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The Freedom Note

Mark Bramble

California State University, Monterey Bay

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The Freedom Note

Chapter 1

It was the popular vote, the first time electing President Novikov. The second time, we were deceived into believing it was the necessary vote when our country exited the UN and we needed a “strong leader”. Then everyone lost their right to vote, but our dear leader was still “elected” for a third term. Our country went from a democracy to fascism and no one has been able to stop it... UNTIL NOW!

Join the Pa-

The note was torn at the bottom right corner. It was behind a glass case attached to a wall. Ben had been staring at it, he had long since committed the details of the note to his memory yet still, when he was around the note, he was compelled to stare at it, as if he had never seen it before. The aged note used to belong to the Patriots for Liberty. Before the country fell apart completely, the Patriots were for reinstating democracy and removing the oppressive government. They failed, and those who were associated with that movement were not brought into the camps like the rest of the redheads and political adversaries. No, when the Patriots were caught, they were all executed.

Although the note was created to be propaganda for the Patriot’s revolution, the camp guards placed it in a glass case as a reminder of the consequences of opposition. It used to work; people used to stare at the note in silence, mourning those who were lost, but now everyone is too numb for it to affect them. Everyone now passes by without giving it a second glance, instead spending their times working, resting, or getting food. The monotonous days of being overworked and underfed left them too broken as they yielded to their fate. Why would someone

desperately trying to survive bother looking at the old propaganda? Nobody cared about the old note anymore except for a young boy named Ben, who stood directly in front of it, studying the note intently.

Ben Emmet was a 13-year-old redheaded boy. He was short, skinny, and wore the standard brown inmate clothes along with his own faded red, second-hand sweater on top. With the attitude of an angry teenager, he rubbed at his running nose with more effort than it required, slightly revealing the identification number tattooed on his arm. It read E0032. With his head held high, he kept his gaze on the note as he stood with his legs locked and his hands clenched into fists. Ben knew he was not like everyone else in the camp. The majority of the people had lost themselves, as Ben called it, and walked through the camps like zombies. The boy refused to lose himself, which made him appear as if he had not spent the last four years trapped in the camp with his little sister.

The source of Ben's anger was not about the camp, he was angry because he had gotten in an argument with his best friend Ryan, who accused Ben of losing himself. Ben clenched his fists harder, turning his already pale hands bone white. Ben still kept his attention on the note, as he stared at the faded paper. Under the text on the note, it used to have the Patriots symbol, but that was worn away by now. Relaxing his hands, Ben unclenched his fists and allowed his blood flow to return. He tried to remember what the symbol used to look like, but it's been so long that all he could remember was the basic outline.

Ben let out a deep breath then looked around his surroundings for Ryan. They always met at the note before they got in line for rations. Getting the small amount of food and water, which

was normally an easy task for anyone to do, one would just simply stand in line and if they made it in time, they were served.

Unfortunately for Ben and Ryan, two days ago things became a bit complicated when camp officers approached Ryan in the lunch line. Ryan had been caught earlier associating with would-be escapees, and both Ryan and Ben knew that escaping was a severe offense, one that usually ended in branding. Both boys also knew that trouble makers and repeat offenders had a tendency to disappear, which led to rumors that the people were killed or even taken away to secret prisons. Ryan's friends, the would-be escapees, never made it out of the camp...

Ben remembered how yesterday, when he and Ryan were in line for their morning rations, camp officers approached the two boys and accused Ryan of colluding with the escapees. He could recall how Ryan's eyes widened in fear and he froze in place. Ben knew he had to act fast so he quickly denied the accusations.

"Sir, that has to be a mistake, Ryan was with me over at the western labor yard from 0800 until 1700, we're logged in and everything."

The officers took a moment to glance towards each other so he took the opportunity to keep speaking.

"I'm sorry sir, but I can show you our ID numbers, you can see we were logged in. We're just getting our food right now and we do not want to cause you any trouble, we'll do anything you need to clear this up, just please don't take him away for a crime he didn't do."

The tallest officer, who wore aviator sunglasses instead of the standard issue tinted goggles slowly nodded his head then replied to Ben.

“Kid we are clearly looking for Ryan Barns, D0119. If this is him he’s coming with us.”

He spoke with a bored tone.

“Sir, my name is Ben Emmet, E0032, and we’re paired to work together, I’m telling you that you can check the logs and talk to our boss, he was there with me, and doing that should be faster, it can save everyone time.”

The tall officer looked back towards the shorter one. After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and reverted his attention back to the young boys who both stood in place like statues.

“Listen kid, if you are willing to allow us to get down that info you said to us on record, we can have it checked out by tonight. We’ll get it checked out and if it’s like you said we can all just move on.”

After his information was collected, and the officers were convinced of Ryan’s momentary innocence, they soon left. Both boys were relieved at the outcome and Ben recalled how Ryan turned towards him, with a slight tremble, and gratefully thanked him.

After that, the two continued about their day, but as it went on, Ben grew frustrated with Ryan because that was not the first time Ryan had almost gotten into serious trouble. Normally Ryan avoided doing anything drastic, but he did push the rules, whereas Ben was more hesitant to do so and tried his best to avoid unwanted attention. Avoiding attention was the smartest thing to do, especially since Ben not only wanted to survive, but he had to take care of his sister. The two have argued about Ryan’s behavior before, usually with Ryan conceding to Ben angrily. Yet even after agreeing with Ben, Ryan would still go and break rules anyway. What frustrated Ben so much was that he realized throughout the whole ordeal, Ryan still did not listen to him, because Ryan never actually denied trying to escape.

Ben tried to bring Ryan's behavior up after the encounter but Ryan quickly reacted defensively.

"Don't start with me Ben. I'm sorry, leave it at that."

"Ryan! You can get in big trouble if you get caught."

"You just don't get it Ben, I'm tired of having to justify trying to live like a normal human being to you. You might buy this shit but I don't, you've lost yourself. You're just weak, like the rest of them!"

Without waiting for Ben to respond, Ryan quickly turned away and stormed off. Ben was surprised by what Ryan said to him. After everything they had been through surviving together in the camp for the last four years, Ryan would dare call him weak? Ben was so angry that he chose not to chase after his friend, instead letting him go away alone.

As time continued to go by, Ben's frustration with Ryan grew to worry. *Where is he? He's never been this late before.* Ben knew the issue with waiting around for Ryan was that the lines for food were always long, and those in the back of the lines were not usually able to get food because of the dense population of people forced to live inside the camp. They lived in a maximum-security camp, as demonstrated by the abundant amount of razor wire covering all edges from building to fences.

The fences covered the entire perimeter of the 6,000-acre camp, which sounded larger than it felt since over 10,000 prisoners were kept inside. Ben initially assumed a maximum-security camp would only have a few prisoners, so Ben was always surprised by the fact that an insanely large number of societal offenders had been placed in there, as he figured that the masses of people would be placed in camps with regular security.

In fact, when Ben thought about it, they had placed all kinds of offenders in the maximum-security camp. Ben's family was placed inside for having the gene MC1R; in other words, they were born with red hair. The family who slept adjacent to Ben in the sleeping barracks were placed there due to their Irish descent, and Ryan was placed in the camp because his parents were associated with the Patriots. Ryan did not like to talk about it, but his parents were executed at the start of the roundups with the rest of the patriots.

As Ben continued to wait for Ryan, his concern only grew, they needed the rations and Ryan was taking far too long. Ben began pacing on the dirt to try and work off his growing nerves. Although Ben felt doubt, he reminded himself that even though they had an argument, Ryan should still show up, just like always. Ben continued to pace around and once he was on his third loop around a small jagged rock, someone bumped into him. Ben's head shot upward as his gaze shifted from the rock to who he hoped was Ryan. Instead it was a large masked guard holding a baton. *Oh shit...*

"Out of the way Bog Jumper." The guard commanded with a gruff voice.

Quickly following his command, Ben sprang towards the wall as fast as he possibly could. He probably could have moved faster if he was not as malnourished as he was, but even in his state, Ben made it to the wall quickly. He was used to the guards using Irish racial slurs against the prisoners, redheads were Irish now, government opposition was Irish, and hell, even the homeless who walked the streets were Irish now.

Luckily for Ben, the guard was satisfied with his effort to move so he walked on. Ben allowed himself to take a breath after that encounter, he knew if he was too slow, or did anything that was not to the guards liking, he could be hit with the baton, which he learned was a painful

experience back in his first year. Ben tried to calm himself after the guard left, after all, he should be used to the danger that the guards brought, and he should be used to where he lived now, a large maximum-security internment camp, somewhere in the middle of a desert. In the camp, they all lived isolated from the world, miles upon miles away from civilization.

Feeling overwhelmed about everything going on, Ben slumped down with his back to the wall feeling his throat burn and eyes sting, but he pushed those emotions away, this was no time to cry like a child. As Ben sat, doing his best not to cry, he began to think himself. *Is this really it? Am I going to be here my entire life? Just barely surviving and being treated like some kind of animal?*

Ben sat still for a few more minutes until a chill snapped him back into reality. He was in the shadow of the wall due to the sun starting to set. *I guess summer truly is over now.* He stood up still feeling anxious about Ryan, he was incredibly late, too late. Ben had to leave, Cassy had the flu and needed food. Even Ben's stomach growled, but he could care less about that when Cassy was so sick. She had simply started out last night with a fever and then the next thing Ben knew, she began to vomit.

Ben was overwhelmed but then surprised and relieved when the neighboring family, Mr. and Mrs. Walsh, stepped forward from their neighboring area in the barracks and helped Ben. The Walsh's normally kept to themselves ever since they were first placed in this sleeping barracks, taking the beds of Ben's parents after they disappeared.

Mr. Walsh, a thin, freckled man with blonde hair, explained to Ben how to take care of someone who was sick, like placing a cold wet rag on their head, wrapping them up so that way they sweat, and how to give them food and water in small portions so they are able to eat without

vomiting. Mrs. Welsh left to get the camp doctor, but after an hour she returned with a nurse who gave Cassy a shot. The nurse herself was helpful and explained what she was doing to Ben with a soft voice.

“She definitely has the flu, that’s been going around the camp so you see this needle? I’m going to put it right here on her arm.”

The nurse easily pierced Cassy’s skin with a practiced motion as she continued to talk to Ben.

“What I’m giving her is an antiviral treatment, it should help her but she is still going to be very sick. Now, what I’m going to need you to do is come over to the infirmary if she gets worse but you must leave her here, the infirmary is already overcrowded with the sick. Besides that, watch over her and make sure she gets enough rest, water, and food.”

After having spent no more than five minutes at the barracks, the nurse had already exited the door. They were soon able to sleep and Ben awoke early the next morning.

He spent the rest of the day caring for his sister, he skipped his labor job, which was something he knew he would have to answer for later. Ben was able to take a moment to leave and get in the lunch line where he got some stew, which he was happy to feed to Cassy. Ben then continued to take care of Cassy until it was time to get the dinner rations, and after making sure she was comfortable enough, he left to go meet up with Ryan.

Ben had to return to continue taking care of Cassy, and with food, but instead of already being in the lines, Ben had been looking toward the note on the wall as he waited for his friend. He took one last moment to study it again and noticed how along with all of the dirt, the note was getting sun-bleached, it was fading from existence, just like they were in the camp. *How*

symbolic. Ben thought to himself. It wasn't until another cold breeze struck his body, that he was reminded it was time to leave to the line alone, so with regret, the redheaded boy left.

As Ben walked to the mass of sun scorched bodies which were lined up for food, he was once again reminded of the poor conditions they were kept in. Dirt was everywhere, people were covered in filth, and almost no one was willing to help anyone else anymore. Most people in the camp stopped helping each other years ago, making everyone only in it for themselves. Ben took a moment to think about how the Walsh's had helped him, and how maybe people here were not so bad until he saw more prisoners gather, all who looked desperate and dangerous. Ben knew none of these people would help anyone.

Now, even though he was surrounded by other prisoners, Ben felt alone. The lack of community was clearly shown by the adults who stood in front of him, who all looked wild and hungry, each one ready to attack anyone who threatens their spot in line at a moment's notice. As Ben studied the people who have lost their humanity, who were reduced to animals, Ben thought it was no wonder Cassy got so sick. *We are living in our own shit and everyone is too desperate for food to care anymore.*

Ben approached the end of the line, standing behind another redheaded man. As he waited in the slow moving and seemingly endless monstrosity of a line, Ben kept his mind preoccupied by thinking about where Ryan may be and why. He would feel horrible if Ryan was now waiting by the note just like he was, but if that was the case then Ben knew that if he received rations and Ryan did not, he could at least share his with Ryan even though he would not be able to join him in the line. It was far too dangerous for someone to just hop into line,

even with a friend because people would attack you if they thought you were cutting ahead of them.

As slowly as ever, the line continued to inch forward, and unfortunately for Ben, he must have gotten too close to the man in front of him because he suddenly lurched around and stared at Ben with intensity in his eyes. The man was had to be around 50 and he had crooked verdant eyes, leathery skin, and a desperate look about him. Ben froze but held his gaze and after a long moment of staring at him, the man scanned his head around animalistically, then resumed to look forward in line, leaving Ben wide eyed, but safe for now. After that encounter, Ben couldn't help but feel that the man looked strangely familiar, then Ben realized that was because the man was his future. A feeling of dread overcame Ben as he thought how it could be 10 years or maybe 20, but one day he would break, and he'd become nothing more than an animal desperately searching for food, just as this man was.

Ben tried to keep standing normally but he began to feel sick to his stomach. He hated it but he could feel the undeniable truth that he had no future here. The sky was overcome with the darkness of the night and the air began to drastically chill, yet the line for food was still massive. Ben peered around the masses and saw that the line was far too long for them to still give rations by the time he'd get there, and he knew that Cassy would go hungry tonight.

Ben slumped his shoulders and exited the line in defeat. As Ben walked, he noticed the man that was in front of him tilt his head slightly when he noticed Ben leave. Ben thought about possibly asking someone for food, but he knew that people don't share food anymore, and he had nothing valuable left to trade, so he was left with no options. One of the masked guards on line

duty noticed Ben leave and called out for him to halt. He ran over to Ben and began to ask him questions.

After that brief check, the guard allowed Ben to leave as he returned to keeping the line in order. Glad to be done talking to a guard but still sad that he lost out on the food, Ben dejectedly walked towards his sleeping barracks when he stopped before the flimsy excuse of a door. The barracks themselves were large buildings that went down blocks inside the camp. Each of the barracks housed about four families in each one. Inside his building, Ben and Cassy slept near the end of their building, in the back. He hated living inside them because during the summer they kept no heat out and during the winter they kept no heat in. Then, they were crowded and had almost no privacy, except for the sheets that were hung up to act as walls. The barracks did not even come with a kitchen or a restroom, each of those were their own buildings.

Ben entered through the creaky door and saw some of his neighbors settling in with extra blankets for the cold night. At the far end of the cabin was Cassy's bed but Ben hesitated. *Could I face her empty handed? What do I tell her?* Then Ben noticed Mrs. Walsh sweeping in her area, which was adjacent to theirs. He closed his eyes for a moment, then after he opened them, he walked towards Cassy. When he saw her, she did not look good. Her pale face was still covered in sweat and her lips looked dry. Laying there in her bed, shivering, she looked so feeble. Ben checked her cup for how much water was left. It was less than a quarter full. Ben let out a large sigh then placed his hand on Cassy's forehead.

“Cassy, drink some water.”

Ben placed his hand behind her head to lift it up and placed the cup to her lips. She opened her eyes and took a small sip of the water, which was followed by several coughs.

“I’m hungry.” Cassy muttered through her cracked lips weakly.

“I’m... I’m so sorry Cassy, I couldn’t grab us food this time. But you’ll be fine, let’s just get you some more water.”

Cassy made no strong expression but Ben could tell she was upset. Raising her back up and putting the cup to her mouth, Ben was able to get her to take one more sip before she curled up in fetal position and faced away from him. As sick as she was, she was not as bad as she was last night, which gave him some relief.

Feeling worn out from the long day, Ben sat on his bed and looked at the wooden wall. Ben and Cassy were lucky for the section they had, the walls were built solid and in one piece at least, which kept them that much warmer than some of the others. In some people’s barracks, the walls were cracked and when wind blew, the people who lived inside had no shelter from it. After a few minutes he looked back at Cassy who was sleeping relatively peacefully. He slowly shook his head then stood up and looked towards Mrs. Walsh, who was now preparing her bed for the night.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Walsh?”

She looked up, with her bright brown eyes and gave Ben a small smile.

“Everything alright?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to bother you, I’m just going to go outside for a while and I wanted to ask that if Cassy gets worse or anything if you could just let me know and I’ll come back in.”

Mrs. Walsh took a glance at Cassy then nodded at Ben.

“Stay close.”

“Yes, I will.” Ben replied thankfully.

Ben quickly walked back outside and breathed in the fresh night air. One decent thing about being away from civilization was that at least the air smelled fresh at night and in the mornings. After a few minutes of Ben standing by his barracks he began to feel the urge to leave, to hide away from his failures and stresses. His favorite spot to hang around was near the note. It was private, and relatively secluded from everyone else besides the occasional guard who would walk by. Even with the few passing guards, it gave him a sense of privacy. Ben looked in the direction of where he wanted to go but remembered that he had to stick around for Cassy. Ben crossed his arms as he felt his thoughts have an internal struggle about whether he should stay or go. *Cassy is doing fine, she won't need me there right now, but I did tell Mrs. Walsh that I would stick around.* Ben's internal conflict ended when he decided he would simply just walk to his spot, and then walk back, which shouldn't be too long. Having made his decision, he set off.

After navigating through the darkness of the camp, he made his way to his spot with routine ease. The only sounds Ben heard as he walked were the crunches of gravel beneath his tattered shoes, and once he stopped walking, he took in the silence of the night. Some insects chirped, shuffling could be heard from late night stragglers or guards on patrol, and when he listened closely, the hum of conversation could be heard from prisoners settling down for the night. He then shifted his attention to the note on the wall, taking in its outline, was illuminated by the light of the night sky. He then peered around at his surroundings to see if anyone was in his vicinity. His quick search revealed that no one else was there to intrude on his privacy.

Ben wondered for a moment to try to think of any other ways he could maybe find Cassy some food. As he let his thoughts wander, his stare settled back on the note as he struggled to

think of anything fruitful. There, the boy stood and stared for several minutes, blinking only when his eyes would sting.

Eventually, Ben gave up and sat down with his back against the wall. As he sat he was once again overwhelmed by the all the emotions he had tried to suppress throughout the day, and against his own will, he began to cry. He silently wept into his palms as he tried to fight every tear, only making his crying feel worse. *My god, I am so weak! I can't even keep from crying like some child, Ryan was right.*

After a few minutes of crying, Ben got a handle on himself and he sat in near silence, aside from his own sniffing. With his puffy nose and eyes, he gazed upward, where he saw the stars shining vividly along with the half moon. Still trying to calm himself, he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he could see the fog of his breath disperse in front of him. In a slow movement, Ben grabbed his legs and began to shiver.

With his arms wrapped around his legs, he returned his gaze to the night sky. There was a blue tint to the blackness, and he was able to see in the dark almost clearly. This had to have been the brightest night in months, and the bright sky made the night almost seem beautiful, but something did not feel right. Ben couldn't shake the feeling that there was something going on with this night besides the brightness.

Ben tried to keep sitting in the cold, but he began to feel overwhelmed by uneasiness so he stood up. Standing was still not enough, so he began to walk. Not paying attention to where he was going, Ben kept his gaze focused on the sky. He followed the patterns of the stars, he knew that they were different constellations, but he did not know which ones those were. He kept his head up towards the stars as he absentmindedly walked towards the perimeter fence. It wasn't

until he was surprisingly close to the fences that he realized how close he was. Ben considered turning back, but it was too late, he couldn't stop himself.

Ben knew that the prisoners were not allowed near the fences, and this was the closest he had ever been to them since his admittance to the camp. If a guard were to spot him right now, he'd be in serious trouble, but Ben's instincts were guiding him, and he had to follow them. As he approached the fence, he placed his hand on the cold metal. He then gazed back towards the night sky, as he took in the bluest night he'd ever seen in his life. He was aware that a guard should be patrolling the area any minute now but he held his eyes upward.

Ben held his gaze until he noticed distant movement in his peripheral vision. He lowered his eyes from the stars to the horizon, where he could see the clear outline of the distant mountain range. he was confused, they lived in isolation, there shouldn't be any movement. Then, a rush of panic and anxiety hit him as he clearly saw an object that did not belong. His blood began pulsing through his body and he could feel his pale cheeks burn red and the deafening sound of his heartbeat pulsing through his ears. He was a flashlight. A lone flashlight flickering in the distant mountains, where nobody should be. That's when Ben realized what was happening and began to whisper to himself.

“Is that-”

But his thoughts were interrupted by the yell of an incoming security guard who had finally taken notice of ben.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!” The guard roared in a deep, angry voice.

Ben stood completely still and raised his arms above his head in compliance, all while his mind regained its composure and he finished his thought.

“-Ryan?”