



JM BRISCOE

JM Briscoe has always been fascinated by reading and storytelling. Some of her favourite authors growing up included: Dr Seuss, Beatrix Potter, Philip Pullman, JK Rowling and Neil Gaiman. She spent most of her childhood exploring the Shotley Peninsula in search of fairies and leprechauns. Since then, her interests have expanded to all things science fiction, with her most recent adventure taking her inside the immense stone walls of a cold war bunker. She holds a bachelor's degree in creative writing and a master's degree in Writing for Young People, both awarded by Bath Spa University.

About November Child

November has never known life above the surface. She shares her underground home with Father, his many androids and the eleven other children that were born there. But November has always been a curious child, and soon discovers the cracks in their illusory existence. When the children are forced 'Topside', November must rely on her keen instincts and knowledge of the old world to journey through the volatile, post-nuclear terrain and save what's left of her family.

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NOVEMBER CHILD

It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Something they never told her about ice: it actually burns. November felt it over every inch of her body, stabbing into her flesh like blades of electricity. She felt stunned. Paralysed.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

The gunshots were muffled, but November could still hear them. She had no idea whether she was up or down, left or right, backwards or forwards. Her chest convulsed as the water fought its way inside her. Like sand pouring into her lungs, scraping against her throat as it went.

You can give in now, his voice whispered. *You can come home.*

The blue light faded, and the darkness turned thick and black, like the inkpots in Father's office. Even now, she could still remember breaking one, and how the blackness had spread across Father's desk like liquid shadow.

She could see it ... She could see home.

The office. The canteen. The projection room. The library. The garden. The workshop.

And then she heard the music, as loud and clear as if she were actually there. Its melody wrapped around her still, freezing body, sending a ripple of warmth through her bones. The voice was so gentle, so familiar, as it sung about sweet things. Beautiful things. Rainbows and birds and blue skies.

Things she had always wanted to see ... and now never would.

Chapter One

The Centre of the Earth

November raced down the stairs, cursing her short legs for not being able to take the steps two at a time. She'd never been particularly tall – but she was fast. The fastest, really. And this came in handy when being chased by a hundred-pound eleven-year-old, who had clearly been a rhinoceros in a previous life.

She leapt from the bottom step, propelling herself across the open canteen and weaving between the round tables. She hurled chairs and trays of leftovers behind her, but it would take a lot more than that to slow January down.

They thundered towards the play area, their stomps echoing across the entire canteen. A stretch of yellow and black tape blocked the entrance, but November tore straight through it. She couldn't stop now. Not when he was right on her heels.

Most of the play equipment had already disappeared – something about Father wanting to 'renovate'. But even with the extra room, there were only so many places she could run. She sprinted towards the jungle gym. She was just small enough to squeeze inside, and January would never be able to reach her through the metal bars. It was perfect.

But he was too close behind.

She leapt on to the climbing mesh and clambered upwards. January reached for her ankle, but she kicked him away. When she reached the very top, she glanced over her shoulder.

There he was, flushed and panting, right behind her.

She darted across the bridge, past the tunnel, until there was nowhere left to run. Her feet shuffled backwards, reaching the very edge of the jungle gym, her heels hanging over what the other kids called *Devil's Drop*.

She took a breath.

'Give them back,' January said, his chest heaving as he stood across from her, blocking the only escape. He was a full head taller than her, and much wider.

'I don't have them.'

He looked down at her pockets. 'Give them back, or I'm telling,' he warned, taking a step closer.

‘He won’t believe you,’ she snapped back. ‘You’re his least favourite.’ Even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew she didn’t mean them. Not really. But she wouldn’t back down – not to January.

‘Take that back!’ he yelled, his nostrils flaring.

‘N–’

January’s hands slammed against her shoulders. She reached out for a railing, a piece of rope – *anything* – but it was too late.

She hit the floor with a sickening *crack* and the blueberries burst in her pocket, seeping through her trousers and up into her blouse. Pain splintered through her left arm. She wanted to cry out, to shout every ugly name she could think of, but her chest was too tight. All she could do was lie there.

She heard January swear under his breath. Within a few seconds, he was kneeling on the floor beside her. His dark, wide eyes scanned over her injuries.

Of course, when he realised the stains were just berry juice and not blood, he laughed. ‘Serves you right.’

‘What’s going on here?’ Father’s voice bellowed from the doorway.

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Growing up with eleven other children meant that scrapes and bruises were as regular as meal times. Still, it was best to avoid them – especially if they were coming from someone twice the size of you.

‘January’s a creep,’ November said when she and Father were sitting in the infirmary. This was her least favourite place in Orsa Nova. Many of the rooms throughout the bunker were cramped and colourless, but the infirmary was especially bleak. Cold white walls with charts pinned over the cracking paint, and metal instruments scattered across every surface. Just being there felt like punishment.

But it wasn’t. November still had that to look forward to.

Her arm was broken in three places. It had stopped hurting; the anaesthetic had seen to that. But it didn’t *look* like her arm any more. It was the wrong shape. She swallowed the sick bile at the back of her throat and looked away as Father set the bones. At least this part was painless.

The Bone Serum was the part she was dreading. A fresh batch bubbled in the corner of the room, and the chemical stench burned her nostrils.

November tried again. ‘He isn’t like the others.’

Father injected her with the serum. He put the syringe down and dabbed some cream on the spot the needle had entered. ‘None of you are like each other,’ he said. ‘Not really. You were created to be diverse and unique. January can be insensitive.’ He shrugged, as if there was nothing that could be done about it. ‘Still, he cares for you. They all do. You may not share blood, but you’re family nonetheless.’ Then he smiled at her. ‘Just like we are.’

‘I hate him,’ she muttered.

Then the Bone Serum kicked in. A tight cramp spread through her arm as the serum overpowered the anaesthetic and her bones began to repair. November gritted her teeth. It wasn’t the first time she’d had Bone Serum, and she knew the pain wouldn’t last long, but that didn’t make it any easier.

‘Hate is a powerful word,’ Father said, his voice hardening. His purple eye narrowed, and the lenses in his bronze eye switched, zooming in on her face.

November looked down at her shoes.

‘Just as love is a powerful word. Never use either unless you truly mean it.’

‘I love *you*,’ she mumbled, still not looking at him. The pain was lessening now.

To her relief, Father laughed. ‘I know.’ Then he kissed her forehead. ‘Now, before these childish scraps become any more serious, I’m restricting all contact between you and January. You won’t be allowed to sit near each other, or work together in any of your classes.’

She rolled her eyes. As if they’d *want* to.

Father frowned. ‘You may have to face real enemies one day, November. Making enemies of each other is foolish.’ He stared at her in silence until she finally nodded. ‘Good – and one more thing: April will be looking after your beetroot. She’s more than capable of overseeing two patches in the garden. Quite the green thumb, that one.’

November blinked at him, trying to understand what he was saying.

‘You’ll still be able to attend class, but there will be no more –’

‘You’re *banning* me?’ Her voice went all high and squeaky.

Father didn’t even flinch. ‘From working in the garden, yes. Until the end of the year. You can’t go around stealing other people’s things, November.’

‘But they weren’t for me!’

Father’s eyes, both purple and mechanical, focused harder on her face. ‘Who were the berries for?’

It only took her a second. ‘You.’

Each year, all the children were given a patch in Father’s garden and assigned different seeds. And blueberries were Father’s favourite. Everyone knew that. There was always some argument over who should get to grow them. If it had been someone like August, or even March, November probably wouldn’t have taken them. But this year, it was January.

It was the perfect excuse.

‘Me?’ Father raised his eyebrows.

‘They’re your favourite.’

His expression softened. ‘Wait a moment.’ He rolled across the room in his chair. On reaching his desk, he pulled out a small square box from one of the drawers, before gliding back to her. He popped the lid open to reveal dozens of blueberries, plump and fresh.

‘Sally’s taken it upon herself to stash these around my offices.’ He held the box towards her and winked. ‘She thinks I don’t eat enough.’

November reached into the box and pulled out three blueberries. ‘Thank you,’ she said quietly, guilt stirring in her stomach.

‘You’re welcome. Now, off you go.’

She stood, carefully lifting her arm and flexing her fingers. It felt as good as new.

‘And November?’ Father called when she was at the door. ‘No more stealing. Is that understood?’

She nodded.

‘Good girl.’

When she opened the door, she spotted January sitting on one of the wooden benches along the corridor, arms folded and brows furrowed. His ink-black hair was still damp from their chase, but the rosy tint had disappeared from his otherwise brown skin. His dark eyes glared at her as she stepped out.

‘Move along, November,’ she heard Father call from behind, the sternness returning to his voice. ‘January, come in, please.’

The children didn’t break eye contact until January stepped inside the infirmary and the door closed between them. It was only then that November stuck out her tongue.

She wondered what *his* punishment would be. Their usual penalties were

things like skipping dessert or missing out on movie night. This felt different – but why? She and January had always fought, ever since they could walk and talk. He hated it when she challenged him. Everyone thought it was an age thing, seeing as he was the eldest and she was the second youngest. But November knew it was simply a January thing. A short fuse and a whole lot of muscle equalled trouble for anyone brave enough to stand up to him.

To be fair, it wasn't *always* November who got injured. Sometimes she would get January back just as good. It simply required a little more stealth. Like the time she put wire across the bottom of a doorway, or the time she stuffed nettles into his pillowcase. Had it not been for the blisters on her palms, she probably would have got away with that one.

November looked down at the blueberries in her hand. She wasn't sure what made her feel worse: how quickly Father had believed her, or how effortless it was to lie to him. She'd lied before, of course. Who hadn't? But pretending to sleepwalk when caught out of bed, or claiming to have watered the radishes, even after they turned to mulch, was nothing compared to this. Those were little lies – unimportant lies.

This was something else entirely.

She looked at her other hand, pushing the sleeve back to reveal the tiny puncture wounds decorating her fingers. The bite was still red and blotchy, but it didn't hurt any more.

'November.'

She spun round. Sally was standing right in front of her.

'We missed you at the library session today.'

November's cheeks burned. 'Yeah, sorry ... Something happened.'

She straightened up and tried to flatten down her hair. Sally was always so poised and elegant, with her welcoming expression and gentle voice. Her milky skin was flawless, and her round eyes were almost the same colour as the berries in November's hand. Every part of her was smooth and sleek and perfectly in place. And there November stood: pink-faced with ratty hair and berry juice staining her blouse.

She tried to smile when Sally squeezed her shoulder. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that Sally wasn't real. She looked more like the rest of them than Father did. And yet, when it came down to it, she was nothing more than wires and programming.

'I have just the thing to cheer you up.' She pulled out a patterned book from behind her back. 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. I think you'll enjoy this one.'

'Thanks, Sally.' November reached out to take the book.

'What's that on your hand?'

She froze. The bite marks.

'Just scratches.' It was unsettling how easily the lies continued to roll off her tongue. 'January pushed me off the jungle gym.' At least that part was true.

Sally nodded, her face expressionless. 'Well, here you go.'

November took the book from her. 'I'll read it before next week.'

Sally smiled her white toothy smile. 'Wonderful. I look forward to hearing your thoughts. Now, please excuse me. I must retire to the docking station.'

And then she walked away, her ponytail swooshing from side to side as she went. She disappeared around the corner and November counted exactly twenty seconds, before heading straight for the stairs.

She had no idea what she was going to say to April or December, or if she'd even tell them at all. Luckily, she didn't meet anyone else along the way.

When she reached the girls' dormitory, she pressed her ear against the door. It was almost dinnertime and everyone would be gathering in the canteen. But she had to make sure. No one else could know about this yet.

She glanced down the corridor one last time – one final check – before stepping inside. At least she'd managed to move the creature from the garden before Father banned her.