the village  
hall. Cartwheels  
clattered on the  
street below,  
and the sky



raced with wispy clouds. I peered back up the street towards Jacob's house, but his window was closed. Jacob never gets out of bed before he absolutely has to.

I hurried down the ladder onto the first-floor landing, then down the stairs to the living room. Mum was kneeling beside the stove, feeding it with logs. When she heard me, she turned and rushed over.

'Leo!' she said, grabbing me into a powerful hug. 'Happy birthday, son.'

She kissed my forehead, and I wiped it off immediately.

'Thanks,' I said.

Behind her, on a high shelf, I couldn't help noticing a small package decorated with sprigs of ivy: my birthday present. It was a set of charcoal drawing pencils, and I knew this because Lulu, my older sister, had never kept a secret in her life.

The back door thumped, and in walked Lulu, carrying her basket of woodworking tools, closely followed by Stickle the cat.

Lulu grinned at me. 'It's here,' she said, dropping her basket with a clank. 'Are you going to open it now?'

For a second I wasn't sure what she was talking about; then my eyes settled

on the table. It was set with jam and butter, and there was a jug of flowers in the centre. Propped against the flower jug was a small rectangle of paper.

The letter.

For the first time, I felt a shiver of nerves. What had the elders chosen for me?

‘Oh, come on,’ said Lulu. ‘We all know you’re going to the Records Office. You virtually live there anyway!’ She grabbed my arm and dragged me over to the table. ‘Open it, Leo. Put us out of our misery.’

‘Open it when you’re ready,’ Mum said. ‘It’s your big day, my love. No one else’s.’

I sat down, lifting the letter carefully. My name was written on the front: *Leo Wilder*, in thin, slanted letters. It was sealed on the reverse side with a circle of blood-red wax.

‘Here,’ Mum said, placing a bread roll and a cup of goat’s milk in front of me.

‘Thanks,’ I said, but I didn’t feel like eating.

I touched the wax seal on the letter and noticed Lulu glaring at me impatiently from across the table.

‘Fine,’ I said, sliding my finger under one of the folds. The wax cracked, and the letter opened just a little.



I paused, took a deep breath, then pulled the letter open and read the words that were written there—the command of the elders, my Assignment for the next two years.

‘Huh?’

I dropped the letter and stood up, knocking the table so that everything shook. My cup teetered and fell, sloshing goat’s milk onto my feet.

‘What is it?’ Lulu asked. ‘Where are you going?’

I felt Stickle at my feet, lapping up the spilled milk. Then Mum was suddenly beside me, gently squeezing my shoulder.



‘Oh my,’ she said. ‘Well, I’ve never seen *that* before.’

The letter lay open on the table top,  
two words inked in black:

**TOP SECRET.**

Lulu hurried round the table to read the letter.

‘What does it mean?’ she said.

But there was no answer, because none of us knew.

Then, there came a knock at the door.

For an instant, I thought Jacob had arrived.

How could I tell him I wasn’t coming to the Records Office, that we wouldn’t be spending our Assignments together after all?

But, I realized, it couldn’t possibly be Jacob. He never knocked, he just walked right in.

So who was it?

Mum glanced down at me, the same question furrowing her brow. She gave my shoulder a final squeeze before cautiously moving towards the door.

The hinges creaked and light poured in from the street. I saw a tall, slim outline on the doorstep and heard a surprised tone in my mother's voice.



‘Oh . . . good morning . . . please,  
uh . . . please come in.’

Ducking gracefully under the  
doorframe came Gilda, the  
village chief.



She glanced at me as she entered, her long green cloak brushing the floor. Then she turned and smiled at Mum.

‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘I’m so sorry for the intrusion.’

‘Not at all,’ Mum replied. She glanced at the spillage on the table, and her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. ‘Can I get you anything? Uh . . . Would you like some milk?’

‘Thank you, no,’ replied the chief with a polite smile.

Then her smile vanished, and she looked me straight in the eye. ‘But I’m afraid I do have to borrow your son.’