

The Mysterious Benedict Society



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TRENTON LEE STEWART

Trenton Lee Stewart is a contemporary American author of short stories and young adult novels. He was born in 1970 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and began writing stories in elementary school. He grew up attending Gifted and Talented classes and reading novels full of puzzles and mysteries. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from Hendrix College in 1992 and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1995. Even once he grew older, Stewart maintained a connection to children through his mother, a teacher. The stories she told of her students reminded Stewart that children are capable of extraordinary things when given opportunities. He lived with his wife in Iowa City for several years, before moving to Cincinnati, where Stewart worked at a library and nearby universities. He published several short stories, and in 2005 he published his first novel, *Flood Sumer*. *The Mysterious Benedict Society* was his second novel, and each book in the *Mysterious Benedict Society* trilogy has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In 2016, he published a standalone young adult novel, *The Secret Keepers*. He currently lives in Little Rock, Arkansas with his wife and two sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Mysterious Benedict Society was published in 2007, when information technology was still developing but had been around for long enough to be firmly established in culture. The novel takes place in an alternate world in which cell phones and laptops do not exist, but despite this, the story echoes elements of the contemporary Digital Age, or the Age of Information. Mr. Curtain transmits his mind-controlling messages through televisions and radios, which mirrors how personalized, advanced technology increased the efficacy of propaganda and fear-mongering. (It also draws on several conspiracy theories that circulated in the late 20th century about nefarious subliminal messages being encoded in various media.) Televisions are found in most locations in *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, including the dorm rooms at the Institute, which highlights the omnipresent nature of electronics beginning in the late 20th century. Mr. Curtain's use of technology to facilitate his rise to power also calls to mind common fears about how advanced technology might enable surveillance and control of the public.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Mysterious Benedict Society harkens back to classic

children's novels of the 20th century. Like Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the novel explores themes of education, critical thinking, wordplay, and puzzles. It also shares similarities to the works of Roald Dahl, such as *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which both feature a plucky but disadvantaged protagonist encountering magic or unusual inventions in a world populated by people whose names form puns or are overly literal. The narrator's glimpses into multiple characters' minds and the story's elements of mystery can also be seen in Ellen Raskin's 1978 classic *The Westing Game*. In terms of more modern works, *The Mysterious Benedict Society* has been compared to Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, as both narrators employ humor and wit while precocious children face seemingly insurmountable odds.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Mysterious Benedict Society
- **When Written:** 2005-2007
- **Where Written:** United States of America
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Middle Grade Novel, Science Fiction
- **Setting:** Stonetown and Nomansan Island
- **Climax:** The Mysterious Benedict Society confronts Mr. Curtain in the Whispering Gallery.
- **Antagonist:** Ledroptha Curtain
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Story Continues. Years after finishing the original trilogy, Trenton Lee Stewart returned to the world of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, writing a prequel in 2012 and a new installment in the adventures of the Society in 2019.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the fictional town of Stonetown, an 11-year-old orphan named Reynie Muldoon takes a series of strange tests. His tutor at the orphanage, Miss Perumal, has helped him register for the tests, which promise "special opportunities" for gifted children. The exams are full of riddles, puzzles, and personal questions about the test-taker's bravery. Reynie manages to solve all the riddles, and he answers the question about his courage with honesty: he hopes he is brave, but he is not sure. Outside the building of the second test, Reynie encounters a

girl named Rhonda, who loses her pencil. Since the children are only permitted to bring one pencil, she doesn't have a spare. Reynie breaks his pencil in half and offers her the sharpened end, reasoning that he can sharpen his half so they can both take the test. Rhonda thanks him and offers to help him cheat, but Reynie turns her down. He is the only child in his section to pass the test. After the second test, Reynie meets the other children who have passed: Sticky Washington, a nervous boy with a perfect memory; and Kate Wetherall, a cheerful and athletic girl who carries a **red bucket** full of various useful items. They discuss the tests and realize that helping Rhonda was a test in itself. The three children are brought to the third test, in which they have to cross a multi-colored tiled floor without setting foot on a blue or black square. They all pass and are led through an underground passage by a sad-looking man named Milligan. When they emerge from the tunnel, Milligan disguises himself and requests that they wait on the porch of a nearby house. He leaves, and the children tell each other about themselves. Kate reveals that she is an orphan like Reynie—her mother died when Kate was a baby, and her father abandoned her when she was two years old.

Rhonda emerges from the house, revealing that she is not a child but a young woman. She introduces the children to their final test, a maze, and she mentions that they should be able to complete it with their eyes closed. This hint helps Reynie realize that he can navigate the maze by feeling the arrows etched into panels throughout the maze. All three children make it through the maze.

Afterwards, Rhonda and the tests' administrator, a woman known only as Number Two, bring the children inside to eat dinner and meet Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict is the man who created the tests; he is friendly and intelligent, and he suffers from narcolepsy, a disorder that causes abrupt sleeping spells. He informs them that they are waiting on Constance Contraire, the final child who passed the tests, who did so by breaking all the rules and answering every question with rude poetry. When Constance arrives, Mr. Benedict explains that he is assembling a group of children to fight a great danger. He asks if the children can guess what they all have in common, and Reynie notes that all four are alone. Mr. Benedict agrees—Reynie, Kate, and Constance are orphans, and Sticky is a runaway. Mr. Benedict uses a machine he invented to reveal hidden messages encoded in television and radio transmissions, which causes the public to panic and which has thus resulted in what the news calls **the Emergency**. He explains that he needs people with a powerful love of truth to fight the Sender of these messages, and they must be children because the Sender, a man named Mr. Curtain, operates out of the Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened, a school on Nomansan Island. The children will go to the Institute as students and investigate. They agree to join the mission. In the days leading up to their departure, they practice Morse code and name themselves the

Mysterious Benedict Society. They learn that Milligan was once a secret agent who had his memory stolen by the Sender's henchmen, and that the Sender is preparing to increase the strength of his messages.

Rhonda brings the children to the Institute, where they are greeted by Jackson and Jillson, a pair of Executives (the high-ranking staff of the Institute). Maintenance duties at the Institute are performed by employees called Helpers. Jackson and Jillson explain that Executives are former students who performed well as Messengers, which is a role granted to top students. Messengers' duties are kept secret from the other students, but the Mysterious Benedict Society infers the Messengers deliver the transmitted messages.

On their first day of classes, the children are greeted by Mr. Curtain, and they are horrified to see that he is identical to Mr. Benedict, save for the addition of a wheelchair and mirrored sunglasses. They send a message in Morse code to their associates on the mainland asking if Mr. Benedict has deceived them, and the response is a riddle that, when solved, reveals that Mr. Curtain is Mr. Benedict's estranged twin brother.

As classes continue, Reynie and Sticky excel, which earns them an enemy in competitive student and Messenger Martina Crowe. They witness a student be punished with a trip to the "Waiting Room," which terrifies him and in turn worries Reynie and Sticky. Sticky is especially afraid of being sent to the Waiting Room. A few days later, all four children suffer terrible headaches and irritability, and they realize they are being affected by the signal of a transmitted message as Mr. Curtain increases the power. Constance is able to hear the voice of the Messenger, indicating that she possesses an unusually sensitive mind. They send a Morse message with these developments to the mainland, and, to their dismay, Mr. Benedict requests that the children begin cheating on assignments so they can earn the rank of Messengers. They do so, but their names are not on the next list of Messengers. Reynie encounters Mr. Curtain, who expresses an approval for Reynie and remarks that he sees similarities between them. Mr. Curtain also explains that Messengers will soon be obsolete when Mr. Curtain brings about what he calls "the Improvement."

As the children continue investigating, they learn that the Helpers are former enemies of Mr. Curtain's, whose memories he has erased (he calls the process "brainsweeping"). Reynie starts to doubt himself, but he recalls a conversation with Mr. Benedict when the older man told Reynie that people can create their own families, which renews Reynie's dedication to his friends. Their espionage is going well until Sticky is caught cheating and brought to the Waiting Room. That night, Sticky returns to the dorm, traumatized and covered in mud. He has to speak with Mr. Curtain the next day, and he doesn't believe that he will be able to withstand the pressure and avoid giving up his friends. Reynie reassures him and comes up with a plan. When Sticky meets with Mr. Curtain, he lies that Martina

Crowe abused her power as a Messenger to force him to cheat. This takes suspicion off Sticky—but instead of being punished, Martina is rewarded with a promotion to Executive. Sticky and Reynie become Messengers, and Jackson blindfolds them and brings them to the Whispering Gallery. There, they see the device that Mr. Curtain uses to transmit messages and to brainsweep his enemies: the Whisperer. The Whisperer eases its user's greatest fears, and both Reynie and Sticky are unable to resist it. The next day, the Mysterious Benedict Society searches for the Whispering Gallery. Instead, they find a room containing Mr. Curtain's plans to end the Emergency with the Improvement and install himself as "Minister And Secretary of all the Earth's Regions" (M.A.S.T.E.R.). They also find a room full of brainsweeping machines.

That night, Milligan arrives on the island to help the children. He offers to take them home, but Kate insists that their work isn't done, and the others agree. Milligan accepts this and informs them he will stay hidden by the shore, where they can leave him messages. Reynie is struggling against his desire to return to the Whisperer, so he doesn't argue when Kate decides to look for the Whispering Gallery by herself. She eavesdrops on a conversation between Mr. Curtain, Jackson, and Jillson, but Mr. Curtain suspects her presence, and she only barely manages to escape. This puts Mr. Curtain on alert for a spy. Reynie suggests that to defeat Mr. Curtain, all four of them need to take him on at once. To ensure that Reynie and Sticky will be called for Messenger duty, the children tamper with the cafeteria food and give all the other students food poisoning. Reynie leaves a note informing Milligan of their plan, but the note is discovered. Milligan sacrifices himself to the Executives in order to destroy the note and keep the children safe, and the Executives imprison him in the Waiting Room.

Mr. Curtain summons Reynie and Sticky to the Whispering Gallery for the final round of messages before the Improvement. Reynie asks Sticky to take the first turn with the Whisperer so he can resist it and stall for time. Sticky is afraid that Mr. Curtain will discover his subterfuge and brainsweep him, but he trusts his friend, so he does as Reynie asks. While Mr. Curtain is distracted with the Whisperer, Reynie signals to Mr. Benedict that they need Kate and Constance, and Mr. Benedict sends a message to the girls. They run to the Whispering Gallery, but Martina Crowe and Jillson decode the Morse message and chase after them. After a long chase, Kate gives herself up to save Constance.

Meanwhile, Reynie takes his turn with the Whisperer. Thinking of his friends, he manages to resist it. Constance comes in through the window, and Milligan arrives to rescue Kate, having escaped from the Waiting Room. He reveals that he has regained his memories and remembers that he is Kate's long-lost father. Mr. Curtain rages at the children, and Reynie provokes him until Mr. Curtain falls asleep. Like Mr. Benedict, he has narcolepsy, and Mr. Curtain's sleeping fits are triggered

by rage. Kate arrives as Mr. Curtain wakes up, and the children realize they have to strap into the Whisperer to destroy it. Constance takes on the task, using her stubbornness to confuse the Whisperer. She succeeds. Mr. Benedict, Rhonda, Number Two, and Milligan enter from a hidden door. Mr. Benedict remains to finish dismantling the Whisperer, and the others take Mr. Curtain down to the group's boat. As they board, he escapes, but his Whisperer is destroyed, and his plans are foiled.

The group returns to Mr. Benedict's house. Reynie is reunited with Miss Perumal, and Sticky is reunited with his parents, who have been tirelessly searching for him. Miss Perumal adopts Reynie, and Mr. Benedict adopts Constance. All four children have found families, and they celebrate their victory with a snowball fight.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Reynie Muldoon – Reynard “Reynie” Muldoon is the 11-year-old protagonist of the story. He has been orphaned since infancy and grew up in the Stonetown Orphanage, where the other children ostracized him for his unusual intelligence and unique way of thinking. His only companion for most of his childhood is his tutor, Miss Perumal, who he views as a mother figure. When he sees Mr. Benedict's advertisement offering “special opportunities” to gifted children, Reynie doubts that he could be considered gifted, but Miss Perumal urges him to pursue these opportunities. He proves himself to Mr. Benedict by solving the riddles and puzzles, revealing that Reynie is far more intelligent and capable than he believes. Reynie is forced to confront his self-doubt when he meets Sticky, Kate, and Constance, who quickly come to look to Reynie as a leader. The children form the Mysterious Benedict Society and embark to Nomansan Island to investigate the nefarious plan of Mr. Curtain, which leaves Reynie without an adult to look to for guidance as he leads his friends. He questions whether he has the bravery to lead, and over time he even comes to resent his leadership position, as Mr. Curtain convinces him that a leader is always alone among his friends. Reynie's internal conflict grows stronger when he begins working with Mr. Curtain's Whisperer. The Whisperer simultaneously eases Reynie's fears and saps his energy, which weakens his resolve against Mr. Curtain. In the final fight against Mr. Curtain and the Whisperer, Reynie realizes that his friends' trust in him does not isolate him—it cements a bond among the Mysterious Benedict Society that finally cures the loneliness Reynie has experienced his whole life.

Sticky Washington – George “Sticky” Washington is an 11-year-old prodigy with an infallible memory (his nickname comes from the way facts “stick” in his head). He struggles with

anxiety and low self-esteem, assuming Reynie is smarter than him on their first meeting and doubting his ability to help Mr. Benedict fight Mr. Curtain. When he first uses the Whisperer, Sticky reveals that his greatest fear is being unwanted. This fear is shaped not only by his nervousness, but by the mistreatment Sticky has suffered from his parents. When they discovered Sticky's perfect memory, Mr. and Mrs. Washington pushed him to win fortunes on quiz shows. This escalated until they seemed to care more about Sticky's winnings than Sticky himself, prompting Sticky to run away. Like the other members of the Mysterious Benedict Society, Sticky begins the story alone and lonely. His lack of self-worth prevents him from feeling important to his friends, which hinders his ability to connect with them. At Mr. Curtain's Institute, Sticky is caught helping Kate cheat, and the Executives send him to the dreaded Waiting Room. Sticky is traumatized by the experience, but he continues helping his friends afterwards, hinting that he is braver than he believes. He proves his mettle in the climax, when he resists the Whisperer to allow Kate and Constance time to reach the Whispering Gallery. He realizes that he doesn't need to fear not living up to his friends' expectations because they care about *him*, not what they expect from him. As he confronts the Whisperer, Sticky also confronts his fears, and he finds the bravery he never thought he had.

Kate Wetherall – Kate Wetherall is a cheerful, energetic, 12-year-old member of the Mysterious Benedict Society. She fails Mr. Benedict's written exams, but her resourcefulness and kindness to Rhonda and Number Two during the tests secure her a place on Mr. Benedict's team. Kate is an orphan; her mother died when she was a baby, and her father left when she was a toddler. Kate has therefore grown up on her own, and she is desperate to prove that she can function without help from anyone. She is capable of amazing feats of strength and acrobatics, which she picked up during her years with a traveling circus, and she has a natural gift for measuring exact distances by sight. She carries every survival tool she might need in a **red bucket** that she brings everywhere. Though she keeps up good spirits during the children's adventures at Mr. Curtain's Institute, she occasionally hints that her cheerfulness is an act to prevent her from seeming vulnerable. Her need to prove her self-reliance gets her into trouble when she is nearly caught on a reconnaissance mission that she insists on undertaking alone. She only comes to understand this in the climax, when she sacrifices herself to save Constance and realizes that she now needs her friends to save *her*. Kate is rescued by Milligan, who reveals himself to be her long-lost father. The two reunite, both happy to finally have a family again.

Constance Contraire – Constance is the youngest member of the Society—and the most disagreeable. She earned her place on the team not by passing Mr. Benedict's tests, but by amusing him with her intelligent and witty refusals to participate, which

often take the form of rude poems. The other children dislike Constance at the start of the story, and they do not understand why Mr. Benedict has accepted her. She is openly rude, teasing Sticky about being named "George Washington" and snapping at the others when they annoy her. She also seems to lack the others' intelligence, since she frequently has to ask the meaning of words. However, Mr. Benedict insists that she has an important role to play. That role becomes apparent when Constance reveals that she can hear the voices of the Messengers when Mr. Curtain powers up his mind-controlling Whisperer machine. Her capability becomes even more impressive when the children learn that Constance is only two years old (for much of the novel, her age is a secret). In the climax, Constance further proves herself to be a vital member of the team by willingly subjecting herself to the Whisperer's power. She is so stubborn that she is able to resist the Whisperer's mind-controlling effects, though the effort exhausts her. At the end of the story, Mr. Benedict adopts her as his daughter.

Mr. Benedict – Mr. Benedict is an eccentric man who recruits the four main children to fight Mr. Curtain. Mr. Benedict is an unparalleled genius, and years ago he detected the hidden messages that Mr. Curtain conceals within radio and television transmissions. He has created a series of tests to find the children most capable of infiltrating Mr. Curtain's Institute, from which Mr. Curtain operates his plans. Mr. Benedict is friendly, wise, and easily amused. He also has narcolepsy, a condition that makes him fall asleep without warning. His narcolepsy is triggered by strong emotions—usually laughter, which fits his jovial nature. To combat his narcolepsy, Mr. Benedict wears a peculiar pattern of green plaid that helps keep him awake. His condition leads Number Two and Rhonda, his associates and adopted daughters, to watch over him protectively. Mr. Benedict believes that Reynie, Sticky, Kate, and Constance are necessary to defeat Mr. Curtain, but he hates putting children in danger and gives them every opportunity to turn down his offer. Like the children, Mr. Curtain grew up an orphan, and as an infant he was separated from his twin brother. This makes him ignorant of the fact that Mr. Curtain is in fact his twin until the children are already at the Institute. Unlike the solitary Mr. Curtain, Mr. Benedict has formed a family of people he loves. He imparts the importance of creating one's own family to Reynie, and at the end of the book, Mr. Benedict asks Constance if she will join his family. She accepts, and he happily adopts her.

Ledroptha Curtain – Mr. Curtain is the primary antagonist of the story. He is an egomaniacal man whose obsession with control is enabled by his mechanical genius. He has constructed a machine, the Whisperer, which transmits mind-controlling messages around the world, and other machines that "brainsweep" (erase the memories of) his enemies. Mr. Curtain is the founder of the Learning Institute for the Very

Enlightened, where he trains children to transmit subliminal messages and ultimately join his workforce as Executives. He is also Mr. Benedict's twin brother. The two were born in Holland, but after being orphaned, the twins were separated and raised apart, so neither man knows of the other until the Mysterious Benedict Society infiltrates the Institute. Mr. Curtain plans to use his Whisperer to take over the world by causing the mass hysteria of **the Emergency** and then purporting to fix it. His inflated self-importance proves to be his undoing: he believes that children are too simple-minded to match his genius, so he does not suspect the Mysterious Benedict Society until they confront him head-on. In this confrontation, Reynie easily manipulates Mr. Curtain into revealing that anger is the trigger for his narcolepsy. The children stoke Mr. Curtain's temper, and they are able to put him to sleep long enough to defeat him. Mr. Curtain hides his narcolepsy by using a wheelchair and wearing mirrored sunglasses, revealing that his need for control and skill with propaganda extend to his own self-image.

Milligan – Milligan is a former government agent who works as a guard for Mr. Benedict, Number Two, and Rhonda. He lost his memory at the hands of Mr. Curtain, and he initially sought out Mr. Benedict in the hopes that Mr. Benedict could restore his memory. Though Mr. Benedict could not help, Milligan remained with him out of a sense of duty. His memory loss has robbed him of all hope, so duty is all that drives him. When the children see Milligan outside of Mr. Benedict's house, he is usually in disguise, but they can identify him by his expression of intense sadness. This helps them recognize him when he arrives at the Institute, seeking to help them in their mission. He gives himself up to the Executives to throw suspicion off the children, and the Executives imprison him in the Waiting Room. During his escape attempt, Milligan's memory returns. He realizes that he is Kate's father, and that his name comes from a fractured memory of her asking to return to the mill pond where he taught her to swim—to go to the “mill again.” This realization incentivizes him to escape and save his daughter. Once he and Kate are reunited, he becomes a doting father and a genuinely happy man.

Number Two – Number Two is Mr. Benedict's right-hand woman. She is steadfastly loyal to him, and she usually stands at his side to catch him if he suddenly falls asleep. She is also an insomniac, which directly contrasts Mr. Benedict's narcolepsy, and she eats constantly to make up for the energy she loses from lack of sleep. Number Two is the first member of Mr. Benedict's household that Reynie encounters, as she is the one who administers the entrance exams. Her strange appearance and behavior in these early chapters hints at the unexpected ways Reynie's life changes once he meets Mr. Benedict. Number Two is thin, with stiff posture and a penchant for yellow clothes, which gives her the appearance of a pencil. She is polite but evasive when Reynie asks her questions, and it is only later revealed that her unhelpful answers are another

feature of the test. Once Reynie and the other children pass the tests and join Mr. Benedict, Number Two assists them with the plan to infiltrate the Institute. She has absolute faith in Mr. Benedict. She passed Mr. Benedict's tests when she was a child, and Reynie learns at the end of the story that Number Two is Mr. Benedict's adopted daughter.

Rhonda Kazembe – Rhonda is the youngest member of Mr. Benedict's household. Like Number Two, she passed Mr. Benedict's tests as a child and was later adopted by him. She takes part in the tests by disguising herself as a child and pretending to lose her pencil outside the testing site. If one of the test takers tries to help her, as Reynie and the other members of the Mysterious Benedict Society do, she offers to help them cheat. Since Mr. Benedict is looking for children with a powerful love of honesty, none of the potential candidates must accept her offer. Once the children pass the tests and arrive at Mr. Benedict's house, Rhonda greets them with warmth and friendliness, and she assists them with the fight against Mr. Curtain.

Miss Perumal – Miss Perumal is Reynie's tutor at the Stonetown Orphanage. Before he meets his friends in the Mysterious Benedict Society, Miss Perumal is the only person in Reynie's life who genuinely cares about him. She assures him of his intelligence when he doubts it and helps him register to take Mr. Benedict's tests. Though Miss Perumal is absent for much of the book, she remains one of the most important people in Reynie's life. When he is away at Mr. Curtain's Institute, he writes mental letters to Miss Perumal in an attempt to sort out his internal conflicts, and the thought of Miss Perumal helps him resist Mr. Curtain's mind-controlling Whisperer. After the children defeat Mr. Curtain and return to Stonetown, Miss Perumal adopts Reynie, finally giving him the family he has always wanted.

Jackson – Jackson is an Executive, a staff member at the Institute and a henchman to Mr. Curtain. He usually appears in tandem with his fellow Executive, Jillson. He is rude and dismissive to the Mysterious Benedict Society, and he demonstrates a whole-hearted dedication to Mr. Curtain. The children later learn that Jackson was one of Mr. Curtain's “special recruits” to the Institute—an orphan who has been kidnapped and brainwashed. Special recruits are usually more devoted to Mr. Curtain than other students, since they owe Mr. Curtain a debt of gratitude for taking them in. Though the children bear some sympathy to Jackson and Jillson after learning this, the Executives are too horrible to elicit any goodwill.

Jillson – Jillson works as an Executive at the Institute, and she usually appears with her fellow Executive Jackson. Like Jackson, Jillson came to work for Mr. Curtain as a “special recruit.” She is hinted to be more competent than her partner, as she carries out more duties on her own than he does. She is the one who catches Sticky cheating on a quiz and brings him to

the Waiting Room; she also teaches the lesson about “bad governments” that primes the children to be susceptible to the word association hidden in Mr. Curtain’s subliminal messages. When Martina Crowe is promoted to Executive, the two occasionally work as a pair, and the two of them become a serious threat when they discover Kate’s identity as a spy.

Martina Crowe – Martina Crowe is a cruel and self-centered student at the Institute. She works as a Messenger, helping Mr. Curtain transmit mind-controlling messages to the public with the help of his Whisperer machine. She takes pride in the status and privileges afforded by her position, and she takes an immediate dislike to Reynie and Sticky when they demonstrate their intelligence in class. Since the role of Messenger is given to the Institute’s top students, she perceives Reynie and Sticky as a threat and seeks to undermine them. When Sticky is caught cheating, he (at Reynie’s advice) lies to Mr. Curtain that Martina abused her Messenger status to coerce him to cheat. Rather than punish Martina for this, Mr. Curtain rewards her by promoting her to Executive.

S.Q. Pedalian – S.Q. Pedalian is a bumbling, good-natured Executive with large feet. He is forgetful, easily confused, and prone to malapropisms (mixing up similar-sounding words). His trust in Mr. Curtain overrides his conscience: when he expresses doubts about the morality of mind-control, Mr. Curtain easily persuades him that the process is for the greater good.

Mr. and Mrs. Washington – Mr. and Mrs. Washington are Sticky’s parents. In the past, they have mistreated Sticky and used his perfect memory for financial gain, but after he runs away, the Washingtons realize the error of their ways and grow desperate to find their son. At the end of the novel, they find Sticky and apologize to him, and the family reunites.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Rutger – Mr. Rutger is the director of the Stonetown Orphanage. He denies Reynie’s requests for advanced education at an outside institution, insisting that Reynie remain at the orphanage. Reynie later learns this is because Mr. Rutger is paid for each student.



CONFIDENCE AND GROWING UP

In *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, the four children of the eponymous society set out to stop the evil Mr. Curtain’s plans to take over the world. Mr.

Curtain plans to brainwash (or “brainsweep”) the global population into a state of childlike obedience, which means that the children must mature into competent young adults to defeat him. This change is bittersweet—they lose the innocence and safety of childhood, but they gain confidence, which the novel ties to self-reliance and maturity. The children take on responsibilities and face danger beyond their age when they embark for Mr. Curtain’s Institute. They look to Reynie as a leader, and though he initially resents the maturity and competence his friends expect of him, Reynie gradually comes to trust his own abilities. This confidence enables him to take risks in the fight against Mr. Curtain. His plans place himself and his friends in danger, but they ultimately succeed, which highlights how the children have to forsake the safety and familiarity of childhood for the sake of humanity.

The other children also confront their insecurities: Sticky’s greatest fear is being unwanted, and Kate is desperate to prove that she never needs help. Both of them learn to grow past these issues, and their newfound confidence helps them in the fight against Mr. Curtain. The link between maturity and confidence demonstrates the benefits of growing up. However, the story also underlines the tragedy in the need for these children to grow up quickly. At only two years old, Constance is the youngest of the four children, and even she must put herself in mortal danger to defeat Mr. Curtain. When the children are reunited with Mr. Benedict, Milligan, Number Two, and Rhonda at the end of the story, they also find that they have changed too much to blindly trust in the adults. Even in a group of adults, Reynie assumes a leadership position, indicating how his self-confidence has blossomed. After Mr. Curtain is temporarily defeated, Mr. Benedict brings the children back to his house, and the four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society have a snowball fight. The novel ends on this scene of the four playing, a moment in which they are briefly allowed to be children again, “if only for the moment.” Though they still have some youth in them, the novel nevertheless suggests that they have grown up too much to ever truly return to childhood.



DECEPTION VS. TRUTH

In *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, four truth-loving children discover that sometimes, deception has its place. Mr. Benedict describes the four main

characters as possessing a “powerful love of truth,” and the contrast between truth and deception runs throughout the novel. Mr. Curtain’s plan hinges on deception: his hidden signals embed thoughts into people’s minds, he erases memories and lies to people about their identities, he lies to his students and Executives about the logistics of his plan, and he even prints



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

false press releases to distribute as propaganda. Mr. Curtain’s methods of deception center around controlling narratives—first the narrative of **the Emergency**, then the narrative of the Improvement. His subliminal messages stir widespread panic about the Emergency, and he plans to leverage that panic to construct a narrative of himself as the savior who can end the Emergency. By deceiving the public into believing in his “Improvement,” Mr. Curtain intends to secure governmental authority and eventually world domination. Deception, as Mr. Curtain employs it, is something nefarious and self-serving, and so the children are all too happy to put themselves in danger to defeat him.

Despite their love of truth, the children discover that sometimes deception is not universally evil—in some circumstances, it is necessary. Milligan frequently takes on disguises to hide his identity, and even Kate’s spyglass, which helps the children in their search for the truth, is described as a spyglass “in disguise” as a kaleidoscope. To help the children become Messengers and learn more about Mr. Curtain’s plan, Mr. Benedict asks the children to cheat. This initially horrifies them, but they have to put aside their innate impulse toward honesty in service of the greater good. The children’s moral dilemma here, and their other encounters with deception, suggest that the line between deception and truth is not always black and white, as deception can be employed to uncover truth and fight for what’s right and good.



LONELINESS VS. FRIENDSHIP

All four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society struggle with loneliness, and it is the power of their friendship that allows them to triumph over

Mr. Curtain. They are recruited to Mr. Benedict’s team because, as Reynie observes, “[they are] all alone.” This isolation has left its impact on the children, and it initially hinders their efforts to fight Mr. Curtain. Kate is desperate to prove that she can be entirely self-sufficient, while Sticky is terrified of never being wanted. This leads to Kate undertaking dangerous and reckless missions by herself and Sticky being tempted by the inclusion offered by Mr. Curtain and his team of Executives. Reynie is also lonely in his role as the group’s leader, and he finds himself agreeing with Mr. Curtain’s assessment that a leader is alone “even among [his] friends...for it is [him]—and [him] alone—to whom the others look for final guidance.”

However, the novel suggests that no one can function entirely on their own, and ultimately it is the children’s mutual support of each other that empowers them to defeat Mr. Curtain. Though the children are without families, the Mysterious Benedict Society gradually becomes a family. Mr. Benedict, an orphan himself, tells Reynie that a family can be made up of dear friends, and Reynie realizes that he might count Kate, Sticky, and Constance as his family. Kate learns that she occasionally needs to ask for help, and Sticky finds friends in

the other Society members who want him and care about him beyond what he can provide for them. When Reynie is resisting the Whisperer, the machine Mr. Curtain uses to broadcast subliminal messages via televisions, he draws strength from the thought of his friends. Realizing that he is not alone grants Reynie the bravery to fight the machine. Even the ill-tempered Constance demonstrates the value of friendship when she resists the Whisperer; she stubbornly identifies herself by all her friends’ names instead of her own. In that instance, thinking of her friends literally helps strengthen Constance against the Whisperer. The characters’ devotion to each other helps them fight Mr. Curtain, but the novel suggests that the friendships the children formed over the course of the novel will also prepare them more fully to tackle new challenges in the future.



CONTROL VS. FREEDOM

As the four children of the Mysterious Benedict Society explore the Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened, the headquarters for Mr. Curtain’s nefarious plot, they discover how authority figures can exert control in stealthy and insidious ways by twisting people’s understanding of what freedom is. Mr. Curtain values control above all else, and his plan is dedicated to gaining control over as many people as possible. The Whisperer is a tool that allows him to extend his control into people’s minds, eliminating their free altogether. His methods of control are absolute, but they are not always obvious. When the main characters arrive at the Institute, for instance, their tour guides Jackson and Jillson explain that the school has no rules. However, they immediately contradict this by listing rules concealed as freedoms: students can eat whatever and whenever they want, as long as they eat what the cafeteria serves during meal times; they can keep the lights on in their rooms as late as they wish until 10:00; they can explore the Institute as they please, as long as they stay on the indicated paths and corridors.

The story depicts freedom as the unhindered ability to make choices for oneself, and the children of the Mysterious Benedict Society ultimately thwart Mr. Curtain’s efforts by refusing to give up their freedom. Mr. Curtain entices Reynie and Sticky with promises of privilege after the Improvement, but they resist this manipulation, and boys deny the Whisperer’s attempts to bring them under Mr. Curtain’s control. The key to their success is Constance’s “stubborn independence,” which enables her to resist Mr. Curtain and the Whisperer long enough to wear Mr. Curtain to the point of exhaustion. Their victory ensures that the public will retain free thought and independent will.



HOPE

In the fight against Mr. Curtain, the characters face increasingly dire circumstances, and they struggle to retain hope that they will succeed. The novel

thus illustrates how hope drives the characters toward positive action, while a lack of hope leads to inaction and in turn to self-loathing. At the start of the story, Milligan explicitly states that he has lost all hope, and only duty keeps him going. He carries out his duties with abject misery, indicating what the children might become if they give in to hopelessness. Reynie himself starts to lose hope as he struggles to resist the Whisperer, Mr. Curtain's mind-control machine. He tries to remain optimistic, but he falls into despair as he convinces himself that he lacks the bravery to lead his friends. Losing hope in Mr. Benedict's plan causes Reynie to lose hope in himself. The Whisperer has exhausted him, and he finds that he is "tired, very tired, of always trying to do the right thing." Reynie no longer believes or even hopes that he might be able to help his friends, which leads him to give up trying, which only stirs his self-loathing and hopelessness more. A lack of hope becomes a lack of action, since Reynie no longer believes in what he is fighting for.

The children of the Mysterious Benedict Society regain their hope over the course of the novel, which emboldens them to take action against Mr. Curtain. The children take risks because their hope for a positive outcome overpowers their fear of a negative one. Sticky resists the Whisperer because he has faith in Reynie and hopes that his friend's plan will come to fruition. Kate sacrifices herself to the Executives in Constance's place because she hopes that she can fight them off. Reynie once again dedicates himself to "do[ing] the right thing" because he hopes he can be brave enough. This connection between hope and morality demonstrates that hope is a vital step to finding the bravery to fight for what is right. The children do not defeat Mr. Curtain through hope alone, but their hope encourages them to overcome their self-doubt and take action.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE EMERGENCY

The Mysterious Benedict Society takes place in a world plagued by **The Emergency**, a non-specific and all-encompassing threat that drives the public to mass panic, and which symbolizes how authoritarian forces can utilize wide-scale deception as a political tactic. In the midst of the Emergency, citizens distrust their governments, and news reports provoke hysteria by reporting that everything is "desperately out of control," from pollution to school systems to the weather. People clamor for a drastic improvement, but no one clarifies what improvement is needed. This vagueness is intentional—the Emergency has been created by Mr. Curtain, who sows fear with the mind-controlling messages he transmits to the world. Though the Emergency appears to be a

state of chaos, that chaos has actually been carefully manufactured so that Mr. Curtain can seize governmental power by promising to usher in "the Improvement." Mr. Curtain manipulates the public into believing their governments have lost control so they will welcome *his* control, even if it grants him absolute power.



KATE'S BUCKET

Kate's bucket symbolizes her stubborn self-reliance, which hinders her ability to work as part of a team. Kate fills her red bucket with any survival tool she could possibly need, including a magnet, a bag of marbles, and a spyglass disguised as a kaleidoscope. Kate solves most of Mr. Benedict's tests with the help of her bucket and its contents, and all of her tools help the Mysterious Benedict Society in their adventures. The bucket's usefulness is precisely what makes it problematic for Kate. She carries everything she might need on her person, so as far as she's concerned, she never needs to ask for help. At the end of the novel, she recognizes this as her fatal flaw—she is so desperate to prove herself that she refuses to request help, even when she is out of her depth. Kate clings to her bucket throughout the story, just as she clings to her image of self-sufficiency. Even when she and Constance are being chased by Executives, Kate risks both girls' safety to retrieve her bucket after it falls. When Kate finally learns to put her friends before her pride, she lets herself fall down a rope so that her weight can propel Constance to safety, in an image that mirrors this selfish moment with the bucket.



STICKY'S SPECTACLES

Sticky's spectacles represent his anxiety. Sticky is introduced as an anxious, fidgety boy, and one of his most prominent nervous tics is polishing his spectacles. Throughout the novel, he doubts that he will be brave enough to be an effective member of the group, so he allows himself to yield to his fear—and constantly polishes his spectacles out of nervousness—rather than try and fail. Though the narration notes that Sticky is braver than he realizes, he does not begin to act on this hidden courage until he has to face his fears directly. The Executives bring him to the dreaded Waiting Room, a torturous prison that Sticky is terrified of; when he emerges, he is covered in mud, and he removes his filthy spectacles without cleaning them. Reynie perceives this as worryingly out of character, but although Sticky is traumatized by his experience, facing his fear of the Waiting Room also enables him to face his other fears. Not only does he avoid polishing his spectacles, but he also removes them entirely, symbolizing a dramatic internal shift that will allow Sticky to grow as a character.






QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown edition of *The Mysterious Benedict Society* published in 2008.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ The newspaper that morning had been filled with the usual headlines, several of them devoted to what was commonly called the Emergency: things had gotten desperately out of control, the headlines reported; the school systems, the budget, the pollution, the crime, the weather...why, everything, in fact, was a complete mess, and citizens everywhere were clamoring for a major--no, a *dramatic*--improvement in government. "Things must change NOW!" was the slogan plastered on billboards all over the city (it was a very old slogan)....

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 2-3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage from Chapter 1 establishes the Emergency, the state of general unrest that plagues the book's setting. Every aspect of life has been impacted, if the newspapers are to be believed, which emphasizes the Emergency's status as an all-encompassing, worldwide phenomenon from which no one is safe. The Emergency distresses the global population, but the headlines reporting on it are "usual," and the slogans demanding immediate change are "very old." These indicate a general sense of resignation and suggest that the public has grown complacent. People want the situation to improve, but no one is working to improve it. They look to their governments for a "dramatic improvement," but their hopes are in vain. The emphasis on governmental impotence and things being "desperately out of control" foreshadows the true purpose behind the Emergency: it has been deliberately manufactured to persuade people to accept the "dramatic" shift to an authoritarian government.

☞ What good would those opportunities do him if he wasn't qualified to be given them? And where was the pleasure in cheating? If he couldn't pass fairly, he didn't want to pass. He thought this--and mostly believed it--and felt his spirits boosted by the decision. But even so, a few seconds passed before he could tear his eyes from the paper on the floor.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Rhonda Kazembe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Reynie helps Rhonda find a pencil for the first test, she offers to help him cheat on the exam. She promises that if he uses the answers from her cheat sheet, he will get every single answer correct. Reynie eagerly wants to succeed on the test, since the advertisement for it promised "special opportunities." However, he is naturally resistant to cheating or dishonesty, as this passage reveals. Reynie values fairness; cheating on the test would render his success unfair and therefore invalid.

Reynie's natural aversion to cheating demonstrates his inherent honesty. In spite of his strong moral code, though, Reynie grapples with self-doubt, and his uncertainty about cheating is an early instance of that struggle. He is tempted by Rhonda's cheat sheet on the floor, and he only "mostly believe[s]" in his commitment to fairness. That self-doubt also leads to a desire to prove himself. He wants to pass the test on his own merit to validate his worthiness for the test's promised "opportunities."

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ "Do you suppose we're going to meet anybody *normal* today?" Kate asked.

"I'm beginning to doubt it," Reynie said.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Kate Wetherall (speaker), Milligan, Number Two, Rhonda Kazembe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50



Explanation and Analysis

After the children pass the second test, they meet Milligan, who brings them to a third test and then to Mr. Benedict's house. He refuses to tell the children anything about

himself, and when they step outside, Milligan dons a disguise. After he leaves, Kate responds to his peculiarity with this quote. She is referring not only to Milligan, but also to the pencil-like test administrator and the green-haired Rhonda Kazembe, both of whom have behaved oddly. The test administrator (who is later revealed to be Number Two) and Rhonda were intentionally acting strange as part of the tests. The fact that the children are able to accept and adjust to their behavior—so much so that Reynie and Kate can discuss it casually and with humor here—speaks to the children’s adaptability. The strangeness of the adults they encounter in the tests also highlights that the tests are initiating the children into an unfamiliar world full of unusual people.

☝ [Reynie’s] own parents were never known to him, and so he didn’t miss them in particular, but on rainy days, or days when other children taunted him, or nights when he woke from a bad dream and could use a hug and perhaps a story to lull him back to sleep—at times like these he didn’t miss his parents, exactly, but he did wish for them.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Reynie’s greatest inner conflict is his persistent loneliness, and this passage explores the origins of that feeling. He is too reasonable to miss the people he has never known, but he has grown up without the presence of consistent and unconditional love. He longs for someone to take care of him, to give him a hug and a bedtime story. Even though he was raised surrounded by other orphans who should have—or at least *could* have—offered some sympathy, Reynie has also been alone among his peers. The other children at the orphanage “taunted” him, making his home a place of cruelty from his peers and neglect from his caregivers. This quote also emphasizes that, despite his maturity, Reynie is still a child. He “wish[es]” for a parental figure to give him guidance and love so that he will no longer have to be as resourceful and capable as he is.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “I want to make some things perfectly clear,” said Mr. Benedict. “It is not my wish to put you in harm’s way. Quite the opposite: I despise the notion. Children should spend their time learning and playing in absolute safety—that is my firm belief. Now then, assuming that I am telling the truth, can you guess why I would nonetheless involve you in something dangerous?”
[...]

“If you’re telling the truth,” said Reynie, “then the only reason you would put us in danger is that you believe we’ll fall into greater danger if you don’t.”

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Mr. Benedict (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

The Mysterious Benedict Society is a story about children undertaking a dangerous adventure, but it does not treat those dangers lightly. Mr. Benedict recognizes the immorality and the tragedy in asking children to take on more responsibility than other children their age. He expresses his “firm belief” that childhood should be a stage of life in which people can safely learn, play, and discover themselves and the world around them. The children of the Mysterious Benedict Society do not get that privilege. For the sake of all the other children in the world, and indeed all the adults, these children must sacrifice the innocence and safety of childhood. Reynie demonstrates his savviness as he accurately guesses why Mr. Benedict would act against his own ethics: the stakes are too high to do nothing, and the children are Mr. Benedict’s only hope. He tells this to the children straightforwardly and respectfully, allowing them to make an informed decision about whether they are willing to give up their childhoods for a greater good.



Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ “...Would you consider this a good move?”

“I’m no great chess player, sir, but I would say not. By starting over, white loses the advantage of going first.”

“Why, then, do you think the white player might have done it?” Reynie considered.... “Perhaps he doubted himself.”

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Mr. Benedict (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Benedict asks Reynie about a question on the first test. The question involved a chess move, and Reynie is the first child ever to answer the question correctly. They discuss the logistics of the chess move (which involves the player with white pieces moving his first piece back to its starting position), and then Mr. Benedict asks this question. The discussion that ensues establishes the path from insecurity to confidence that all the children will undertake over the course of the story. Realizing that this chess player made a poor move out of nervousness teaches Reynie that hopelessness and doubt only lead to inaction. Inaction may feel safer than action, but it is never helpful, and in fact it gives the opponent an advantage. Reynie will recall this conversation many chapters later, when he is in a rut of self-doubt, and remembering this lesson will help reignite his hope and push him to action.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ Part of him wanted *not* to believe Mr. Benedict. Could he really be trusted? ...It would be such a relief to think his predictions about the thing to come were nothing more than wild speculation. And yet Reynie did trust Mr. Benedict, had trusted him almost immediately. What troubled Reynie was that he so badly *wanted* to trust Mr. Benedict--wanted to believe in this man who had shown faith in him, wanted to stay with these children who seemed to like and respect Reynie as much as he did them.

And so the question was not whether Reynie could trust Mr. Benedict, but whether he could trust himself. Who in his right mind would actually want to be put in danger just because that let him be a part of something?

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Mr. Benedict

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 135-136

Explanation and Analysis

As Reynie takes in Mr. Benedict's warnings about the things to come, he struggles to reconcile his common sense and his desire to end his loneliness. Mr. Benedict has explained to the children that Mr. Curtain is transmitting mind-controlling messages through electronics, and he has

requested the children's help to bring an end to this. This claim is outlandish, but Reynie believes it--and he worries about what his belief says about himself.

As previous quotes and chapters have established, Reynie is deeply lonely, and the opportunity to "be a part of something" excites him. Mr. Benedict is one of the first adults who has "shown faith in him," and that faith means a great deal to Reynie. More than that, Mr. Benedict's tests have introduced him to Sticky and Kate, the first children who genuinely "like and respect Reynie." Trusting Mr. Benedict will allow Reynie an adult to guide him and friends who care about him. It will also, though, require Reynie to take on a dangerous mission. Reynie's fear of this danger is far outweighed by his desire to be part of something, but he recognizes the irrationality of that, which only feeds his persistent self-doubt.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ Exploring was what she did best, and Kate liked always to be doing what she did best. Not that she was a bad sport; in fact, she was a very good one, and she rarely complained. But Kate had spent all her life--ever since her father abandoned her, which affected her more than she cared to admit--trying to prove she didn't need anyone's help, and this was easiest to believe when she was doing what she was good at.

Related Characters: Kate Wetherall, Ledropha Curtain

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

When the Mysterious Benedict Society first arrives at Mr. Curtain's Institute, they set out to do some exploring. Their initial efforts do not yield much information, and they soon have to return inside. Kate is especially reluctant to stop exploring because she wants to stay in the outdoor world of reckless exploration, which is very much her domain. The absence of Kate's father "affected her more than she cared to admit": his abandonment taught her that she cannot depend on anyone, which has led her to become unreasonably intent on proving her self-reliance. Though she is often impulsive and takes many risks, she stays as much as possible in her areas of expertise. This allows her to indulge in her desire to "always to be doing what she did best" while still proving that she can engage in challenging endeavors without help. She is cheerful, kind, and "a very good [sport]," but this trait hinders her ability to be a part of the team.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ The Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened was unlike other schools....And yet, in certain ways, the Institute did remind them of other schools: Rote memorization of lessons was discouraged but required; class participation was encouraged but rarely permitted; and although quizzes were given *every day*, in *every class*, there was always at least one student who groaned, another who acted surprised, and another who begged the teacher, in vain, not to give it.

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 187-188

Explanation and Analysis

When the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society begin classes at the Institute, they have to adapt to several strange idiosyncrasies, but many other features of the school are already familiar to them. The Institute is not a real school; it exists not to teach its students, but to condition them to Mr. Curtain's way of thinking and to allow Mr. Curtain to run his experiments. The fact that this bizarre, unsupportive, and draconian institution is similar to most other schools is a satirical condemnation of the education system. The description highlights the hypocrisy apparent in most schools, which claim to be against rote memorization and in favor of participation. In practice, though, many of these schools enforce the opposite values. The similarities between the Institute's students and students at other schools also highlight that for all Mr. Curtain's efforts to manipulate minds, he cannot truly control human nature. The Institute generates loyalty to its authoritarian founder, and comparing it directly to other schools suggests that the education system is overly obedient and loyal to the institutions that fund it.

☞ There was some kind of truth hidden in [the lesson], Reynie thought, but it was camouflaged with nonsense. No wonder it gave students trouble.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

The lessons at the Institute are repetitive and confusing, and many of them are built on logical fallacies. Logical

fallacies are flawed or deceptive arguments that do not hold up to reasoning. These are the basis of most Institute lessons, and the lessons depend on the students taking the fallacies for granted. Reynie, being an intelligent boy and a seeker of truth, takes nothing for granted, so he easily sees that the lessons make no sense. His desire for truth also allows him to recognize the elements of truth in some of the lessons, but these elements are "camouflaged" by the dominant "nonsense." This reflects how Mr. Curtain and the Institute at large bury truth under layers of deception. When students struggle to understand the "nonsense," they are told that they are in the wrong. They are penalized and made to feel foolish for not following logic that cannot be followed, which is another way in which Mr. Curtain seeks to control his students into thinking and behaving in ways that don't make sense.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ Reynie wasn't surprised by his friends' responses. He too had been wary of the notion when it occurred to him. But were they not secret agents? Was not their very presence on the island a deception? Kate and Sticky's reaction was just an instinctive response, he thought; they would come around in a minute. Still, Reynie was troubled....Where was his powerful love of truth?...Was he perhaps not quite the truth-loving brave soul Mr. Benedict and everyone else thought him to be?

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Sticky Washington, Kate Wetherall, Mr. Benedict

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Benedict sends the children a cryptic message with advice on how to reach the rank of Messengers, and Reynie deciphers the meaning: the children must excel in their classes by cheating. When he tells his friends this, they are horrified. All the children of the Mysterious Benedict Society value honesty, and Reynie's interpretation of the message would have them forsake that core value.

Though all the children are intelligent, they have distinct worldviews shaped by their individual abilities: Sticky is academically gifted, and Kate has remarkable physical prowess, but Reynie can see things as they truly are. This gift has let him process and accept that, simply by becoming secret agents, the children are engaging in deception. However, Kate and Sticky's reactions make him doubt the ease with which he accepted that idea. His insecurities

come creeping back as he fears that Mr. Benedict and his friends have overestimated him.

Chapter 18 Quotes

“Children despise superior minds, you know, especially in leaders, who must often make unpopular decisions.”

Reynie thought suddenly of Kate and Sticky, who had been so shocked at his suggestion to cheat on the quizzes. But they didn't *despise* him, he knew that....

“One problem with being a leader,” Mr. Curtain was saying, “is that even among your friends you are alone, for it is you--and you alone--to whom the others look for final guidance.” (Reynie felt a pang. That was true, he thought. He did feel that way sometimes.)

Related Characters: Ledroptha Curtain (speaker), Reynie Muldoon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 241-242

Explanation and Analysis



When Reynie proves to be an exceptional student, Mr. Curtain takes a liking to him, and the two have a conversation in Mr. Curtain's office. Mr. Curtain expresses sympathy for Reynie's situation, and Reynie finds—to his dismay—that he relates to Mr. Curtain. Mr. Curtain frames the situation in terms of leadership and superiority, reflecting his fixation on hierarchy and control. Reynie does not think in those terms, but the emotional core of Mr. Curtain's words resonates. Fundamentally, Mr. Curtain is describing loneliness, and Reynie is all too familiar with that. Mr. Curtain's claim that children “despise superior minds” triggers Reynie's self-doubt and reminds him of the difference he saw between himself and his friends when they debated cheating. The conversation shakes Reynie's confidence in his leadership abilities and the strength of his friendships. His newfound connection to the other members of the Mysterious Benedict Society loses some of its strength as Reynie begins to see himself as isolated within the group.

Chapter 20 Quotes

“You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't *depend* on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family.”

Reynie had drunk up those words like life-saving medicine....[He] had gone to bed thinking of the people he might one day--if everything turned out all right--consider a part of *his* family.

Related Characters: Mr. Benedict (speaker), Reynie Muldoon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

At the Institute, Reynie recalls this conversation with Mr. Benedict, doing so as a way of comforting himself. On his last night at Mr. Benedict's house, Reynie asks Mr. Benedict if he, an adult who grew up an orphan, ever stopped wishing for family. Mr. Benedict explains that he stopped wishing for a family because he found one. He describes family as a collection of loved ones who may or may not be related by blood. This notion is “life-saving medicine” to the lonely Reynie, whose greatest wish is for a family. His hope to one day build a family of friends sheds new light on his desire to maintain his connection to the others in the Mysterious Benedict Society. “If everything turn[s] out all right”—in other words, if he can protect his friends and lead them through their mission--his friends will be more than allies and classmates. They will be family.

Chapter 21 Quotes

“No one seems to realize how much we are driven by FEAR, the essential component of human personality. Everything else--from ambition to love to despair--derives in some way from this single powerful emotion. Must find some way to make use of this.”

Related Characters: Ledroptha Curtain (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

The children find this passage in Mr. Curtain's journal. It details his cynical perspective on the world. According to his point of view, all emotions are secondary to fear. This speaks to Mr. Curtain's own cowardice: he is driven by fear, and he is so self-involved that he believes everyone else must share that quality. He concludes that all human thoughts and actions stem from fear, and his immediate impulse to "find some way to make use of this" highlights that he views people not as individuals with agency but as tools to maneuver for his own ends. He even views emotions through the lens of control, imagining fear as the "single powerful emotion" that governs all the rest. This excerpt from Mr. Curtain's journal provides insight into his psyche, and it reveals that, despite his grandeur, Mr. Curtain is largely what he seems to be: an egomaniacal coward whose only goal is absolute control.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☹☹ Reynie's face fell. "It's not funny, Kate."

For a moment--a fleeting moment--Kate looked desperately sad. "Well, of course it's not funny, Reynie Muldoon. But what do you want me to do? Cry?"

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Kate Wetherall (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Mysterious Benedict Society is contending with their most dire circumstances yet. Sticky has been caught cheating and has been taken to the Waiting Room, leaving the others to investigate without him. An Executive sees Reynie spying through the gym window, and as Reynie and Kate flee, she responds to his panic with a joke. Reynie does not understand how she can retain her cheerfulness in such a dangerous situation, and Kate's reply reveals that she is fully cognizant of the dangers. Her humor is one facet of the invincible, self-reliant persona she projects. Cheerfulness and jokes distract her from the loneliness, fear, and "desperate sad[ness]" that would otherwise overwhelm her. If she does not laugh, she will have to cry, and she is unwilling to display that vulnerability. Kate displays surprising self-awareness of this quality, and just as surprising is Reynie's lack of awareness. His gift is his ability to observe and perceive the truth, but Kate has built emotional walls high enough to deceive even him.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☹☹ [Sticky] was glaring at Jackson. It was such an angry look--so full of defiant outrage--that Reynie actually felt encouraged. There was strength in Sticky. It was just easy to miss. Easiest of all for Sticky himself.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Sticky Washington, Jackson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

Sticky returns from the Waiting Room traumatized and shaken to his core. Reynie gradually rebuilds Sticky's confidence, but when Jackson arrives to bring the boys to the Whisperer, he mocks Sticky about the Waiting Room. Sticky makes no reply, but he glares at Jackson with "defiant outrage." This description highlights that Sticky is not as meek as he appears. Sticky's anger does not manifest loudly or brazenly, but it manifests nonetheless, which adds to the novel's theme of people and things containing hidden aspects. Moreover, his anger is "defiant," an act of quiet, subtle rebellion against Jackson's authority. This small rebellion does not directly stand in the way of Mr. Curtain or the Executives, but it still inspires hope in Reynie. Reynie can see the courage that even Sticky doesn't know he has, which gives Reynie hope for their mission and will, in the future, allow Reynie to depend upon Sticky in times of danger.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☹☹ Reynie had...a very troubling problem. Having been made to feel so wonderful--and so easily, so unexpectedly--Reynie found he *wanted* to give in to the Whisperer. Wanted it desperately. This was a disturbing development...

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 323-324

Explanation and Analysis

Once Reynie and Sticky are appointed Messengers, they are allowed access to Mr. Curtain's Whisperer. The Whisperer is the machine through which Mr. Curtain transmits thoughts, but it also has the side effect of inducing great pleasure in the Messengers who use it. The Whisperer

eases its users' fears, so when Reynie uses it, he feels less lonely. The happiness the Whisperer generates is superficial and false, but it appeals to Reynie. His "desperate" desire to serve the Whisperer introduces a new conflict as Reynie struggles to overcome his desire to protect and "give in" to the Whisperer. He is accustomed to a certain level of loneliness, and the Whisperer eases that pain "so easily, so unexpectedly" that he is thrown off balance. However, the Whisperer actually brings about a new stressor for Reynie, who recognizes his temptation as "troubling" and "disturbing." The lure of the Whisperer worsens Reynie's inner conflict as he grapples with his self-doubt.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝ Sticky tried to smile, but in truth he was decidedly troubled. If Reynie hadn't spoken up just then, he wasn't at all sure what he would have done. He had actually *wanted* to join the Messengers! Was that all it took to sway him--being asked? Did he want so much to be wanted that he would do, well, *anything*? It was as if the Whisperer had opened a door, and now Sticky couldn't close it again. He was so ashamed he could hardly look up.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Sticky Washington

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

The Messengers hold an elite rank in the Institute. When Sticky and Reynie ascend to that rank, the other Messengers invite the boys to eat lunch with them. Reynie rejects the offer in favor of staying with Kate and Constance, but Sticky is worried as he realizes that he was actually tempted by the Messengers.

The enticement of the Messengers' company for Sticky mirrors how the Whisperer tempts Reynie. Just as Reynie fears loneliness, Sticky's greatest fear is not being wanted. The Whisperer offers temporary, superficial freedom from that fear, like the Messengers' invitation provides Sticky a surface-level instance of feeling wanted. Even the language is similar: Sticky is "distinctly troubled" to have been tempted, and Reynie found the Whisperer's appeal "troubling." However, Sticky is "so ashamed" that he can hardly look at Reynie, much less voice his feelings, so he does not know that Reynie is struggling with similar guilt.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝ [Reynie] was hoping against hope that Mr. Benedict would find some way to save them--to save everyone--without requiring anything more from him. Reynie didn't think he was capable of more, not since the Whisperer. He was worried, deeply worried, that the Whisperer had revealed to him who he truly was.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Mr. Benedict

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 353-354

Explanation and Analysis

The Mysterious Benedict Society has uncovered the details of Mr. Curtain's plan, and it is worse than they imagined. Mr. Curtain has stockpiled brainsweeping machines and prepared to fabricate an amnesia epidemic that will wipe out his enemies when he moves to seize global governmental control. When the children signal this to Mr. Benedict back on the mainland, Reynie "hop[es] against hope" that Mr. Benedict will relieve him of his responsibilities. The burden of leadership weighs heavily on Reynie. It isolates him among his friends, feeding his loneliness, and as he becomes lonelier, he craves the easy pleasure of the Whisperer. His desire for Mr. Benedict to "save everyone" also highlights that Reynie is a child. He clings to the irrational belief that an adult will swoop in and save the day because Reynie himself does not feel mature enough or capable enough to defeat Mr. Curtain. Reynie perceives this fear and exhaustion in himself as weakness, and he fears that the Whisperer has "revealed to him who he truly [is]"--in other words, that he has always been weak.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝ You shouldn't let her go alone, Reynie thought. She ought to have help. But when he opened his mouth to argue, he found nothing would come out. A fog seemed to have rolled into his mind, and on top of that he felt bone-weary. He was tired, very tired, of always trying to do the right thing.

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon, Kate Wetherall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 365

Explanation and Analysis

When the children decide they must destroy the Whisperer,

Kate takes it upon herself to investigate the Whisperer's computers. This is another example of Kate's instinct to act on her own in order to prove her independence. Ordinarily, Reynie would push against that instinct of Kate's. Although she believes she can undertake any task without help, Reynie knows otherwise. However, using the Whisperer exhausted him, and continuing to resist its pull has rendered him "bone-weary." His body and mind are both affected; he feels the fatigue in his bones, and "a fog seemed to have rolled into his mind."

Throughout the book, doing the right thing has come naturally to Reynie, but he is always conscious that it is a decision. Sometimes, like when he was tempted to cheat off Rhonda, doing the right thing is his natural instinct, but he still finds it difficult. His exhaustion now makes him too "tired" to pursue anything but the path of least resistance, even though that path is unwise.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☛ [Kate] had grand visions of sabotaging the Whisperer, destroying all its computers by herself. Ripping out cables, crushing components, stealing mysterious gizmos that could not be replaced. Not only would she be regarded as a hero, she could prove once and for all that she could do everything alone--that she needed no one's help. But now she saw she could do no such thing. Not this time.

Related Characters: Kate Wetherall

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 375

Explanation and Analysis

Kate sets off alone to investigate and hopefully destroy the computers that power Mr. Curtain's Whisperer. She has finally been allowed to handle a mission without her friends, and she is eager to seize the opportunity to prove "that she needed no one's help." This desire is part of her characterization as overly focused on proving her resourcefulness and self-sufficiency.

Her hopes are dashed, however, when she discovers that the building is full of guards and the system is too complex for her to dismantle. This disappoints her greatly, but she still does not absorb that she will always perform better when helped by her friends. She simply accepts that she can't save the day on her own "this time." Though she is confident in her abilities, Kate's daydream about destroying the computers is vague and untechnical, and she even

describes mechanical parts as "mysterious gizmos." This language hints that Kate would not know how to dismantle the computers even if she was able to reach them.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☛ There had been times in Sticky's life when an important question would flummox him no matter how well he knew the answer; and times he had run away from his problems; and times when he'd felt himself paralyzed when action was most needed. He'd never understood this tendency of his--he knew only that he rarely lived up to expectation...

And yet, in these last days, he'd become friends with people who *cared* about him, quite above and beyond what was *expected* of him....The effect of...all his friendships had grown stronger and stronger until--though he couldn't say *why* he didn't feel mixed up now--at the most desperate moment yet, he knew it to be true. There was bravery in him. It only had to be drawn out.

Related Characters: Sticky Washington

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 421

Explanation and Analysis

At the climax of the book, Reynie asks Sticky to stall for time by resisting the Whisperer. This is a significant risk--if Mr. Curtain catches on to what Sticky is doing, he will likely brainsweep the boy. Sticky is horrified by Reynie's request, but when the time comes to act, he finds the courage to do as his friend asked.

Sticky thinks over his life, reflecting on how his anxiety and nervousness have stood in the way of his happiness. He wields an encyclopedic knowledge of facts and trivia, but when a question is "important," the pressure and expectation leaves him "flummox[ed]," or confused. When his parents mistreated him, he could not stand up to them, and instead "r[an] away from his problems." He does not understand why he can never live up to expectations, but he knows that he can't, and he loathes this quality of himself. But his friends in the Mysterious Benedict Society "*cared* about him, quite above and beyond what was *expected* of him." Even if he fails to meet their expectations, they will still love him. He still doesn't fully understand why he feels the way he does, but the care and trust his friends have in him spurs Sticky to discover that "there [is] bravery in him." His friends have helped him find that bravery, and now it is up to Sticky to "draw [it] out."

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝☝ *It has to be all four of us, but Constance can't handle them. You can handle them, though. It will be rough, but you can handle them.*

(Part of Kate believed this--a very important part, for Kate's sense of invincibility was the main thing that had sustained her all her young life alone. But another part did *not* believe this--and it, too, was an important part, for unless you know about this part it is impossible to understand how brave a thing Kate was about to do.)

Related Characters: Kate Wetherall (speaker), Reynie Muldoon, Sticky Washington, Constance Contraire, Ledropha Curtain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 434

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kate and Constance are running to meet Reynie and Sticky in the Whispering Gallery, where the boys are stalling Mr. Curtain. The girls are being pursued by Executives, and they are about to be caught. Kate finally comes to understand the importance of the Mysterious Benedict Society as a *team*. She realizes that “it has to be all four of [them]” to beat Mr. Curtain. Constance lacks Kate's physical abilities, so Kate decides to sacrifice herself to the Executives to allow Constance the chance to escape. Kate tells herself that she “can handle them,” but she only partially believes this. She clings to her “sense of invincibility,” which “sustained her all her young life alone.” This description makes explicit why Kate refuses to appear vulnerable: believing herself to be invincible let her cope with the insecurities she developed after her father abandoned her. Part of Kate, though, knows that she is not invincible, and this understanding makes her sacrifice even braver, since she doesn't know if she will be able to escape.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☝☝ “Mr. Benedict! Is he the one who tricked you into joining him, who encouraged you to cheat on quizzes, who offered you ‘special opportunities’? Or was that Mr. Curtain, who said cheating doesn't bother him, who rounded up poor unfortunates only to give them a better life, who has offered you a chance to be an Executive? How different are the two men? Not very, Reynard. The only difference is that one can offer you only suffering now, while the other offers you a way to belong--a way to relieve the loneliness.”

Related Characters: Reynie Muldoon (speaker), Mr. Benedict, Ledropha Curtain

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 440

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Curtain is on the brink of bringing about his Improvement. He only needs Reynie to take a turn in the Whisperer, and then the villain's plan will be complete. Reynie is forced to confront the lure of the Whisperer once and for all, and he finds himself rationalizing Mr. Curtain's side of the fight. He thinks of all the similarities between Mr. Curtain and Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict is supposed to be a figure of honesty in contrast to Mr. Curtain's deception, but Mr. Benedict “encouraged [the children] to cheat on quizzes.” Mr. Benedict offered “special opportunities” to children who were alone, but those opportunities have turned out to be a dangerous and exhausting mission. Meanwhile, Mr. Curtain takes in “poor unfortunates” as special recruits and provides them with status and security as long as they obey him. Just as Mr. Benedict gave Reynie the chance to be a part of something, Mr. Curtain has offered Reynie the chance to be an Executive. The brothers are “not very” different, which emphasizes that even the figureheads for the respective forces of good and evil are morally gray characters. Once again, Reynie finds that doing the right thing will bring him “only suffering,” while the selfish choice offers him relief from his greatest fear and torment. As Reynie struggles to convince himself to resist the Whisperer, he learns that doing the right thing is important, but it is rarely easy.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☝☝ For a moment Constance and Mr. Curtain both trembled violently, as if caught in an earthquake....And then, in a voice so loud it hurt everybody's ears, Constance exclaimed: “I...don't...CARE!”

... This was Constance's great gift--the gift of stubborn independence--and she was bringing it to bear with all her might.

For all her valiant resistance, though, the child was, after all, only a child....She could not hold out forever.

Related Characters: Constance Contraire (speaker), Ledropha Curtain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 458-459

Explanation and Analysis

The children temporarily overpower Mr. Curtain, but he soon regains access to the Whisperer. When he threatens to brainsweep all the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society, Constance sits in the Whisperer and forces Mr. Curtain to focus his attention on subduing her. This proves a strenuous task for him, as he finds himself pushing against Constance's "stubborn independence." Keeping Mr. Curtain distracted is just as difficult for Constance, and both the little girl and the old man "trembl[e] violently" as they contest the power of their wills.



The other children have occasionally wondered why Mr. Benedict insists on Constance's significance, considering she seemingly contributes little more than rude poetry and insults. As she takes on Mr. Curtain alone, they realize it is precisely her stubbornness that makes her so valuable to the team. Constance is also less selfish than the other children thought; she is willing to put her body and mind through torture to protect them. The narrative often emphasizes that the children are too young to take on the burdens of their mission, and Constance is the youngest of them all. She puts up "valiant resistance," but she is "only a child." The effort of resisting is taking its toll on her.

Chapter 39 Quotes

●● "Just a few minutes more, Number Two. Let them play. They *are* children, after all."

And this was certainly true, if only for the moment.

Related Characters: Mr. Benedict (speaker), Reynie Muldoon, Sticky Washington, Kate Wetherall, Constance Contraire, Number Two

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 485

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the last lines of the book. The children of the Mysterious Benedict Society have returned home from the Institute, and all of them have found parents and guardians: Reynie is adopted by Miss Perumal, Sticky forgives his parents, Kate reunites with Milligan, and Constance joins Mr. Benedict's family. After years on their own, the children have adults in their lives who love them and whom they can look to for guidance and support. At the end of the book, the children have a snowball fight. Mr. Benedict sits and watches them happily, and when Number Two asks him to call them in for dinner, he protests that they should be allowed to play.

The phrase "if only for the moment" underscores that the simple joy of their playtime is fleeting. In this moment of safety and happiness, the children are allowed to be children again. However, the experiences they endured at the Institute have forced them to mature, and they can never truly return to childhood. The best they can hope for is a moment like this one, in which they can briefly enjoy the freedom and innocence of the childhoods they gave up.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Eleven-year-old Reynie Muldoon is walking through the city of Stonetown on his way to take an important test. This is his second test of the day. He has been told only that he should bring a single pencil and a single eraser, and to arrive before 1:00; if he does not follow these instructions precisely, he will not be allowed to take the test. Reynie very much wants to take the test, so he hurries to find the Monk Building, where the test will be held, since the test's administrators did not tell him how to get there. Finding the building is difficult, but Reynie is used to figuring things out for himself.

The story flashes back to the day Reynie learned about these tests. He is reading the newspaper with his tutor, Miss Perumal, as they share breakfast at the Stonetown Orphanage, where Reynie lives. The two often read the newspaper together, since it is the only thing the orphanage has for Reynie to read—he has finished all of their books, even those meant for older children. The newspaper is full of articles about **the Emergency**, a state of chaos that has overtaken the world.

Miss Perumal sees an advertisement in the newspaper that she excitedly points out to Reynie. The ad reads, “Are you a gifted child looking for special opportunities?” Reynie, who has been orphaned since infancy, is pleased to see an ad that directly address children instead of their parents, but he also finds this odd. Nevertheless, he tells Miss Perumal that he would be interested in the “opportunities,” if she thinks he might qualify. Miss Perumal responds that Reynie is more than qualified: he is the most talented child she’s ever known.

The story begins in medias res (in the middle of things) so that, like Reynie, the reader is thrust into a strange situation without explanation. Reynie does not know why he must arrive before 1:00, or why he is only permitted one pencil and eraser, but he must follow these rules to take the test. His willingness to contend with these bizarre instructions indicates that this test, whatever it is, is important. The fact that Reynie is used to solving problems on his own highlights that he is self-sufficient and intelligent, but also that he does not have the support systems that protect most children.



Reynie's intelligence extends beyond navigating the city on his own: he is the brightest child in his orphanage, having surpassed the lessons and literature of all the other children. Not only is he intelligent, but he is also eager to continue learning, as he seeks out knowledge in the newspaper. Miss Perumal supports Reynie's desire to learn; as his tutor, she helps him learn, and she also learns alongside him as they read the newspaper together. She is the only person in Reynie's life who cares for him and ensures that he is fulfilled. The newspaper introduces the Emergency, which shapes the story's setting and hints at the main conflict. The Emergency is discussed within the first pages of the book, establishing its significance as a major influence on the world and the characters.



Reynie continues to demonstrate his intelligence and perceptiveness, as he notices that the advertisement addresses children directly. He is able to balance his own interest with cautious curiosity. Miss Perumal also demonstrates that she genuinely cares for Reynie in her excitement and insistence in his brilliance. Reynie does not grasp just how intelligent he is: he doubts that he might qualify as a “gifted child,” and only Miss Perumal's encouragement prompts him to pursue the advertisement.



Miss Perumal schedules a time for Reynie to take the test, but she is called away when her mother falls ill. Reynie is disappointed that Miss Perumal cannot take him to the test. He likes Miss Perumal, and he believes her to be the only person who cares about him. To his surprise, though, the orphanage director Mr. Rutger later tells Reynie that Miss Perumal's mother is feeling better, and Miss Perumal will be able to bring Reynie. Mr. Rutger is concerned about the test, since he fears it might be an entrance exam for an advanced school, and he wants Reynie to be educated within the orphanage. Reynie resents this, since being cooped up in the orphanage traps him with the children who bully him and prevents him from making new friends.

Reynie is too excited to sleep, and he gets up early to take the test. He dresses in the dark, which results in an ugly outfit of clashing patterns. He doesn't notice, since Reynie does not consider his appearance worth paying attention to—he is usually unnoticeable and average. Miss Perumal greets him and recommends that Reynie change.

Miss Perumal and Reynie plan for Miss Perumal to drop Reynie off at the test site and pick him up after the exam. When they arrive, they find a long line of nervous children accompanied by their parents. Miss Perumal goes into the building to ask about the test, and Reynie goes to the end of the line. He wonders how many children will be offered “special opportunities.” A man in line notices Reynie's anxiety and kindly tells him that all the children will go in together in a few minutes. The other parents cast “grumpy looks” at the man, disapproving the idea of being friendly to competitors. The man is embarrassed and stops talking to Reynie.

Miss Perumal returns to Reynie and tells him to call her on the building's telephone when he finishes the test. He thanks her, but she tells him not to look so grateful. Reynie is surprised to see that Miss Perumal is crying. She gives him a hug, saying, “I imagine my services won't be needed after this.” Reynie protests that he hasn't passed the test yet, but Miss Perumal dismisses this idea, squeezes Reynie, and walks away to her car.

Reynie is a lonely boy. He has lost his parents, and the other children in the orphanage pick on him for his unusual intelligence. Miss Perumal is the only person, adult or otherwise, whom Reynie trusts, but even she cannot reliably be there for him because she has to help her mother. While Miss Perumal ultimately manages to come through for Reynie, Mr. Rutger represents the other adults in Reynie's life: unhelpful and uncaring. Mr. Rutger is the orphanage director, and he should look out for the best interests of the children in his care, but instead he allows Reynie to be bullied in a school that doesn't teach to his level.



Unlike Mr. Rutger, Miss Perumal pays attention to Reynie and wants the best for him. She playfully teases him about his outfit, demonstrating the closeness of their relationship, and Reynie takes her advice, indicating that he trusts her. She also once again seems to think more highly of Reynie than he thinks of himself: he doesn't believe that his appearance is noteworthy, but Miss Perumal values Reynie enough to insist that he present himself respectfully.



The other children in line are nervous, but they have their parents to accompany them. Miss Perumal cannot stay with Reynie, and she even leaves him in line to speak with the test administrators. This does not frame Miss Perumal as a bad caregiver, since she is doing all she can for Reynie, but it speaks to how fundamentally alone he is. When a man in line is kind to Reynie, the other parents give him “grumpy looks,” which highlights the undercurrents of surveillance and judgment in the world of the Emergency.



Miss Perumal tearfully tells Reynie not to be so grateful for her help, suggesting that she believes he should not be thankful that someone is showing him basic care. Miss Perumal loves Reynie, and she wants him to have a childhood that allows him to take security and guidance for granted. She cares for Reynie so deeply that she is willing to part from him, since she believes the test will bring him a better life. Her remark that Reynie won't need her services is a reminder that although Miss Perumal loves Reynie, she is only his tutor. When she can no longer provide her services, she cannot be in his life.



The test is unusual. The first section involves standard math equations, including a question about how long it would take two trains of different speeds to collide. Reynie answers this question with a note about how the train engineers would probably prevent a collision in the first place. The second section gets stranger. The first questions ask if the test-taker likes to watch television or listen to the radio, and Reynie responds no to both. The third question reads, "What is wrong with this statement?" Reynie writes the answer: the sentence isn't a statement, it is a question. The questions continue like this until the final question, which asks simply, "Are you brave?" Reynie hesitates. Finally, he answers that he hopes he is.

The test administrator watches the children carefully as she eats an apple. She is a thin woman with a yellow suit and stiff posture, and she reminds Reynie of a pencil. She announces that the test is over, and when several children complain that they have not finished, the woman narrows her eyes and repeats that the test is over. She collects the tests and leaves to grade them while the children wait. Two boys near Reynie start arguing over a question, with both of them claiming their answer to be correct and asserting that anyone who got it wrong would be stupid. Listening to them makes Reynie doubt his own answers, but he tries not to care. He wants to prove that he can be brave.

After only a few minutes, the test administrator returns with the results. She announces that she will read the names of the children admitted to the second phase of the test. The children in the room murmur, confused, since the newspaper advertisement hadn't mentioned a second phase. The administrator explains the rules of the second phase: the children should report to the Monk Building before 1:00 to join children from the other sections of the test, and they should bring only one pencil and one eraser. Reynie raises his hand and asks if a pencil sharpener will be provided. A boy near Reynie snickers at Reynie's assumption that he will pass to the second phase. Reynie blushes, embarrassed, but the administrator answers his question straightforwardly and says that the room will have a pencil sharpener.

The room quiets as the test administrator prepares to read the names. She calls Reynie's full name, Reynard Muldoon, and then says, "That is all. The rest of you are dismissed." The rest of the children start crying out in protest, but the administrator ushers them out. Reynie approaches her to ask to use the telephone, but the woman tells him there is no telephone. She smiles and says that she has to sneak out the back door, in order to avoid the angry parents seeking explanations that she cannot give. She bids goodbye to Reynie, tells him not to be late, and leaves.

On the test, Reynie further demonstrates his intellect and his unique approach to problem-solving. He does not accept the conventional wisdom that two trains in a math problem might collide, instead approaching the question with real-world logic. The strange questions about television and bravery also hint that the test is seeking a specific type of person. Reynie's answers to these questions show that he is honest, and his uncertainty about whether he is brave mirrors his initial lack of confidence about whether he qualifies as "gifted."



The strangeness of the tests heightens as Reynie encounters the administrator, whose unusual appearance marks her physical separation from the world Reynie is used to. Her strict adherence to the test's rules also foreshadows her devotion to the man who created the tests. The bickering between the two boys also highlights how Reynie differs from other children: his intelligence is quiet and unassuming, and he can easily be persuaded to doubt himself. Despite this doubt, Reynie hopes that he can be brave.



The second phase confronts Reynie and the other children taking the tests with increasing levels of confusion and mystery. In the face of this confusion, Reynie manages to keep a clear head. He sticks to his curiosity and instinct for rational problem-solving, which prompt him to ask about a pencil sharpener. The other children mock him for this, but the test administrator treats him with genuine, if terse, respect.



The test administrator dismisses the children tactlessly, without regard for social conventions, demonstrating that she is not bound to the norms that Reynie is familiar with. She continues to ignore common courtesy, insisting that the building has no phone and explaining bluntly that she needs to sneak away from angry parents. However, this tactlessness does not make the test administrator unkind. She smiles at Reynie, and reminds him not to be late, suggesting that she wants Reynie to pass the second test.



At a quarter to 1:00, Reynie approaches the Monk Building. Outside, he sees two girls. One girl has green hair and is playfully throwing and catching her pencil. Reynie notes this is a bad idea, and just as he thinks it, the girl drops her pencil and it falls through a grate. The other girl hesitates, but she checks her watch and sees it is almost time for the test. She tells the green-haired girl that she's sorry about her pencil, but Reynie notes the other girl smiling as she realizes there is now one less competitor in the test.

Reynie approaches the green-haired girl. She asks if he has an extra pencil, but he says he was told to only bring one. The girl asks why Reynie is still standing with her, since the test is about to start, but Reynie says he won't leave her without a pencil. He introduces himself to the girl, and she tells him her name is Rhonda Kazembe. She asks how Reynie plans to get her pencil back, but Reynie tells her they can share his. He snaps his pencil in half and hands her the sharpened end. Since the building will have a sharpener, he can sharpen his half inside and they can both take the test.

Rhonda is grateful and surprised at Reynie's ingenuity. To thank him, she reveals that she has the answers to the test. Reynie asks how, but Rhonda says she doesn't have time to explain. Still, she assures him that if he sits behind her, he can copy her answers and get a perfect score. Reynie is stunned. He is briefly tempted--he wants "desperately" to learn about the "special opportunities." But then he imagines lying to Miss Perumal, and he knows he cannot cheat. He turns down Rhonda's offer, and she again looks surprised. Reynie is ashamed. He already feels lonely being different from the children at the orphanage, but it is worse to be considered odd by a green-haired girl who is strange herself. Rhonda tells Reynie to suit himself, and the two enter the Monk Building.

The testing room is lined with desks, and it has a sign that reads, "NO TALKING. IF YOU ARE CAUGHT TALKING IT WILL BE ASSUMED YOU ARE CHEATING." There are only two available desks left, and to ensure he won't be tempted to cheat, Reynie chooses to sit in front of Rhonda. The pencil-like test administrator goes over the rules. From this moment on, she says, the children must not talk. Reynie raises his hand and wordlessly requests to sharpen his pencil, which the administrator allows. Once he is seated, she continues explaining that each child must write their name at the top of the test, read all the questions and answers carefully, circle the correct answer, bring the completed test to her, and sit until all the tests are graded. To pass the test, the children must correctly answer every question.

Reynie once again demonstrates his practicality and foresight by predicting that the green-haired girl might lose her pencil. The other girl's pleasure at the green-haired girl's misfortune speaks to the casual cruelty and selfishness of the world Reynie lives in, which is only exacerbated by the Emergency. The other girl does hesitate before leaving the green-haired girl, hinting that without the influencing factors behind the Emergency, she might be kinder.



In addition to being unusually intelligent, Reynie proves that he possesses a kindness that most of his peers lack. Rhonda even questions Reynie's willingness to stay with her as the test time approaches, but Reynie insists on doing the right thing. His ability to solve Rhonda's problem underscores that Reynie is not only "book smart"--he can apply his knowledge and generate creative solutions. He has been told that the testing site has a pencil sharpener, and he applies that knowledge to help Rhonda.



Though Reynie is "desperate" for the chance at the test's promised opportunities, his moral code and natural honesty overcome that desperation. This decision also highlights Miss Perumal's role in Reynie's life--Reynie lacks parents, but Miss Perumal has served as a strong enough parental figure to strengthen Reynie's natural values. Reynie follows his moral compass, but he still struggles with self-doubt and the fear of judgment.



Reynie is self-aware enough to recognize that he might be tempted to cheat, so he chooses the seat in front of Rhonda. The sign in the testing room and the instructions of the administrator continue to insist upon the test's specific and strict instructions. Even the process of taking the test, which might seem self-explanatory, is specified in detail by the administrator. The fact that the children must answer each question correctly is another reminder that the tests are seeking unusually gifted children.



The test administrator distributes the tests. As the children before Reynie receive theirs, several burst into tears and a few of them look nauseous. A handful of panicked children give up entirely and leave the room. When the administrator gives Reynie his test, he sees that the questions are impossibly difficult. Still, he is determined not to quit before he has tried, so he writes his name on the test. The second instruction was to read all the questions and answers carefully, so he goes through the test and reads each page. As he reads, Rhonda finishes her test. He realizes that her flashy appearance and casual attitude are a strategy to hide her cheating: since most people would assume a cheater to be stealthy, she is calling attention to herself on purpose. He is a little jealous that Rhonda will get to move on to the special opportunities.

Reynie continues to read through the test, even though he is running out of time and has yet to answer a single question. Once he gets to question 21, however, he realizes that the answers to the previous questions are hidden in order in the later ones. The answer to question 1 is revealed in the text of question 21, and vice versa, and that trend continues for the rest of the test. Reynie quickly flips through the test, answering all of the questions. He finishes just in time, and he is the only child besides Rhonda who is not in distress once the administrator calls that time is up.

The administrator grades the tests, and while she is marking Reynie's, Rhonda congratulates him on managing on his own. The administrator announces that she will read the names of those who pass and may continue to the third stage of testing. She calls Reynie's name, and then again says, "That is all."

Before Reynie gets his test, he is confronted by the horrified reactions of the other children. He does not allow their reactions to dissuade him from trying his best, however, even once he sees that the test is seemingly impossible. This hints that his self-doubt might not be as pervasive as Reynie himself feels it is. He approaches the test methodically and according to the instructions. His understanding of the strategy Rhonda employs to cheat demonstrates Reynie's natural understanding of people and their behavior, though he is not immune to petty emotions of his own, like jealousy.



Reynie does not panic, even as time is running out. He sticks to his method, intent on seeing it through to the end, and this level-headedness is rewarded. He discovers that the exam is not a test of random trivia, but a puzzle--and Reynie knows how to solve puzzles. Though he may not possess every scrap of knowledge, his observant nature, problem-solving skills, and ability to think critically put him ahead of his peers.



Rhonda reveals that she, like the test administrator, has hidden depths. She cheated on the exam, but she is earnestly proud of Reynie for taking the test without her help. The test administrator also continues her pattern of strange behavior, reading a list that contains only one name and ending it with the same phrase as the first test: "That is all." The abnormality of the tests is further compounded by the fact that Rhonda did not pass, despite assuring Reynie that she had all the answers.



CHAPTER 2

Reynie waits in the testing room, puzzling over why Rhonda didn't pass the test. The administrator rejoins Reynie. He asks for her name, but she doesn't tell it to him. Reynie asks to call Miss Perumal, but she tells him that Miss Perumal has been called and all is taken care of. Reynie politely asks if the administrator is lying to him. He explains that the administrator previously told Miss Perumal that he could use the telephone, then she told Reynie that there was no telephone, so he is concerned. The administrator assures Reynie this is a "perfectly reasonable question," but she does not answer it. When Reynie asks again, she tells him that she is about to call Miss Perumal, before saying she has already called her and relaying Miss Perumal's congratulatory message to prove it.

The administrator leaves. Reynie is confused by her behavior, but his thoughts are interrupted by a "timid knock" at the door. A boy with **spectacles** and a bald head comes in and asks if this is where he is supposed to wait. Reynie doesn't know, but he welcomes the boy to join him and introduces himself. The other boy, who is fidgety and shy, tells Reynie his name is Sticky Washington.

Sticky and Reynie discuss the test. Sticky was not the only child in his group to pass; a tiny girl about half his size also passed the first section, but he hasn't seen her since. He was the only child to pass the second test, which surprised him. Reynie asks if a girl cheated, and a surprised Sticky says yes. Sticky reveals that he was the only child to help Rhonda after she dropped her pencil. He is skinny enough to fit through the bars of the grate, so Rhonda held his feet and he searched the drain. He didn't find the pencil, but Rhonda revealed afterwards that she had another one and offered to help him cheat for his trouble. Reynie speculates that refusing Rhonda's help was part of the test.

Reynie continues to display his gifts for observation and critical thinking. He does not believe everything he is told, and instead recalls previous evidence to assess if he is being lied to. Even in the face of potential dishonesty, however, Reynie remains polite. He respectfully explains his concerns to the test administrator, despite the woman's consistently bizarre behavior. The test administrator continues to display this strangeness as she rapidly changes her story regarding Miss Perumal. The test administrator is openly confusing and dishonest, but she seems to respect Reynie, since she acknowledges that his question is "perfectly reasonable." Her refusal to answer the question hints that she is deliberately acting unreasonably.



Before he even enters the scene, Sticky's anxiety is apparent. He knocks before entering the room, and he does so "timid[ly]," indicating that Sticky is unsure if he has a right to be there. He looks to Reynie for assurance, and though Reynie doesn't know more than Sticky, he takes the lead in the situation and welcomes Sticky inside. This establishes Reynie's unknown and untapped capacity for leadership.



Sticky is surprised that he was the only child to pass the second test, which demonstrates that he does not perceive his intelligence as remarkable. He also proves to share Reynie's kindness, which many other children lack, since Sticky was the only child in his group to help Rhonda. His willingness to dive into the drain hints that Sticky may be braver than he lets on. Meanwhile, Reynie continues to put together the puzzle of the tests by realizing that Rhonda herself is a feature of the exam.



Sticky nervously polishes his **spectacles**. He comments that it's creepy to be tricked by the test administrators, but he is grateful that they let him pass the second stage even though he missed a few questions. Reynie is confused how Sticky could have missed any, and Sticky is embarrassed, assuming that Reynie knew all the answers to all the questions. He says that time ran out before he could read the last three, so he circled answers at random. Reynie is stunned to realize that Sticky didn't notice the trick of the test: he simply knew all the answers. He expresses his amazement to Sticky, who brightens and reveals that his nickname comes from how everything he reads "sticks" in his head.

While discussing the second test, Sticky simultaneously demonstrates his brilliance and his insecurity. Unlike Reynie, Sticky knew the answers to every question on the exam, but he doesn't think this feat is extraordinary. In fact, he assumes that Reynie is smarter than him, and he's pleasantly surprised to learn that Reynie passed for an entirely different reason. Their different strategies for the test highlight that the two boys are equally intelligent, but their intelligence manifests itself differently. Reynie can solve problems and riddles, including riddles of human behavior, while Sticky is academically brilliant and has a photographic memory.



As the two boys wait, they continue talking, and they enjoy each other's company. When Reynie describes the administrator's strangeness about Miss Perumal, Sticky slips back to his anxiety and claims he tried to call his parents, too. Reynie can tell Sticky is hiding something, so he kindly tries to change the subject. He asks Sticky where he lives, but that only makes Sticky more nervous.

Reynie is observant and emotionally intelligent, so he can easily tell that Sticky is hiding something. Instead of pressing the matter, Reynie tries to change the subject to put Sticky at ease. This effort fails, however, and Sticky's nervousness around the subjects of his parents and his home hints that some of his anxiety may have roots in genuine hardship.



The awkwardness is ended when the door bursts open and a blond girl with a **red bucket** races into the room. Sticky jumps, asking what the girl is running from. She explains that she wasn't running from anything; she was simply running to the room, since the test administrator told her to come. She introduces herself as Kate Wetherall, and Reynie introduces himself and Sticky. He asks why Kate was running, and she says it's faster than walking. She is interested in Sticky's nickname. She has always wanted a nickname and has tried to get people to call her "The Great Kate Weather Machine," but no one ever goes along with it.

Kate immediately introduces a new energy to the room. Unlike the quiet, academic boys, she is rambunctious and talkative. Kate views running as a sensible mode of transportation because it is faster than walking; this indicates that her unusual behavior is motivated by logic, but that this logic is not the same rationale that governs most people's actions. She has come up with her own (overly-long) nickname that no one ever calls her, which establishes her as creative and outgoing—but also, to some degree, misunderstood.



Reynie asks what Kate's **bucket** is for. She explains that it is for carrying things, and she opens it up to show the boys its contents. Inside the bucket, Kate carries a variety of things: some are practical, like a flashlight and a magnet, while others seem more random, like a bag of marbles and a kaleidoscope. Kate adds that without her bucket, she wouldn't have been able to retrieve Rhonda's pencil. With the tools from her bucket, Kate unscrewed the grate and fashioned sticky twine to reach the pencil. As she tells the story, she reveals that she can always intuit the precise measurement of any distance or object.

Kate carries everything she might need in her bucket, which establishes her self-reliance. She also explains the bucket's importance in overly simple terms: just as she runs because it is fast, the bucket is for carrying things. This indicates that Kate perceives most of her reasoning as self-explanatory and straightforward, even when it might be confusing to other people. In other words, like Reynie and Sticky, she does not see herself as remarkable. She also shares the boys' kindness, as she helped Rhonda, and their unusual skills—in Kate's case, a natural knowledge of measurements.



Unlike Reynie or Sticky, Kate didn't pass the second test, since she didn't notice the puzzle or know the answers, and she refused Rhonda's help to cheat. Instead, the test administrator let Kate pass because she distracted the angry parents long enough for the administrator to escape. Just then, the administrator pops in and tells the children to report to Room 7-B for the third test. The three new friends, chatting among themselves, make their way down the hall.

Kate offers a third type of intelligence to the group of children. She does not share Reynie's penchant for riddles or Sticky's collection of facts, but she can navigate social situations, and the contents of her bucket hint at her resourcefulness. She is moral and honest, as she refused to cheat, and she helped the administrator with no ulterior motive. The three children recognize their similarities and quickly form a bond.



CHAPTER 3

Room 7-B is on the 7th floor, and when the children reach it, Kate knocks loudly on the door over and over until she is told to stop by a deep voice from behind the children. They turn to find a tall man in weather-beaten clothes. He wears an expression of such profound sadness that Reynie asks if he is alright. The man responds that he is not alright, but that isn't relevant. He tells the children his name is Milligan, and he is here to administer the third test.

Kate continues to demonstrate her boisterous attitude as she knocks on the door far longer than is necessary. Her knocking calls the attention of Milligan, whose deep sorrow contrasts her cheerfulness. Reynie proves once again that he is kind in addition to smart, noting Milligan's obvious sadness and asking if the man is all right. Milligan dismisses the question, which indicates that he does not care about his own wellbeing. He is also yet another strange person affiliated with the tests.



Milligan asks which child is George, prompting Sticky to reveal that his real name is George Washington. He is touchy about sharing a name with a president, and defensively tells the other children not to tease him. Milligan tells Sticky that he will take the test first, and a nervous Sticky steps into Room 7-B. A little while later, Milligan tells Reynie it is his turn.

Sticky is immediately defensive about his name, so much so that his first reaction is to insist that the others not tease him. This hints that Sticky has suffered similar bullying and ostracization to Reynie. The fact that Sticky has to take the test first, despite his nervousness, also foreshadows how the plans of the tests' creator will force Sticky to face his fears.



Room 7-B has a checkerboard floor, with alternating rectangles of blue, black, and yellow. On the opposite wall to Reynie is a door and a sign that reads, "CROSS THE ROOM WITHOUT SETTING FOOT ON A BLUE OR BLACK SQUARE." Reynie realizes it will be impossible to cross the room without stepping on blue or black. He reads the sign again, then laughs and confidently walks across the room and out the door.

This test presents Reynie with another opportunity to prove his skill with riddles. He solves this one quickly and confidently, suggesting that passing the previous tests has bolstered his confidence enough that he no longer doubts his ability to solve the tests' puzzles.



Reynie and Sticky wait quietly in the other room and watch while Kate completes the test. Using tools from her **bucket**, she fashions a tightrope and expertly lassoes it on the handle of the opposite door. She walks across the tightrope and reaches the door, but Milligan stops her and tells her she has to try again without the rope. Kate returns to the starting point and stuffs all the contents of her bucket into her pocket. She kicks the bucket onto its side and rolls it forward with her feet. Milligan again comes in, confiscates her bucket and its contents, and tells her to try again. Kate pushes herself onto her hands and walks across the room on her hands instead of her feet. Milligan gives up and tells Kate she passes.

As the children follow Milligan through a dark underground passage, Sticky asks Reynie how he passed. Sticky crossed on his hands and knees, but Reynie's feet touched many black and blue squares. Reynie tells the others that there were no squares on the floors, only rectangles, so he could step on them. Sticky is frustrated and calls himself stupid for not figuring this out, but Reynie reassures him that he isn't stupid.

Milligan leads the children out of the underground passage, and when they emerge, the sunlight briefly blinds them. When they can see again, they find Milligan replaced with a short, big-bellied man. He tells them he is Milligan, only in disguise, and as they look closer, they recognize him. Sticky, impressed, asks if Milligan is a magician, but Milligan answers, "I'm nobody." He directs them to a house and tells them Rhonda will let them inside soon.

Sitting on the stairs to the house, Reynie tries to ask Sticky about his parents, but Sticky changes the subject and asks if Kate shared their experience with the test administrator and her telephone. She shrugs and says she has no one to call—her mother is dead, and her father left her when she was two. Her only memory of her father is a day he took her swimming at an old mill pond. She asked if they could return, and he affectionately told her they could. She remembers that her father called her "Katie-Cat," and that he seemed like a nice man, which she takes to mean that people aren't always what they seem. Kate only spent a few years in an orphanage after her father left, since when she was seven she ran away to join the circus.

Kate proves the scale of her abilities. Not only is she gifted with distances, but she is also capable of astounding physical feats. She also solves problems creatively, coming up with three alternative solutions for the puzzle after Milligan discounts each one. Her first two attempts make use of her bucket, which shows the bucket's importance to her. However, when she is forced to work without the bucket, she is still able to think of a solution. This indicates that although Kate treasures her bucket, it is not as necessary as she might think.



Sticky continues to struggle with his self-confidence. He thought of a perfectly reasonable answer to the puzzle, but since he feels that Reynie's answer was smarter, Sticky calls himself stupid. Reynie again takes on a position of leadership to reassure Sticky and keep him moving forward.



Like the children, Milligan possesses a unique gift: he can disguise himself with ease. Unlike the children's talents, though, Milligan's ability relies on deception and dishonesty, introducing an element of moral ambiguity. His assertion that he is "nobody" highlights the disregard for himself that he demonstrated earlier, when he insisted that his wellbeing was unimportant. This claim also speaks to a lack of identity—Milligan can disguise himself as anyone, but he has no true sense of self.



Sticky is consistently evasive about his home life, which foreshadows the secret he is hiding and raises the issue of deception by omission—Sticky avoids lying by avoiding the truth. Kate is more open. She reveals her past with a shrug, a gesture of nonchalance, though her remark about her father suggests that his abandonment has impacted her more than she lets on. His absence has shaped her understanding of morality and truth: because he seemed like a good man, and he did a cruel thing, she has become wary of deception.



Reynie asks if Kate ever misses her parents. He doesn't miss his, since he never knew them, but at lonely moments he does wish that he had parents. Kate "breezily" claims that she doesn't miss them, since she doesn't remember her mother and she wouldn't miss a man who abandons his daughter. As they discuss this, Sticky becomes more dejected, but he says he is only upset because he feels bad for Kate. Kate changes the subject and starts telling the boys about life in the circus.

Kate continues to hide the impact that her parents' absence has had on her. She insists "breezily" that she doesn't miss them in order to give the impression that her cheerful confidence comes naturally. She quickly changes the subject when Sticky mentions feeling bad for her, indicating that she projects false confidence to avoid being pitied or seen as weak. Sticky claims to pity Kate to deflect attention from himself, but he also feels some loneliness that he wants to hide. Reynie reacts to his loneliness differently; instead of hiding it, he acknowledges his solitude and his wish for a family.



After about an hour, Rhonda comes out and greets the children. The children realize she is not a child at all, but a short, young adult. She has lost her green hair and strange clothes, which she explains were to distract from her age, and she tells the children they must complete one final test: they must each find their way through a maze and ring a bronze bell. Kate asks if the test will be difficult, and Rhonda says they should be able to do it with their eyes closed. Sticky asks if it will be scary, and Rhonda says it might be, but it is not dangerous. Reynie asks who goes first, and Rhonda tells him that he will.

The fact that Rhonda is an adult marks her as the third strange adult affiliated with the test, and the second one to be in disguise. The continued peculiarity of the adults indicates that the children are entering a world unfamiliar to them, but it also characterizes a divide between children and adults—even adults on the side of good. The three questions the children ask also hint at their various personalities. Kate asks if the test will be difficult, which suits her desire to independently overcome challenges in creative ways. Sticky asks if the test will be scary, which speaks to his fearfulness. Reynie asks which child will take the test first, which highlights his practicality, and the fact that he goes first foreshadows his status as a leader.



Reynie goes into the maze full of confidence, certain that he will figure out the trick to this test. He quickly loses this confidence, though, when he starts walking and realizes that he is in a maze of identical rooms and has already lost his bearings. Reynie inspects a panel near the doorway, which is decorated with four differently colored arrows pointing in different directions. He wonders which one he should follow, before remembering Rhonda's advice that the children could complete the maze "with their eyes closed." There is only arrow on the panel that he can feel with his eyes closed, so he follows that one. With this strategy, he makes his way through the maze, until he finally finds the bronze bell and rings it.

Despite his pervasive self-doubt, Reynie is able to feel confident when he thinks he has earned it. The maze proves more challenging than he anticipated, which undermines his newfound confidence, but he persists. He reassesses his past experiences and recalls a clue, which he is able to apply to the test. Reynie's problem-solving abilities continue to manifest in unique ways, demonstrating that he can adapt to almost any situation.



The pencil-like test administrator blindfolds Reynie and has him run the maze again, to prove that he has figured out the secret. He runs the maze in half the time as his first trial, but he asks the administrator why she didn't just ask him the secret. She winks and says that very few children ever point that out. Reynie waits for his friends, and soon Kate arrives. She completed the test by unscrewing a grate and crawling through a heating duct, avoiding the maze entirely. The two of them wait nearly half an hour without any sign of Sticky. While they wait, Kate reveals that her kaleidoscope is actually a spyglass "in disguise."

The test administrator again seems to be more friendly than she initially lets on, as she winks at Reynie and implicitly compliments him for being observant. The fact that even questioning the tests is a test in itself highlights the reflexive nature of these challenges--in other words, the tests examine and challenge themselves. It also suggests that the test is seeking children who can think for themselves and question authority. Kate revealing her spyglass "in disguise" continues the motif of disguises that has run through the tests. Though the children were expected to be honest when it came to cheating on the test, the reoccurrence of disguises hints that deception can occasionally be useful.



Finally, Reynie and Kate hear the bell ring, very softly, indicating that Sticky has made it through the maze. They wait for him to go through a second time, but he is not as fast as Reynie expects--in fact, it takes Sticky nearly 15 minutes. At last, though, the children are reunited, and Sticky is relieved to be with them again. He explains that he found the bell the first time through sheer luck. The second time, he remembered exactly the path he took, and retread his steps precisely.

Sticky's actions continue to highlight his anxiety and low self-esteem. He rings the bell softly, implying that he does not want to call attention to himself. He also again demonstrates that his intelligence differs from Reynie's. Unlike Reynie, Sticky does not solve the puzzle of the arrows. He uses his unique ability--his memory--to help him through the maze the second time. He finds his way through the first time by persisting through adversity--this is another hint that Sticky is not as meek as he believes.



CHAPTER 4

The hungry children are finally served dinner in a dining room full of crowded bookshelves. Rhonda explains that being hungry is part of the test, since they need to see how the children behave when they are tired and irritable. She happily remarks that the children did brilliantly, though Sticky is still embarrassed about his performance in the maze. Rhonda comforts him, revealing that she completed the maze test when she was a child and had significant trouble. She says that Mr. Benedict designed the maze to thwart any tricks. Reynie asks who Mr. Benedict is, and Rhonda tells the children Mr. Benedict is the reason they are all together.

The fact that Rhonda completed the same test as a child indicates that Mr. Benedict has been running his tests for some time, and evidently has yet to find what he is looking for. He alone designed the maze, and he did so in a way that prevents any tricks, proving that he must be incredibly intelligent. Rhonda brings this up to comfort Sticky, who once again is feeling insecure about his abilities.



Rhonda tells Sticky that she took more than an hour to finish the maze test, but she still passed. The test administrator, who Reynie thinks of as "pencil woman," enters the dining room and remarks that Rhonda is the most gifted child to ever take the tests. Rhonda replies that the pencil woman is the most gifted one who took the tests, which makes the pencil woman blush. Kate interrupts to ask when they can meet Mr. Benedict, and the pencil woman says that he is ready to see them now. Rhonda asks about "the other one," and the pencil woman notes that there has been a delay. Before the children can question this, Rhonda and the pencil woman usher them into Mr. Benedict's study.

The adults have a history that the children do not know, further indicating that the children are entering a pre-existing team. The discussion between Rhonda and the test administrator, or the pencil woman, reveals that they are both much more intelligent than an ordinary person. Their initial appearances do not make this intelligence obvious, which speaks to how a strange appearance can conceal hidden depths.



The study, like every room in the house, is full of books. Mr. Benedict emerges from a pile of books, revealing himself to be a friendly, unkempt old man with messy white hair and a green plaid suit. He shakes each of the children's hands, greets them by name, and congratulates them on doing so well on the tests. He asks Number Two--the pencil woman, who only goes by her codename--to meet Milligan and "our missing young friend." As Number Two departs, Mr. Benedict offers to answer any of the children's questions, so Kate asks who they are waiting for. Mr. Benedict answers that they are waiting for Constance Contraire, a fellow test-taker who brought 37 pencils to the first exam and answered all the test questions with rude remarks.

Mr. Benedict reads some of Constance's test answers to the other children, and her quips make him laugh so hard that he falls asleep. Rhonda catches him and rests him in a chair. She assures the children that Mr. Benedict is fine, and he wakes up a few moments later. Mr. Benedict tells the children that he has narcolepsy, which Sticky correctly defines as "a disorder characterized by sudden and uncontrollable attacks of deep sleep." Mr. Benedict tells them that his narcolepsy is triggered by strong emotions. This is why he wears green plaid--the pattern calms him. He continues describing Constance's test-taking: on the second test, she ignored all the questions and wrote a poem about the test being absurd. Sticky asks how Constance passed the test without answering the questions, and Mr. Benedict just says, "There are tests, and then there are tests."

Constance comes in with Milligan and Number Two, but she is so tiny that the other children almost don't notice her. Number Two tells Mr. Benedict that Constance sat down and had a picnic instead of finishing the maze. Constance refuses to apologize, and Mr. Benedict says that he wouldn't ask her to. He introduces her to the other children, and she glares at them fiercely. Once they are settled, Mr. Benedict grows solemn. He explains that the children will not be rewarded for passing the test with a pleasant education. He has run the tests for years, hoping to form a team of children for an "urgent project." He has yet to assemble a team because he needs children specifically, and the people who pass his tests grow up too quickly.

Like the other adults in his group, Mr. Benedict has an unusual appearance that highlights his disconnect from conventionality. Number Two and Milligan also reject traditional forms of naming, which further marks them as nonconformists. Mr. Benedict is surrounded by books, which underscores his love of learning, and he shows respect for the children by greeting them individually. The repeated references to "the other one" and "the missing young friend," as well as Sticky's earlier recollection about a small girl who passed the first test with him, are revealed to refer to Constance Contraire. Though Constance has yet to appear, Mr. Benedict's description makes clear her differences from the other children: she does not share their earnestness or courtesy, and she has no regard for rules.



Mr. Benedict is good-natured, and he doesn't take himself or his tests too seriously. He is so amused by Constance's witty rebukes that he triggers his narcolepsy. This condition can be a seriously disruptive disability, but Mr. Benedict has learned to manage it. He shows no frustration or resentment for the fact that he cannot control his narcolepsy; he simply accepts it as an aspect of who he is. He also trusts Rhonda and Number Two to help him when he falls asleep, which speaks to the bond the three of them share. His remark about tests also confirms that the tests the children faced were multifaceted, and they tested the children's character more than their knowledge.



Constance Contraire asserts her personality as soon as she enters the room. Not only has she flouted Mr. Benedict's tests, she also aggressively refuses to apologize for doing so, and she refuses to greet the other children. This introduction characterizes her as belligerent, ill-mannered, and contrary (in keeping with her name). Mr. Benedict accepts this about her, assuring her that he does not expect her to apologize for her behavior. He makes no attempt to control her, since she makes clear she will not be controlled. Nevertheless, he believes she can help his "urgent project."



Mr. Benedict divulges that the project is a dangerous mission that might put the children's lives at risk. He hates the notion of endangering children, and he asks the children to guess why he would act against his beliefs. Reynie guesses that Mr. Benedict will only put the children in danger if he believes they will be in more danger if he doesn't. Sticky is visibly nervous, and Mr. Benedict assures him that he will not be forced to join the team; he only asks that Sticky hear him out. Sticky agrees, and Mr. Benedict asks the children to guess what they all have in common. Constance guesses that they all passed the "boring tests," Kate guesses that they're all gifted, and Sticky guesses that they're all children.

Reynie guesses that all four children are alone. He reasons that the newspaper ad was addressed to children, not parents, and at the Monk Building, many of the children who passed the first test came by themselves. He knows that he and Kate are orphans, so he guesses that Constance is, too. Reynie can tell Sticky has been hiding something, which suggests that Sticky might be alone as well. Sticky is shocked, and Mr. Benedict tells him that he is willing to break his policy against taking in runaways if Sticky wants to join the team. If Sticky wants to leave, Mr. Benedict promises that he will help him get off the streets. Mr. Benedict praises the children for their gifts and ingenuity, and he acknowledges that they are all alone. This prompts such pride and sympathy in Mr. Benedict that he falls asleep.

Reynie is used to ignoring loneliness, but the sincerity of Mr. Benedict's emotion makes Reynie miss Miss Perumal. Mr. Benedict wakes up, and after Rhonda and Number Two help him to his feet, he mentions that his narcolepsy is usually triggered by laughter. He continues to explain that he needs the children for his team, and although he hates putting them in danger, the children are "our last possible hope [...] our only hope."

Mr. Benedict makes clear that he hates putting children in danger. He believes that children should be safe and protected, but a team of children must risk their safety for the sake of his plan. This sets in motion the journey the children will undertake throughout the story, as this lack of protection forces them to grow up quickly. When Mr. Benedict asks the children to guess what they have in common, their answers provide insight into their characters. Constance's disdain for "boring tests" highlights her disagreeable nature, Kate's assertion that they are all gifted speaks to her air of confidence, and Sticky's simple guess that they are all children demonstrates his uncertainty and practicality.



Like the other children's guesses, Reynie's guess speaks to his character: he is perceptive, insightful, and emotionally intelligent. He knows that all four children are alone, which establishes the importance of their budding friendships. He has also noticed that Sticky is hiding something, which prompts Mr. Benedict to reveal that Sticky has run away from home and lives on the streets. Mr. Benedict also promises to help Sticky if he turns down the team, which suggests that Mr. Benedict's claim about wanting to protect children is true. He feels so strongly about the children's situation that his emotions trigger his narcolepsy.



When Mr. Benedict demonstrates sincere care for him, Reynie immediately thinks of Miss Perumal, which highlights the strength of their bond. Mr. Benedict describes the children as the world's "last" and "only" hope, which introduces the theme of hope. Hope of the children's success drives Mr. Benedict to recruit them, despite the danger. Although the situation is dire, he has not given up hope, so he still believes in the children's power to help.



CHAPTER 5

Eventually, all the children decide to join the team. Kate joins immediately, though Constance is skeptical about following instructions. Reynie pauses to weigh his fear with his desire to be a part of something. He realizes that Mr. Benedict is asking the children to do something important, and “a strange sense of duty, not to mention a powerful curiosity, compel[s] him to join.” Sticky is nervous, but Mr. Benedict tells him the team needs him to succeed. Reynie tells Sticky that he wouldn’t blame him for leaving, but that Reynie would feel much better if Sticky did join the team. This finally persuades Sticky to join.

The children are given toothbrushes and pajamas and shown to their bedrooms. Reynie and Sticky share a room, and Reynie watches Sticky read half a book in only a few minutes. He marvels at Sticky’s intelligence, and wonders what Sticky ran away from. He feels like he has been friends with Sticky and Kate for ages, and he resolves that even if nothing else comes of Mr. Benedict’s team, at least Reynie has made friends.

After Sticky is asleep, Reynie creeps downstairs to Mr. Benedict’s study. Mr. Benedict is still awake, and he asks if Reynie is looking to call Miss Perumal. He compliments Reynie for being “polite yet steadfast” when Number Two refused to let him call Miss Perumal during the tests, revealing this to have been another aspect of the testing. Miss Perumal called earlier; she has had to take her mother to the hospital, but she is “proud but not surprised” with Reynie’s achievements. Mr. Benedict somberly tells Reynie that he won’t be able to contact Miss Perumal while the mission is in action because it demands secrecy, but once the mission is over he will be able to see her again. Reynie nods, hiding the tears that come to his eyes at the thought of not seeing his tutor again.

Kate’s eager willingness to join the team highlights her impulsive but deeply moral nature. Constance cares more about having to follow orders than the reasoning behind the team, and Sticky is only convinced when Reynie makes clear that he wants Sticky there. Reynie is once again conscious of his own fear. He also recognizes his own loneliness, and he craves a salve for that loneliness. He feels a “duty” to Mr. Benedict’s hope; the hope that the children might succeed in their goal, even though Reynie has yet to learn what that goal is, combats his fear. The other factor that pushes Reynie to join is curiosity. This is a form of hope—a hope of learning the truth—that also speaks to Reynie’s love of learning and discovery.



Reynie can appreciate his friends’ intelligence without feeling insecure about his own abilities. He also appreciates his friends as people. His concern for what Sticky ran away from also shows that Reynie cares about his friends. Reynie has never had an opportunity to be a friend before, but presented with the chance, he demonstrates earnest compassion and an easy ability to develop affection.



Mr. Benedict’s description of Reynie as “polite yet steadfast” shows that he understands a core element of Reynie’s character: he is considerate of other people, but he perseveres for the sake of his goals. Miss Perumal also demonstrates her understanding of Reynie, and the fact that she is “not surprised” by his success proves that she still thinks more highly of his intelligence than Reynie himself. As Reynie moves into the world of Mr. Benedict and his associates, he has to temporarily leave Miss Perumal behind. This loss signifies a kind of growing up, as Reynie leaves his only parental figure. It also marks a new stage in Reynie’s quest to end his loneliness: to stay with his new friends, he must forsake the only person who has cared for him.



Mr. Benedict is stricken by Reynie's sadness, and he falls asleep. Only a moment later, though, he wakes and requests Reynie stay a moment longer to discuss one of the questions on the test. The question showed a chessboard with only the black pawn out of its starting position and asked if the position is possible. Reynie is the first child to ever answer correctly. White pieces always move first, but Reynie tells Mr. Benedict that the white knight could have changed its mind and moved back to its starting point. Mr. Benedict asks if Reynie thinks that would be a good move, and Reynie says no. He asks why the white player might have done it, and Reynie answers that the player may have doubted himself. Mr. Benedict agrees and bids the boy good night.

The children rise early on a stormy day, and Milligan and Rhonda serve them breakfast. Constance is especially cranky since she's hungry, and her face grows red enough to highlight her pale blue eyes. Rhonda compliments her eyes, and Constance is so upset by the compliment that she falls quiet. Milligan, who acts as the house's guard, leaves for duty, and Rhonda tells the children never to leave the house without Milligan. Mr. Benedict and Number Two come in. Number Two sticks close to his side until he is seated, at which point she hurries to the food. Rhonda explains that Number Two never sleeps, so she requires a great deal of food to give her energy. Mr. Benedict laughs, remarking that he can't stay awake and Number Two can't stay asleep.

Mr. Benedict tells the children about the house's alarm bell and instructs them to gather on the landing if they ever hear it. All the talk about danger is making the children nervous, so Mr. Benedict offers to answer their questions. Before anyone else can speak, Constance demands to know why she is not allowed to have candy for breakfast. Mr. Benedict calmly explains that candy has low nutritional value. After this, the others ask about the project and the danger they face. Mr. Benedict explains that he has discovered that coded messages are being embedded in human brains. These messages have a powerfully negative effect, and they are the source of **the Emergency**. He remarks that he has been unsuccessful in learning who sends the messages and why, but Number Two and Rhonda defensively say that he has uncovered much about the Sender.

Mr. Benedict once again shows his deep empathy, as he is so moved by Reynie's sadness that he falls asleep. His question about the white knight also highlights the importance of confidence. The white player makes a poor decision due to self-doubt, which suggests that confidence and hope of success are vital to victory.



Constance again asserts her cantankerous nature. Her dislike of compliments suggests that she is too stubbornly bitter to know how to react to positivity. When Number Two enters with Mr. Benedict, she stays close to him until he is seated, which speaks to her protective role toward Mr. Benedict. Her overprotectiveness becomes slightly ironic when Rhonda reveals that Number Two has her own struggles with sleep.



Instead of fueling Constance's irritation by responding sharply, Mr. Benedict treats the little girl with respect and calm. This placates her, which shows that Mr. Benedict has a more developed version of Reynie's emotional intelligence. It also shows that Constance is not a constantly raging monster who can never be tamed; she just needs to be spoken to correctly. Mr. Benedict reveals that the Emergency has been intentionally manufactured by an individual who tampers with people's free will, which establishes freedom as a right that needs defending. During this explanation, Number Two and Rhonda defend Mr. Benedict against his own criticism, once again highlighting their tight bond and their desire to protect him, even from himself.



Mr. Benedict admits that he has learned some things about the Sender, including the fact that they use children to deliver the messages. The children want to know more, so he brings them to a room full of electronics, including a television, a radio, and a computer. He turns on the television, and Reynie experiences the unease he feels whenever he watches television.

Constance yawns and announces that she doesn't hear anything unusual. Mr. Benedict asks Number Two to engage the Receiver; she types something into the computer, and the sounds of the television are replaced by a child's voice reciting cryptic messages, such as, "The missing aren't missing, they're only departed." Mr. Benedict tells the children that this voice is being transmitted on every television, radio, and cell phone in the world, in every language, so it is subconsciously absorbed by millions of minds.

Mr. Benedict explains that the Sender controls "the adhesive property of thoughts"—the way thoughts are attracted to signals and other thoughts. Children's thoughts can be slipped into the mind without notice, and Constance comments that this makes sense, since grown-ups never think she is even capable of thought. She adds that she has never felt like she had thoughts that were not her own, and the other three children agree. Mr. Benedict tells them that this is because they have "an unusually powerful love of truth," so their minds resist the hidden messages. Reynie recalls the test question asking if he liked television and radio.

Mr. Benedict continues that something terrible is approaching, but when Sticky asks what it is, he confesses he does not know. A frustrated Constance exclaims that they should call the government, but Mr. Benedict says that most governmental officials do not believe him, and the ones that did have gone missing. Reynie connects this to the television's message that "the missing aren't missing, they're only departed," which seems to have allowed the Sender to abduct people without anyone caring. Constance scoffs that the children themselves can't really be in danger—but Reynie can tell Constance is becoming afraid. Mr. Benedict tells her that they are all in danger, and the alarm bell begins to clang.

Just as children are important to Mr. Benedict's plan, they are important to the Sender. The adults' need for children indicates that children are uniquely capable for specific tasks, but the risks of these tasks force the children to mature too quickly. The fact that the Sender transmits his messages through electronics is also significant. It mirrors the manipulation of popular media as propaganda, which has been a growing concern as electronics made media more accessible in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



Despite the capability and intelligence all four children have shown, they are underestimated by most adults around them. In addition to being able to go unnoticed, their "powerful love of truth" is a strength that allows them to see through the layers of deception that the Sender and the Emergency have generated.



The government officials are as susceptible to the Sender's manufactured apathy as everyone else, which makes them unhelpful in the current crisis. The children are learning that figures of authority cannot always be trusted. This mirrors the lack of protection the four main children have to deal with: children are not protected by their parents, and citizens are not protected by their governments.



CHAPTER 6

Mr. Benedict falls asleep, startled by the emergency bell. Abruptly, the bell stops ringing and the lights turn off. Kate manages to get her flashlight, but when she turns it on, Constance is gone. The remaining children run to the landing, where Milligan is waiting, but Constance is not there. Milligan needs to search the maze to see if Constance ran there. But he refuses to leave the children alone, so he brings them down to the maze with him. He wants Kate to turn off her flashlight, since it will only help the intruders find them. They have come for the children.

The group moves through the maze in darkness, until they see two flashlight beams moving through the maze. They hear Constance cry out in pain, and then a man whispers that he has her. Milligan leads the children in that direction, but when they arrive, the intruders corner them. Reynie is surprised to see the two men are handsome and well-dressed with friendly smiles. He is almost charmed by them before he sees Constance's tiny feet poking out from one of their bags.

Milligan obeys the men's command to raise his hands above his head, only to suddenly run from the room. The intruders laugh at the protector who only protects himself, and one remarks that Milligan seems familiar. The men extend their hands to the children, and Reynie notices that each one wears two watches. The taller of the men smiles and promises that they won't hurt the children, but the shorter man suggests they tell the truth. The tall man adjusts his watches and admits that what is about to happen will hurt a lot. Reynie hears an electrical hum, but the noise is cut short when Milligan shoots both men with tranquilizer darts. Milligan tells the children, "For every exit, there is also an entrance."

The residents of the house reconvene in the dining room. Constance is still stunned; she got lost on the way to the landing and wound up in the maze, where the intruders shocked her with wire that flicked from their watches. Mr. Benedict tells the children that the Sender hires kidnappers to capture vulnerable children to send his messages. The kidnappers were going to take the children to the Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened. Reynie recalls that Mr. Rutger never let students from the orphanage attend that school, and Mr. Benedict says that Mr. Rutger is paid per student at the orphanage academy. Reynie is indignant, realizing that Mr. Rutger refused to send him to an advanced school simply out of greed.

The dangers continue to increase, and they now actively interrupt Mr. Benedict's explanation of the situation. The children have no time to get their bearings or understand their mission before they are thrust into action. Milligan takes on a protective role, but he cannot shield the children from danger entirely, as he has to delve into the maze after Constance.



The kidnappers do not fit the stereotypical model of a criminal. They are attractive, friendly, and charming, and even the normally perceptive Reynie almost falls for their act. Appearances can be deceptive, and people sometimes take advantage of that.



In addition to their carefully curated appearances, the two men are used to employing more direct dishonesty to trick their victims. Milligan also utilizes deception to lull the kidnappers into a false sense of security. Deception is primarily a weapon used by evil characters, but it is also a necessary tool the heroes must use to fight those characters. Milligan's comment that "for every exit, there is also an entrance" speaks to this duality. It also foreshadows the doubleness and deceit that the children will continue to encounter.



Mr. Rutger, the man responsible for Reynie, refused to provide the best opportunities for him out of simple greed. Even when children are seemingly protected by a guardian, these adults do not always have children's interests at heart.



Mr. Benedict explains that the Institute largely admits orphans and runaways, and sometimes children are taken there against their will. Reynie correctly guesses that the hidden messages come from the Institute, and Rhonda tells the children that one of the repeated coded messages tells listeners not to defy the Institute. Kate is appalled that children can go missing, and Mr. Benedict reminds her that “The missing aren’t missing, they’re only departed.” A terrified Sticky says that he would hate to go to the Institute, and Mr. Benedict awkwardly reveals that he must go. The children are to go to the Institute as spies.

Both Mr. Benedict and the Sender take in children who are alone, and both of them require these children to leave behind the innocence of childhood for a greater purpose. Mr. Benedict recognizes the tragedy of this and regrets it, but he believes it is necessary for the greater good. Though later events prove him correct, this similarity between Mr. Benedict and the Sender highlights the moral ambiguity of both characters, raising doubts about the authenticity of their opposing moralities.



CHAPTER 7

Kate eagerly accepts the role of secret agent, but the other children hound Mr. Benedict with questions as he explains the logistics of the plan. The children will leave for the Institute the following day. He tells them that they must behave exactly as the Institute wants them to, since only top students are allowed to send the hidden messages. He also instructs the children to watch out for any curiosity or oddity at the Institute. Kate hopefully asks if Mr. Benedict expects the children to sneak around and break into offices, but he tells her to take no unnecessary risks. This leaves Kate disappointed and the other children relieved.

Once again, the children are not allowed to live with the same kind of ethical simplicity that characterizes the lives of most children. The tests required them to prove their strong moral codes and love of truth, but Mr. Benedict’s plan needs them to temporarily obey an evil plan for the sake of deception.



Mr. Benedict and the children will convey information between them through Morse code, which Sticky offers to teach everyone. The Institute is on Nomansan Island, and Mr. Benedict and his associates will watch the school all day for any signals. As he finishes his explanation, Mr. Benedict emphasizes that the children must take care of each other and work as a team. He stresses that each of the children is vital to the plan’s success. Constance responds to this advice by teasing Sticky about being named “George Washington.”

The name “Nomansan Island” recalls the term “no man’s land,” which commonly refers to abandoned land and the areas between trenches in warfare. This name emphasizes its isolation and potential danger. When the children are on the island, there will be no adults present to protect them, so they must protect each other. This teamwork will not come easily, though, as Constance makes clear with her teasing of Sticky.



In the yard, Sticky teaches the others how to use Morse code to send a message, and Constance applies this knowledge to ask Sticky, in Morse, why he ran away. Sticky reveals that when his parents found out about his perfect memory and exceptional intelligence, they began entering him in quiz competitions. The more prizes he won, the more they pressured him to study. The pressure made him nervous, which made him miss questions, which caused his parents to grow angry and accuse him of not caring about their family. To make a point, Sticky pretended to run away by hiding in a boarded-up cabinet. His parents looked for him, but once benefactors started gifting them large funds to help, they stopped looking as hard. One day Sticky heard his father say something about being “better off,” and Sticky ran away for good.

Sticky finally reveals the last pieces of his backstory, which he has tried so hard to conceal. He is not an orphan like the others—he is alone because his family has failed him. Instead of protecting him and allowing him to enjoy childhood, Sticky’s parents prioritize control over love.



After the story, Constance uses Morse code to apologize to Sticky, which surprises everyone. Kate remarks that they are a depressing group, and Constance asks why Milligan is so sad. They look to the bodyguard, who is standing watch in the yard, and Constance asks him why he is sad. Milligan tells them that he woke several years ago tied to a chair with all his memories gone. He managed to fight off his captor and break out of his bindings, and he swam through a body of water to escape the people who pursued him. He still does not remember who he is, and he calls himself “Milligan” because it was the first thing he thought of when he first woke up. He tells this story softly, without excitement or drama.

The children push Milligan for more information. They correctly guess that he woke up on Nomansan Island, and that his captors were the men they encountered in the maze. Milligan adds that Mr. Benedict believes Milligan was once a secret agent. He came to Mr. Benedict for help, and though Mr. Benedict has not been able to restore Milligan’s memory, he has earned Milligan’s loyalty by helping him make sense of what happened. Milligan’s penchant for disguises comes from a fear that an enemy will recognize him, and that he will not recognize them as an enemy. Kate asks if his memory might return, but Milligan says that he has lost hope. Reynie asks what keeps Milligan going without hope, fearing that the world might seem hopeless to him one day, too. Milligan replies that only duty keeps him going.

CHAPTER 8

Rhonda sits down with the children to review the mission. She gives them notes that Number Two prepared, and all of them but Constance eagerly read them. They learn that the Institute generates its own electricity with tidal turbines, which are considered the best in the world and were invented by a scientist named Ledroptha Curtain. Ledroptha Curtain is certainly the Sender, but his plan is unclear. The turbines generate enough power to broadcast coded messages far more often and on a far stronger signal, which makes Reynie suspect Curtain is saving up energy for something. Mr. Benedict comes in and confirms this, referring to this unknown evil as “the thing to come.”

Constance’s apology indicates that she is not as two-dimensional as the others perceive her to be. She is a disagreeable child, but she is not truly cruel. Milligan’s story also adds dimensions to his character, explaining that his sadness is not merely a character quirk, but a result of deep trauma and loss. His retelling of this story without fanfare demonstrates that he is resigned to his fate.



Milligan explains the purpose of his disguises, highlighting once again that deception is sometimes necessary. His lack of hope has sapped him of the desire to pursue restoring his memory. In other words, his lack of hope has led to a lack of meaningful action. Reynie understands this, and he sees Milligan as a cautionary tale of what he might become if he loses hope.



The revelation that Mr. Curtain’s plan is only in its early stages raises the stakes of the story and characterizes Mr. Curtain as dangerously ambitious. He is not content to manipulate the public with coded messages; he has something even more drastic planned.



Kate asks what will happen when the Sender boosts the power, and Mr. Benedict tells her that the only thing they know for certain is that increasing the power will allow the Sender to broadcast his messages directly into everyone's minds, leaving no escape. Some exceptionally sensitive minds might hear the children's voices, but for the most part, everyone will simply feel irritated and confused. But Reynie speculates that this is not the Sender's main purpose, otherwise he would have boosted the power already. Mr. Benedict agrees; the Sender must be waiting in order to prepare people for "the thing to come." What "the thing to come" might be is exactly what the children must find out.

Sticky asks if the Curtain's success would really be so bad. Mr. Benedict grimly suggests that it would be especially bad for them--people who love truth and can resist manipulation will likely be given "special attention" from the Sender. The prospect frightens all the children.

Reynie is tempted not to believe Mr. Benedict, who is an odd man and might just be losing his mind. But he trusts Mr. Benedict, and in fact he is troubled by how badly he wants to trust him. He recognizes that he needs to figure out if he can trust himself, because he doubts someone in their right mind "would actually want to be put in danger just because that let him be part of something."

Reynie is smart enough to understand Mr. Curtain's plan and to guess the most effective strategies to carry it out. If it were not for Reynie's innate morality, he could easily follow in the footsteps of Mr. Curtain, who is himself a brilliant scientist. This highlights that intelligence is not a guarantee of empathy or morality. In fact, intelligent people can abuse their gifts for selfish and evil purposes.



Though the children's love of truth has allowed them to resist the coded messages so far, it can only protect the children before "the thing to come" is in effect. Once Mr. Curtain has achieved his goal, Mr. Benedict predicts he will follow the path of many authoritarian leaders and eliminate free-thinkers and critics.



Reynie is a desperately lonely boy, and Mr. Benedict has offered him an opportunity to be included in a group that values his intelligence instead of belittling it. Reynie longs to "be part of something," and he is more than willing to put himself at risk to cure his loneliness. At the same time, he recognizes that this is a troubling mindset, indicating that Reynie's emotional intelligence extends--to some degree--to himself.



CHAPTER 9

The adults of the house are busy preparing paperwork for the children's admittance to the Institute, so the children spend the evening by themselves. Sticky helps Kate and Reynie practice Morse code, while Constance composes a rude poem about the other three. Finally, she goes to bed, and the others are relieved by her absence. They all express worry about having her on the mission, but Reynie points out that Mr. Benedict wouldn't have let her join if she wasn't important. Still, Kate and Sticky ask Reynie to talk to Mr. Benedict about Constance. It has to be him, they say, because Sticky will get nervous and Kate will get frustrated.

The groups' dynamics begin to establish themselves as, for the first time, Sticky and Kate look to Reynie as their leader. Though he frequently doubts himself, they view him as the most capable and most able to discuss the situation with an adult. Reynie is a part of the group, but he also has a unique role within it that demands extra maturity.



Reynie finds Mr. Benedict in his study. He is uneasy; it seems wrong to complain about Constance and to express doubt in Mr. Benedict. Reynie is steeling himself when Mr. Benedict predicts that he is here to discuss Constance. Mr. Benedict tells Reynie that he doesn't have time to explain all his reasoning, but he honestly believes that Constance might be the key to their success. He admits that he is sympathetic to Constance, since like her and Reynie, Mr. Benedict grew up an orphan, but he has not built his team around sympathy. Reynie says that he understands, and Mr. Benedict asks him to convey this information to Sticky and Kate and make sure they still want to participate.

Reynie tells Sticky and Kate about his discussion with Mr. Benedict, and they reluctantly agree to do the mission with Constance. Reynie rushes back to the study to tell Mr. Benedict, but when he arrives, he hears Mr. Benedict complaining to Number Two that putting the children in danger goes against everything he believes in. Number Two agrees that they all share that feeling, but they have no choice. Mr. Benedict is so distraught that he falls asleep, but Number Two helps him, and he quickly wakes up. He tells her that if she sees "our young hero," she should instruct him to come right in. Number Two remarks, "He's an extraordinary child, isn't he?" Reynie realizes they might be talking about him.

Number Two leaves the study, and Reynie goes in to tell Mr. Benedict that all the children choose to continue. He is about to return to his room when he pauses and thanks Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict is puzzled, but Reynie simply repeats his gratitude. Mr. Benedict smiles affectionately and tells Reynie he is welcome.

Early in the morning, the children gather together. Kate has suggested that their group needs a name, and the others agree, even Constance. They throw out several ideas, but no one can agree on a name. Reynie suggests they start with what brought them together, which Sticky and Kate immediately identify as Mr. Benedict. They try a few more ideas before Constance interrupts. She suggests "The Mysterious Benedict Society," and then she leaves the room.

Mr. Benedict is a steward of honesty, but even he does not reveal the entire truth about his plan, leaving Reynie and the others to trust him based on faith. He also proves that, unlike many other adults, Mr. Benedict understands some of Reynie's loneliness, having grown up an orphan himself. His insistence on Constance's importance also hints that there might be more to the little girl than first appears.



Mr. Benedict once again emphasizes his dilemma: endangering children is immoral, but it is the better moral alternative to letting Mr. Curtain exert his will over the world. Though he understands that putting the children at risk will force them to grow up too quickly, as Number Two says, they have no other option. Their discussion about Reynie also reveals that they see Reynie's uniquely amazing abilities and potential for heroism more clearly than he does.



Reynie has lived his entire life in loneliness, with only Miss Perumal to care about him. Mr. Benedict has proven that he believes in Reynie and that he is concerned about his wellbeing. Further, he has brought Reynie into a group of friends and allies. Mr. Benedict regrets that he requires children to carry out the mission, but Reynie is grateful to be a part of something.



Though Mr. Benedict feels guilty at putting the children in danger, they unanimously recognize him as the cause of their friendship. Constance demonstrates that she is willing to engage with the others when they introduce a topic that interests her, and when she does engage, she has good ideas to offer.



CHAPTER 10

The only way to get to Nomansan Island is via a narrow bridge hidden by woods. Rhonda drives the children of the Mysterious Benedict Society through the woods, pointing out where Mr. Benedict and the others will watch for the children's signals. She instructs the children to keep their messages cryptic, in case they are seen by outsiders; when Constance asks what "cryptic" means, Rhonda rephrases that the messages should be vague. She reminds the children to be careful, because even with precautions, their situation is extremely dangerous.

Rhonda pulls into the Institute, where two friendly young guards greet them. Reynie is incredibly anxious. He thinks back to leaving Mr. Benedict's house, when all the adults looked exhausted and sad, but also hopeful. Reynie cannot muster hope through his fear, and beside him, the other children are visibly afraid. Finally, though, the guards verify the four children as new students and allow them into the Institute.

Rhonda drops the children off, and they are told to wait on the side of the loading area, in order to avoid interfering with the many workers in white uniforms. Reynie notices that several of the workers appear to be working on the island's turbines. Sticky and Kate notice this as well, but Constance is confused and asks if the workers are trying to repair the water. She cries out when two men in suits pass by, both wearing shock-watches like the men in the maze. Kate shushes Constance as the group's escorts arrive. The escorts wear matching uniforms and introduce themselves as Jackson and Jillson. Reynie tries to introduce himself, but Jillson cuts him off, which makes Reynie feel foolish.

Jackson and Jillson lead the children to the dorms, where the boys and girls are forced to separate. Reynie and Sticky's room is a standard dormitory, though it surprisingly includes a television. It has a window through which they can send messages in Morse code, and thinking about this makes Reynie's stomach churn. He knows that he is a secret agent, but it still doesn't feel real. Jackson tells Sticky and Reynie of the school hierarchy: Messengers are students who enjoy secret, special privileges, and Messengers who excel at their jobs can be hired as Executives like Jackson and Jillson. Jackson adds that after the orientation tour, the children will meet Mr. Curtain.

Nomansan Island is physically remote and inaccessible, mirroring how the children will be on their own at the Institute. As Rhonda makes clear, the children are in great danger, and they must face that danger alone. Though they can send messages to Mr. Benedict, those messages must obfuscate the truth, so only the children will know precisely what they are going through.



Just like the intruders who tried to kidnap Constance, the guards at the Institute are affable and charming. Their friendly appearances create a false sense of security that enables them to deceive victims. Faced with the reality of the Institute, Reynie struggles to find hope. He recognizes that hope will be important to drive the children in their goals, but in this moment his fear overpowers his hope.



The other children do not know Constance well, and she does not appear to share their intelligence or maturity: she doesn't understand what the workers are doing, and she cannot control her surprise at seeing men who resemble her potential kidnappers. This adds to the mystery of why Mr. Benedict considers her so important. When Jackson and Jillson greet the children, they make clear that the Institute will offer none of the warmth or friendship of Mr. Benedict's home. Jillson snubs Reynie's attempt to introduce himself, which reinforces his loneliness and insecurities.



The Institute enforces upon its students the order that Mr. Curtain looks to establish in the wider world. The televisions in the dorms allow him to transmit his messages to students at all times, and the strict hierarchy reflects Mr. Curtain's desire for rigid control. The promise of special privileges also prompts students to vie for Mr. Curtain's validation and incentivizes them to aid him in his schemes.



Jackson leaves, and Sticky and Reynie plan to find the girls. Before they can, however, Kate and Constance come through a panel in the ceiling. They discuss what they've learned, and they all decide that the voices delivering the messages must be Institute Messengers. Reynie notes that Messengers' responsibilities are secret, so they will have to become top students and earn the rank of Messengers themselves to learn Mr. Curtain's plan. Kate suggests exploring before their tour. The boys agree, but Constance is tired. She eventually lets Kate give her a piggyback, and the Mysterious Benedict Society leaves the dorms.

The Institute is a beautiful place, and its appearance does not at all betray its sinister inner workings. Once the children are outside, Kate pulls out her "spyglass in disguise" and locates a window above the Institute flag, which is the highest window on the island. She concludes that something important must be there and plots a way to climb up. Reynie stops her, reminding her of Mr. Benedict's warning against unnecessary risks. The children remain outside for some time. Kate is especially reluctant to go inside; exploring is what she does best, and she likes to do what she does best. She has spent her whole life trying to prove that she doesn't need anyone's help, and she genuinely believes this when she is doing what she is good at.

As the children walk back inside, Sticky notices a patch of a rare plant called drapewood. He points out that some of it was planted more recently than the rest, which he can tell by the color of the stems. Constance surmises that something has been buried there, and Kate asks Reynie if they should investigate. Reynie is pleasantly surprised that Kate wants his opinion. He tells her they should investigate, but the plant makes him uneasy somehow. Sticky regrets bringing it up and says the plant is probably nothing. He walks into the patch of drapewood, and the vines seem to swallow him.

CHAPTER 11

Sticky is just close enough to his friends that Kate can grab him as he falls through the drapewood. She stumbles forward, and Constance falls off Kate's back into the hole. Kate grabs the smaller girl, but the weight of two children starts to drag Kate down herself. Kate calls for Reynie, and together, Kate and Reynie are able to pull Sticky and Constance to safety. Once they are all safe, they smile at one another, satisfied at getting out of danger together, and then gather around the hole to peer inside. The drapewood around the hole is growing back to conceal it. Sticky thanks Kate for saving him, and Constance says that she would thank Kate if it wasn't Kate's fault she fell in. The children ponder why someone would cover such a dangerous hole, and Reynie concludes that it must be a trap.

The children launch their investigation as secret agents. They quickly determine the significance of the Messengers, and Reynie provides a strategy for a long-term goal. Kate suggests a more immediate plan of action, which reflects her enthusiasm and impulsiveness. The fact that Constance lets Kate carry her suggests that Constance might be warming to the other children, despite her prickly exterior.



The Institute is like the people who populate it: appealing on the outside with danger lurking within. On the other hand, Kate's spyglass is also "in disguise," which hints that despite the children's love of truth, deception might be able to serve them as well as it serves their enemies. Kate's inner monologue when the children stop exploring reveals that she is just as insecure as Reynie and Sticky. Her apparent bravery and recklessness are actually symptoms of her fear of appearing vulnerable.



Sticky's encyclopedic knowledge proves to have real-world applications when he recognizes the disparity in the drapewood. He still doubts himself, however, and he is embarrassed to have drawn so much attention to the plant. Reynie is once again thrust into a leadership position when Kate instinctively looks to him for guidance. He does not know exactly what to do, but he advocates for investigating, which suits his natural curiosity and shows that Reynie can push through uncertainty when his friends depend on him.



In the first moment of danger on their mission, the children prove that they can and will protect each other. They demonstrate their support for each other by literally and physically supporting each other. Their effort is not flawless--Kate accidentally endangers Constance in the process of saving Sticky--but in the end, all four are safe and closer than ever.



The children return to their rooms to meet Jackson and Jillson, but the Executives arrive more than 30 minutes late. Jillson asks Kate and Constance why their television is off, and she seems confused when Kate lies that they turned it off to leave the room. They meet with the boys and give all the children a tour of the island. They pass a mine, and Jillson explains that Mr. Curtain built his fortune by bringing a colony of miners to the island. He used that fortune to open the tuition-free Institute, but some of the mine shafts remain. They also point out the barracks of the Helpers, the white-uniformed workers, who are not allowed to speak to the students. Jackson remarks that soon the children will forget to even notice the Helpers.

The Executives lead the children past a group of students reciting a nonsensical chant about the “free market.” Jackson casually refers to it as the Free Market Drill, and Constance challenges that it sounds like nonsense. Jillson says that everything sounds like nonsense on some level, and that this is the sort of lesson they will learn at the Institute. She explains that there are no rules at the Institute, but she immediately contradicts herself by listing several rules. Reynie notes this inconsistency, but Jackson rolls his eyes and insists, “Many things that sound like rules aren’t actually rules, and it always sounds as if there are more rules than there really are.” Jackson also refuses to call Sticky by his nickname. Even though “Sticky” is what everyone calls him, Jackson believes that if the name isn’t official, then it can’t be real.

CHAPTER 12

Jackson and Jillson leave the children alone in a classroom to wait for Mr. Curtain. Kate wonders why the Executives would warn them about the mine shafts when they are clearly traps, and Reynie supposes that they don’t want the children to leave the paths. More students come in, escorted by Executives and a pair of men each wearing two watches. The Mysterious Benedict Society try their best to be inconspicuous, though Constance almost falls asleep until Reynie nudges her. He notes some other drowsy children and realizes that they must have been kidnapped by the men in suits. He wonders why they look so sleepy.

The Helpers are another element of the hierarchy of the school. The rule that they are not permitted to speak to the students allows students to overlook and forget them. This generates entitlement and insensitivity in the students, positioning them as figures of authority over the Helpers. All students rank higher than Helpers, while Messengers rank higher than other students, Executives rank higher than Messengers, and Mr. Curtain controls them all.



Jillson’s comment about nonsense shows how the Institute deconstructs students’ perception of the world to allow Mr. Curtain to reshape their beliefs. The list of rules is another way muddying the truth and cementing Mr. Curtain’s control: the students are forced to follow rules while the Executive insist there are no rules at all. Jackson continues trying to undermine the children’s perception of reality by claiming that they cannot trust what things “sound like.” This implies the children cannot believe their own perceptions and must instead believe what Mr. Curtain tells them is true. Jackson’s point extends to Sticky’s name; though “Sticky” is what everyone calls him and what he calls himself, the Institute’s paperwork identifies him as “George,” so that must be the truth.



In addition to all the other rules, Executives control students by limiting where on the island they can go. The arrival of kidnapped students indicates that like Mr. Benedict, Mr. Curtain is recruiting children. Their difference is highlighted by Mr. Curtain’s utter lack of children’s agency and consent.



Jillson announces Mr. Curtain's entrance. He comes in on a technologically advanced wheelchair and wears large reflective glasses that hide his eyes. The Mysterious Benedict Society are stunned to see that Mr. Curtain is in fact Mr. Benedict, right down to his green plaid suit. Reynie is horrified, and he tries to find an explanation besides the most plausible one: that Mr. Benedict has tricked them.

Mr. Curtain approaches Reynie and asks why the boy is staring at him, which makes Reynie understand that Mr. Curtain doesn't recognize him. He lies that he is distracted by Mr. Curtain's large nose, and though Mr. Curtain is initially outraged, he calms down and says that the Institute needs honest children. He welcomes all the new students to the Institute, but Reynie is trying to figure out how Mr. Benedict and Mr. Curtain, who seem to be complete opposites, could be the same person. Everything seems backwards. Reynie shudders, realizing that backwards, the acronym for the Learning Institute for the Very Enlightened is *EVIL*.

Lights-out in the dorms is 10:00. When that hour strikes, Reynie checks outside his room and sees S.Q. Pedalian, a large-footed Executive, on patrol. S.Q. gently reminds the boys to be quiet, and then he moves on. Once he's gone, Kate and Constance come down through the ceiling panel. The children puzzle over Mr. Curtain's identity, and Reynie suggests they send a message to the shore. If they haven't been tricked, the reply may help them figure out what to do.

Sticky uses Kate's flashlight to send a brief, cryptic message in Morse to the mainland, conveying that Mr. Curtain is Mr. Benedict. A long time passes without a response, until finally the children receive a riddle: "When looking in my looking glass, I spied a trusted face. Alas, not to be taken for him am I. Beware, therefore, the Gemini." The children are frustrated by the strange message. Sticky explains that a Gemini is a zodiac sign, which indicates what time of the year someone is born. Kate suggests that the Gemini must be a traitor in their group who was born under the Gemini, but Reynie doesn't believe Mr. Benedict would send a message that made the children turn on each other. He recalls that Gemini is the sign of the twin and concludes that Mr. Benedict must have a long-lost brother.

The instances of deception in the Institute come to a head with Mr. Benedict's apparent deception of the children. When Mr. Curtain reveals himself to be identical to Mr. Benedict, the children must contend with the notion that the identity of Mr. Benedict--their benefactor, the leader of their mission, and the source of their friendship--might be a lie. Even his reflective glasses prevent people from seeing his eyes, which are commonly referred to as "the windows to the soul," meaning that Mr. Curtain seems especially enigmatic and hard to read.



Mr. Curtain remarks that the Institute needs honest children, even though the Institute is constructed on a foundation of lies. This suggests that he sees the value in honesty and chooses to ignore it. Meanwhile, Reynie tries to understand Mr. Curtain's identity. He conceives of Mr. Curtain and Mr. Benedict as not only different, but direct opposites. He knows that sometimes external appearances disguise a person's true intentions, but he doubts that one person could be so double-sided.



S.Q. is kind, but he enforces Mr. Curtain's rule; he is an example of how good people can easily be manipulated into serving evil leaders. Reynie's plan to contact their allies on the mainland suggests that he still has hope and faith in Mr. Benedict, and the fact that he needs advice on what to do highlights that although he is a leader, he is still a child and occasionally needs guidance.



The riddle is similar to the original tests: it demands the children pool their knowledge and apply it in an unconventional way to decipher the truth. Reynie again demonstrates his faith in Mr. Benedict when he insists that Mr. Benedict would not want the children to turn on each other. This puts to rest a moment of tension between the friends, as they briefly fear that one of their number is a traitor. Reynie's realization that Mr. Benedict and Mr. Curtain are twins is the most literal example of doubleness that the children encounter.



Kate asks why Mr. Benedict hadn't told them that he had a twin on the island, and Reynie says he probably didn't know. The "looking glass" in the riddle must refer to a telescope, so Mr. Benedict saw Mr. Curtain through his telescope only that day. Because Mr. Benedict was an orphan, he and his brother must have been separated. Sticky signals to the mainland that they understand, but the response from the mainland is cut off when a pair of Executives come outside. Since the response had only been wishing them good luck, the children adjourn the meeting and go to bed.

The backstories of Mr. Benedict and Mr. Curtain are not dwelled on in this book, but the impact of their respective childhoods is evident on both men. Mr. Benedict has sought to remedy the loneliness of growing up an orphan by surrounding himself with intelligent, compassionate friends. Mr. Curtain has responded to the lack of control he had over his upbringing—characterized by losing his parents and being separated from his brother—by trying to exert control over the entire world.



CHAPTER 13

The Institute's curriculum has been designed by Mr. Curtain, and when a class runs through all the lessons, they repeat them from the beginning. All the lessons are eventually reviewed over and over, and the students who learn them best become Messengers. The children of the Mysterious Benedict Society are familiar with this strange teaching style; just like in their old schools, rote memorization is "discouraged but required," and class participation is "required but rarely permitted."

The Institute's strict and unchanging lessons satirize the education system by pointing out the undue emphasis on rote memorization and the hypocrisy of requiring "but rarely permit[ing]" class participation. In this way, the Institute—and by extension, the education system—functions as a tool to perpetuate the dominant authority's control.



Reynie and Sticky have been earning perfect scores, but Kate and Constance are struggling academically. The four are in a class taught by S.Q. Pedalian and a Messenger, Martina Crowe, when Jackson arrives and calls two Messengers out of class. In this same class, Reynie also recognizes the two children he thought had been kidnapped, and he is surprised to find that they look purposeful and happy. He chastises himself for jumping to conclusions, and he concludes that he must be getting everything wrong.

The two children's newfound happiness hints that the Institute has more secrets that the Mysterious Benedict Society has yet to uncover. Reynie is embarrassed that he jumped to conclusions, but he then jumps to the conclusion that he has gotten everything wrong. He is building some confidence as a leader, but he still struggles with insecurity and self-doubt.



S.Q. asks Reynie and Sticky to stay after class. They exchange a nervous look, worried that they are expected of something, and Martina hisses at them angrily as she leaves. S.Q. tells the boys (tripping over his words as he does) that he is amazed by their performance. He congratulates them, and Reynie asks about the two other new students. S.Q. explains that they are "special recruits" who get extra encouragement to become top students; Jackson and Jillson were special recruits themselves. When Sticky asks what makes special recruits special, S.Q. chokes on his words and avoids answering.

S.Q. is the kindest but least competent of Mr. Curtain's Executives, which makes him a good source of information, since he is less skillful at deception than his peers. He cannot think of an appropriate lie to explain the special recruits, so he avoids answering. However, his nervous response indicates that the true answer is significant.



Reynie asks why Martina is so angry at them, and S.Q. laughs that their perfect scores are showing her up. There are only a limited number of jobs for Messengers, so if a Messenger falls behind, they might lose their role. This happened to S.Q. several times when he was a Messenger. Reynie mentally notes that they will have to watch out for Martina.

Another method by which Mr. Curtain controls his students is by pitting them against each other. By establishing the role of Messenger as coveted and limited, he has indirectly made Martina an enemy of the Mysterious Benedict Society.



CHAPTER 14

At lunch, Reynie and Sticky tell Constance and Kate about their encounters with S.Q. and Martina. Kate is furious about how Martina is treating them, but Reynie is distracted by Constance's horrible table manners. Her rudeness makes him sad, as he realizes that she has never had someone to teach her courtesy. Reynie and Sticky order their lunches from a Helper, and they both reflect on the deference that Mr. Curtain demands from the Helpers. They are not allowed to speak to or make eye contact with the students, and any time Reynie tries to greet the Helpers, they seem uncomfortable.

The rest of the day follows a similar pattern: Reynie is pleased by his and Sticky's academic success, then he is dismayed by the glares that their success inspires from Martina and other students. Kate and Constance continue to fail the Institute's constant quizzes. After classes, the Mysterious Benedict Society meets in the plaza. Instead of talking, they watch Mr. Curtain, who is also in the plaza. He sits in his wheelchair going through a stack of papers and making occasional notes in a large book. Eventually, Mr. Curtain turns and leaves.

Students are not allowed in each other's rooms, since that would encourage private meetings, and secrets at the Institute are reserved for Messengers and Executives. In the evening, the children linger together outside Reynie and Sticky's room to eavesdrop on other students. During this time, Jackson marches down the hall and commands a Messenger to go to the Waiting Room, by order of Mr. Curtain. The Messenger is horrified, but Jackson coerces him into obedience. Another girl in the hall bursts into tears at the mere mention of the Waiting Room. The children of the Mysterious Benedict Society exchange nervous glances, and Constance says that they should probably avoid being sent to the Waiting Room.

CHAPTER 15

That night, only Kate comes through the ceiling panel to visit the boys, since Constance fell asleep in the girls' dorm. Kate complains about how much studying she has to do, and Sticky offers to help, but she turns him down, frustrated. Sticky is hurt by her rejection, but Kate doesn't notice. Reynie points out that many of the pointless lessons they learn in class echo the messages they heard through the television, and the children resolve to find out how the lessons fit with the hidden messages. They prepare to report their findings to Mr. Benedict, but Mr. Curtain and some Executives are in a position outside to see the message, so the children give up for the night. Kate climbs up her rope to the ceiling panel and disappears, prompting the boys to marvel at how she moves.

As Reynie gets to know Constance, he is able to see past her rudeness to the little girl underneath. In yet another example of his emotional intelligence, he perceives that her lack of courtesy reflects a lack of guidance and care. Kate's characterization is also strengthened here. Her anger at Martina's behavior highlights Kate's loyalty and her affection for her friends.



The Mysterious Benedict Society continues to try to balance academic success with the accrual of information. The contrast between these two goals speaks to the contrast between the children's youth and the magnitude of their mission. Struggling with quizzes is the problem of a normal child, but the Mysterious Benedict Society are not only children—they are spies.



Mr. Curtain asserts his control over the Institute by establishing secrets themselves as a privilege reserved only for himself and those under him. He also threatens children with the prospect of being sent to the mysterious Waiting Room. The students at the Institute follow the rules because Mr. Curtain has given them a harsh incentive to behave and has laid out specific goals to achieve.



When Sticky offers to help Kate study, he is reaching out to her in a gesture of friendship, since his knowledge is the only part of himself in which he is confident. Kate unthinkingly rejects him, prompting Sticky to doubt himself and his friendship with Kate. Still, he likes and respects her, and he pauses to admire her athletic ability with Reynie.



Reynie lies awake, trying to calm himself by writing a mental letter to Miss Perumal. He manages to calm down, and he is close to falling asleep when Sticky asks if he's awake. Reynie wants to go to sleep, but he also wants to be there for Sticky, so he gets up. Sticky points out that the coast is clear, so they send a Morse message using the light switch. Sticky is terrified that they will be caught, having spent the last few hours obsessing over the Waiting Room, but Reynie promises to keep watch, so they send their message to the mainland and receive an affirmation in response. As they go to bed, Sticky is still nervous. Reynie searches for something to say that will ease both their nerves, but he can't think of anything.

Sticky is too anxious to sleep, which leaves him exhausted in class. He is further distracted when he sees the Messenger who went to the Waiting Room, who still looks distraught. Nervous and distracted, Sticky falls asleep in class. Martina gets him in trouble, and in revenge, Kate ties Martina's shoelaces to her desk. Constance scolds Kate for making more enemies, but Kate reminds her that Martina was already their enemy. She asks if Constance expected Kate to let Martina get away with it, and Sticky points out that one of Martina's insults was actually correct--she called him bald, and he is, because he disguised himself with hair remover when he ran away. This makes the children laugh, but their laughter falls away as they remember their troubles.

CHAPTER 16

In class, Jillson lectures about the dangers of "bad government," and explains that all the current governments in the world are bad. She compares them to poison apples: beautiful on the outside, but deadly within. These governments also shelter wicked officials, which act as poison worms within the poison apples. The comparison catches Reynie's attention, as he remembers one of the coded messages was "poison apples, poison worms." He is pondering the significance of this when he suddenly becomes angry. His anger has no source, but it's directed at everyone he can think of. Reynie looks to his friends and finds that they all look pained and angry, but the rest of the class is unaffected.

Reynie has been separated from Miss Perumal for days, but she is still in his thoughts, and thinking of her is his only source of comfort. Despite his own unease and exhaustion, Reynie wants to be a good friend to Sticky, so he helps him send the Morse code message. Reynie values their friendship, but he is too afraid of their situation to effectively comfort Sticky. His inability to help himself or his friend is yet another reminder that the children are out of their depth in their mission at the Institute.



Kate once again proves her dedication to her friends by taking revenge on Martina. She already considered Martina her enemy because she was an enemy of the boys, which speaks to the strength of the bond among the Mysterious Benedict Society. The children experience a brief moment of youthful joy, like normal students, while they laugh at Sticky's baldness, but that happiness fades quickly. Their childishness is quickly eroding as they face the dangers of the Institute.



Jillson's lesson applies Mr. Curtain's strategies for control to other governments. She claims they project an attractive appearance that covers up evil insides, much like Mr. Curtain's associates and the Institute itself. This lesson instills distrust in any authority besides Mr. Curtain's.



The Mysterious Benedict Society convenes to discuss what might be happening to them. Reynie, Kate, and Sticky all agree that they feel angry, but Constance seems to shrink. She nervously asks if the others only feel angry, and if they don't hear something. She trails off before elaborating. Reynie realizes that Mr. Curtain must be boosting the power, which is causing the children's minds to react to the hidden messages. He kneels beside Constance and gently prompts her to tell them what she hears, and for once, Constance doesn't complain. She seems to be fighting back tears as she reveals that she alone can hear the Messenger's voice.

The children are shocked to realize that Constance possesses one of the "exceptionally sensitive minds" Mr. Benedict referred to. Sticky points out that Constance's ability might be useful, since she can know with certainty when messages are being sent. The broadcasts have paused, so the children are feeling better, and they send a message to the mainland about Constance. Mr. Benedict signals back that they are running out of time, and the children must "become what [they] are not." The children are confused by what this means.

CHAPTER 17

The message broadcasts continue the next day, putting all four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society on edge until the broadcasts conclude in the evening. As the children meet up in the boys' room, Reynie figures out what Mr. Benedict's message means. Since time is running out, the children need to become Messengers as soon as possible. To accomplish this, they need to earn top grades, which can only happen if they "become what [they] are not"—that is, if they cast aside their shared love of truth and start to cheat on assignments.

Kate and Sticky are horrified by Reynie's suggestion. Reynie does not want to cheat, but he reasons that their very presence on the island is a deception. Still, he worries that his love of truth might not be as powerful as his friends'. Constance argues that Mr. Curtain is the real deceiver, and they need to beat him at his own game. The children send a message to Mr. Benedict to ask if they should cheat. He responds simply, "Do not get caught."

For the first time, Constance is openly afraid and vulnerable. She is the most immature member of the group, and physically the smallest, but she rarely allows herself to display emotion or seek protection like an ordinary child. Realizing that she is alone in her ability to hear the Messenger's voice frightens her enough to temporarily pull down her walls. Reynie picks up on Constance's distress, and he responds to her like the frightened child she is.



Constance's importance starts to become clear. She does not share Reynie or Sticky's academic intelligence or Kate's physical prowess, but her sensitivity and love of truth is perhaps the most powerful of all four children. This is another reflection on the nature of truth. Constance has not tried to hide her abilities, but the other children have nonetheless been unable to see them, which is a reminder that people can contain hidden depths.



The Mysterious Benedict Society's mission poses threats to their safety, but it also threatens their morality and identities. The children share a love of truth, and their understandings of themselves are shaped by this innate honesty. To succeed in their mission, however, they must suppress their love of truth and use the tool of their enemy—deception—in order to defeat him.



Reynie is the first to understand why the children must cheat, but his friends' reactions push him back to his familiar self-doubt. Constance distinguishes between the Mysterious Benedict Society's deception and Mr. Curtain's deception; she sees Mr. Curtain's dishonesty as part of his character, while the children's dishonesty is simply a tool they must use. This simplistic perspective on morality suits Constance's immaturity, as she fails to recognize that the children are moving away from their shared values and toward moral ambiguity.



The members of the Mysterious Benedict Society spend the night practicing their cheating. They arrange for Kate and Constance to cheat off Sticky and Reynie, and their teamwork helps the girls improve on their quizzes. Between classes, they hear that one of the Messengers is graduating. Kate distracts S.Q. Pedalian so the others can question the graduating Messenger about his special duties and privileges, but the boy becomes agitated and insists that he can't tell them anything.

Once the children decide to cheat, they quickly arrange a system that involves each member of the team. This speaks to the group's growing bond and the trust they have in each other. It also highlights how crucial teamwork is to their success. In addition to working towards jobs as Messengers, the children continue to explore other avenues of investigation, such as questioning the graduating Messenger. His confusion and anxiety suggest that Mr. Curtain has means of controlling his Messengers that the Society has yet to uncover.



CHAPTER 18

During class the next day, Jackson posts the list of new Messengers. None of the Mysterious Benedict Society has made the list, and as they walk out of class, Reynie sees the two children he suspects were kidnapped. Despite their apparent happiness, he feels sympathetic. He imagines that they must have lived terrible lives to find the Institute so wonderful, and that students must turn their backs on the outside world to become Executives because they are so grateful to be part of something important. Reynie finds himself jealous of that feeling.

Reynie again demonstrates his instinct for compassion and ability to see past people's external appearances. He assesses that the kidnapped children's loyalty to Mr. Curtain and the Institute must stem from gratitude, and he is able to sympathize so strongly that he becomes envious. Though Reynie is part of Mr. Benedict's group, he does not have the certainty of Mr. Curtain's recruits, and he longs for that unshakeable faith and security.



Reynie runs into Mr. Curtain, who assumes Reynie is disappointed at not being a Messenger. With condescension, he claims that even the minds of gifted children are easily read. He tells Reynie that Reynie is not yet ready to be a Messenger, but the time will come. Mr. Curtain mentions that he dislikes and distrusts Constance. Reynie suggests that Mr. Curtain should keep people he distrusts close, and Mr. Curtain laughs in approval. Reynie gets the sense that he has passed a test he didn't know he was taking. Mr. Curtain remarks that keeping his enemies close is the best way to control the problem, and "control is always the key." He makes up his mind about something, and orders Reynie to accompany him to his office.

While Mr. Benedict treats children with respect, Mr. Curtain talks down to them and assumes all children are less intelligent than himself. He also differs from Mr. Benedict in his thoughts on control. Mr. Benedict values truth and independent thought, and his tests indicate that he believes in creative problem-solving. Mr. Curtain, on the other hand, believes that problems can be solved by asserting control over every situation. Reynie disproves Mr. Curtain's assumption that children are inferior by manipulating Mr. Curtain into tolerating Constance's presence. He reads Mr. Curtain's motivations just as Mr. Curtain believes he himself can do to any child.



Mr. Curtain speeds down the corridors in his wheelchair, and Reynie has to run to keep up. They reach Mr. Curtain's office, which requires a number code to enter. The office is white and sparsely decorated. On the wall is a map of Holland, where Mr. Benedict was born, and below that is a row of bookshelves locked to prevent access to their books. Reynie marvels at how Mr. Curtain and Mr. Benedict can be so similar and yet so different.

Mr. Curtain and Mr. Benedict are identical in appearance, and they have the same Dutch origins. They both surround themselves with books and display remarkable intellect. However, their offices, as Reynie observes, highlight their differences. Mr. Benedict welcomes guests into his office, which is full of messily assembled papers, while Mr. Curtain keeps his office locked and mostly empty. Mr. Curtain renders his books inaccessible and maintains strict control over what the residents of the island may learn, unlike Mr. Benedict, whose house is full of books ready to be read.



Mr. Curtain moves to his desk and marks something in a journal. He tells Reynie that he spent his childhood as an orphan in Holland, where he was constantly bullied by other children. He tells Reynie that they have both been mistreated for being different, and Mr. Curtain claims that in spite of this, his only goal is to make people happy. He remarks that he sees himself in Reynie, who is a natural leader with a superior mind. Mr. Curtain explains that children despise superior minds, and that leaders are always alone even among their friends. Reynie sees some truth in this, but he tries to reassure himself that his friends do not despise him.

Mr. Curtain tells Reynie that he is on track to become an Executive. Reynie is surprised, and Mr. Curtain points out that an orphan like Reynie would not be leaving much behind to come work for Mr. Curtain. He reveals to Reynie that he is planning for what he calls the Improvement, which will eliminate the need for Messengers. He promises that he will explain further once Reynie has proven himself. With a laugh, Mr. Curtain remarks that he prizes “open minds.” Reynie thanks him, but Mr. Curtain says not to thank him—instead, Reynie should impress him.

That night, Reynie describes the meeting to the other members of the Mysterious Benedict Society. They pass on the information to the mainland. The response tells the children not to worry, but reminds them that time is of the essence.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, the Mysterious Benedict Society climbs a tall hill so Kate can survey the landscape with her spyglass. She spots another drapewood trap, and Reynie wonders why both traps are right next to groups of boulders. Kate points out that the rocks would always cast the drapewood in shadow, making them harder to see. Constance admires this trickery, and Sticky notes that drapewood was a good choice for a plant, since it thrives in shade.

Though Mr. Curtain is a villain, he has some sympathetic traits that make him similar to Reynie. They have both struggled with loneliness, as both grew up with neither friends nor family. Mr. Curtain’s experiences with childhood bullies may have shaped his current perception of children as ignorant and easily manipulated. He also observes that Reynie acts as his group’s leader, and he correctly points out the isolation that role can impose. The accuracy of Mr. Curtain’s words shakes Reynie’s confidence in himself and the Mysterious Benedict Society.



Mr. Benedict’s predictions of “the thing to come” are proven correct as Mr. Curtain reveals his plans for the Improvement. His joke about “open minds” also shows that he finds humor in undermining free will. He uses the phrase with double meaning—in the traditional sense, a student with an open mind is a good listener and ready to learn, but Mr. Curtain also forcibly opens minds to encode his transmitted messages. His laughter at this joke marks a twisted version of his brother’s enjoyment of wordplay, indicating yet another way the brothers are at once similar and different.



The message from the mainland once again highlights the ethical dilemma of recruiting children as spies. Mr. Benedict and his associates do not want the Mysterious Benedict Society to worry, but they must remind the children of the high stakes and limited time to keep the mission on track. This reminder necessarily brings stress to the children, since they must be aware and afraid of the potential consequences of their failure.



As they discuss the drapewood, each of the four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society contributes something relevant to their unique characterization. Reynie’s keen observation skills help him notice that both traps are located near boulders, and Kate’s spatial awareness helps her think of the way the rocks would cast shadows. The academic Sticky presents more information about drapewood. Constance offers only admiration for Mr. Curtain’s strategy, which reflects her mischievous nature. Each of the children are distinct individuals, but they have learned how to come together as a team and combine their abilities to serve their goals.



The children's spying is interrupted when two Helpers walk past. Reynie recognizes one of them as a school facilities inspector from Stonetown, but the Helper nervously insists he has a different name and has worked at the Institute for as long as he can remember. Reynie realizes that the Helpers, like Milligan and the missing government agents, have had their memories stolen by Mr. Curtain. Mr. Curtain kidnaps people who stand in his way, wipes their memories, and converts them into his private workforce. He programs the Helpers to believe that "everything is as it should be," but their eyes share Milligan's sadness, as they unconsciously miss the lives they've lost.

Reynie explains his revelation to his friends. He realizes that the kidnapped students are acting happy because they don't remember being kidnapped, and the Messenger who insisted he couldn't talk about his duties really couldn't, because he had lost his memory of them. Sticky uses his knowledge of amnesia to help Reynie deduce that the memory-wiping causes deep sadness when it robs people of all their memories, but when Mr. Curtain targets specific memories, the process only causes confusion. Reynie recalls that the school facilities inspector was a jovial man who was always talking about his beloved children; he must have come to inspect the Institute, and Mr. Curtain silenced his report by kidnapping him.

Mr. Curtain's methods grow increasingly insidious as the children uncover more and more information. Not only does he rob the general public of independent thought and free will, but he also robs the Helpers of their very identities. Their false belief that "everything is as it should be" instills the Helpers with complacency, a lack of awareness that prevents them from fighting back. However, Mr. Curtain's efforts cannot entirely erase the core truths that make up these people, and they sense the deception even though they cannot identify it.



The revelation that Mr. Curtain regularly kidnaps and brainwashes people confirms that he has no regard for anyone's individual agency. He views people merely as pieces in a game of his devising, in which the object is to gain as much power and control as possible. This information adds context to Mr. Curtain's earlier claim that he wants to make people happy. The brainwashing process can cause deep despair, but it also allows the kidnapped students to enjoy their time at the Institute. This happiness, though, is superficial. The students and the Helpers alike have been stripped of the fundamental right to make their own choices and think for themselves.



CHAPTER 20

That night, the children are subdued. Now that they know some aspects of Mr. Curtain's plan, they miss not knowing them. They know that since they're children, without proof, nobody will take their word over that of an adult. Kate expresses a desire to steal Mr. Curtain's notebook or, barring that, to take action. Sticky protests that they are doing all they can. They tell Mr. Benedict what they've learned, and he responds that there may be a way to restore memories to those who lost them.

To calm himself down, Reynie writes a mental letter to Miss Perumal. He ponders the fact that Sticky is the only one of the four children to have a memory of family life, and he wonders if it is worse to have felt loved and then rejected, or to always have been alone. He recalls his last night at Mr. Benedict's. Reynie had asked the older man if he had ever wished for a family, and Mr. Benedict says that he did as a child. Now that he is older, though, he has acquired a family—a family made up of dear friends. Reynie thinks over the people he might one day consider part of his family.

The children came to the island to learn about Mr. Curtain, but now that they have, they miss their previous ignorance. They are learning information and facing dangers too horrifying for children. Knowing what they know, they can never return to their youthful innocence; indeed, they can never truly be children again. Still, they must contend with the disadvantages of youth, which means their word against Mr. Curtain's will count for nothing.



The notion that people can choose their own families opens an opportunity for Reynie to finally quell his lifelong loneliness. For most of Reynie's life, Miss Perumal was the only person he might consider family, and his continued imagined letters to her show that he still values their connection. Meeting Mr. Benedict and forming the Mysterious Benedict Society have also allowed Reynie to expand his chosen family.



Reynie starts to cry as he continues thinking about Miss Perumal, and Sticky asks if he is okay. Reynie deflects, moving the conversation to the people who have lost their memories. Sticky wishes they could lay their hands on Mr. Curtain's journal, and his phrasing of that thought gives Reynie an idea.

Reynie is much more emotionally intelligent than most children his age, but he usually directs that insight towards other people rather than himself. Here, he rejects Sticky's implicit offer to discuss his feelings and instead redirects both of their attention to the mission.



CHAPTER 21

Mr. Curtain sits in his usual place in the plaza when Reynie approaches him. He explains that he has noticed Mr. Curtain's journal has many dog-eared pages, so Reynie offers him several bookmarks. He waits for Mr. Curtain to put them into the book. Mr. Curtain finds Reynie a nuisance, "and yet the nuisance had flattered him," so he puts the bookmarks in the journal. Before Reynie leaves, he asks why Mr. Curtain is always staring into the distance on the plaza. Mr. Curtain says that he is looking at his proudest accomplishment, the turbines, which he considers a remarkable achievement and a continuation of Holland's history of controlling the sea. Reynie is struck by Mr. Curtain's vanity.

Mr. Curtain considers himself a master of controlling the world around him. He even believes that he has conquered the sea itself with his turbines. He is blind, however, to Reynie's ability to control him. Reynie easily assesses that Mr. Curtain is susceptible to flattery, and although Mr. Curtain thinks of children as inferior nuisances, Reynie's judgment proves correct: he can control Mr. Curtain by telling the man what he wants to hear.



Reynie hurries back to his friends on the hilltop. Constance has been keeping watch, surprisingly doing what the others asked her to do. Hidden behind a cactus, Kate is on her hands and knees, and Sticky stands on her back, peering through her spyglass. He has been watching Mr. Curtain turn the pages in his journal, though Sticky is only able to make out portions of each page. He can't tell if the contents are useful yet, because he hasn't thought about them—"there's a difference between remembering and thinking," he says. The group is interrupted by Jackson, who threatens to take Kate to the Waiting Room unless she gives him the spyglass. She relents, but he thinks the device is simply a kaleidoscope.

Once again, the Mysterious Benedict Society has worked out a strategy to utilize each member of the team. While Constance keeps watch and Reynie uses his connection to Mr. Curtain, Kate's strength provides a sturdy foundation for Sticky to spy from. Sticky clarifies that his intelligence and his photographic memory are different skills; he is gifted in both areas, but he is only confident in his memory, since that comes naturally and requires little active input from him. The spyglass's disguise proves useful when Jackson confiscates it and believes it to be a kaleidoscope, in yet another instance of the children employing deception for their own ends.



Later, Sticky tries to reproduce what he saw in Mr. Curtain's journal. The passages reveal that Mr. Curtain believes humans are driven by fear, and he hopes to make use of this. He has concluded that perfect control is impossible, but the illusion of perfect control can be just as effective. He refers to memory-wiping as "brainsweeping," and notes that trigger objects can cause relapses of memory. An entry dated the day of the children's arrival notes that the Helpers have increased the power of the turbines to prepare for the Improvement. The last entry is a list of slogan ideas promoting Mr. Curtain, though the children don't know its purpose. They report their findings to Mr. Benedict and go to bed, pleased that they are making progress.

Mr. Curtain views the world through a cynical lens. He believes that people make choices based on fear, not hope, and he aims to manipulate those fears. He recognizes that his desire for complete control is impossible, but he is satisfied with the appearance of control. Mr. Curtain thinks that the appearance of control is effective enough to grant him genuine authority, which speaks to his warped perception of deception and truth. In his view, if a deception is powerful enough, it becomes truth.



CHAPTER 22

The next day, Jillson catches Sticky cheating. She drags him to the Waiting Room while the other children boo and jeer, including a smug Martina. Constance looks terrified, and Reynie shares her fear. If Sticky reveals their secrets to Mr. Curtain, it will be the end of their mission and the start of real mortal danger.

The three remaining members of the Mysterious Benedict Society meet and somberly search the campus for clues. Constance wonders why the gym is frequently closed for Executive use, and Reynie realizes the Executives might use the gym for something important. With Constance as lookout, Kate and Reynie hurry off to peek into the gym. Reynie stands on Kate's shoulders to look through the window, and he sees rows of smiling Recruiters, prompted by Executives, practicing greeting paper figurines with hugs and handshakes. Reynie realizes this must be preparation for the Improvement. The practice is coming to an end when S.Q. Pedalian looks out the window and sees Reynie.

Reynie and Kate run away and plan to split up. Reynie worries that he will never see Kate again, after Mr. Curtain catches and brainsweeps him. Reynie thanks Kate for her help. She makes a joke, and when Reynie tells her the situation isn't funny, her cheerful demeanor falters. She tells Reynie that she knows this isn't funny, but asks, "What do you want me to do? Cry?" She promises to see him at supper and runs off.

Reynie slowly makes his way to the far side of the Institute. He hesitates before going inside, then tells himself he must at least pretend to be brave. He joins Kate and Constance in the cafeteria, and the Executive on duty doesn't pay Reynie any attention. Kate informs Reynie that S.Q. was unable to identify Reynie as anything other than an "especially average-looking boy," much to the frustration of the other Executives. Reynie is relieved, but his fear for himself is quickly replaced by fear for Sticky, who is still in danger.

The Mysterious Benedict Society is confronted with the dangers that previously seemed abstract. Sticky has been forcibly separated from the group, ripping him from his support system. If he confesses, Mr. Curtain will likely brainsweep the children—or worse. With Sticky gone, the reality of the situation sets in: the Society members are children, they are alone, and they are in danger.



Though they have temporarily lost a member, the Mysterious Benedict Society continues its mission, which highlights the children's perseverance and commitment to their cause. Once again, Kate boosts one of her friends up to a higher vantage point. This reinforces her characterization as sturdy and reliable, but it is also a reminder that Kate intentionally curates that image to avoid seeming vulnerable. The scene in the gym indicates that the Improvement is rapidly approaching, and the potential consequences become all the more intense when S.Q. sees Reynie through the window, placing him in imminent danger.



Kate is almost always smiling and joking, even in inappropriate moments. Her reaction to Reynie shows that she understands her cheerfulness is out of place. If she does not constantly appear happy, she fears she will reveal her deep insecurities and loneliness. Like the other children, Kate prizes truth and honesty, but much of the personality she projects is a deception.



Reynie continues to struggle with bravery. He has undertaken a dangerous mission and often leads his friends through risks, but he still does not consider himself brave. In an unusual stroke of luck for the Mysterious Benedict Society, S.Q. Pedalian fails to identify Reynie due to the boy's "average-looking" appearance. This reminder of Reynie's looks highlights the disparity between a person's interior and exterior, as Reynie's unassuming appearance hides an impressive mind.



CHAPTER 23

Reynie is up late waiting for Sticky. Finally, Sticky arrives. He is covered in black stinking mud. His eyes are bloodshot from crying, and they hold a look of total despair. Sticky shuffles along without speaking, and he goes to the bathroom to wash off the mud. He gets into the shower fully clothed, and barely notices Reynie urging him to undress and use soap. Reynie tries to remain calm, but he feels sure that Sticky has been brainswept, and since cheating wouldn't warrant that punishment, Sticky must have told Mr. Curtain everything.

Sticky returns from the shower and, without looking at Reynie, pulls his suitcase from the bed. Reynie begs Sticky to talk to him, and Sticky snaps that he doesn't want to talk about the Waiting Room. Mr. Curtain didn't meet with him today, so tomorrow Sticky will either have to go back to the Waiting Room or meet with Mr. Curtain. He plans to run away to avoid either option. He can't go back to the Waiting Room, and he is sure that if he faces Mr. Curtain, he will let down the Mysterious Benedict Society. Reynie tearfully tells Sticky how sorry he is that this happened, but he is relieved that Sticky has not lost his memory and identity. Sticky insists that if he has to talk to Mr. Curtain, he will crack under the pressure and get them all caught, but Reynie confidently tells him that Sticky will come through for his friends when they really need him.

Sticky is still worried about returning to the Waiting Room. Reynie assures him that he will not have to go back, and Kate agrees as she and Constance come in through the ceiling panel. She makes a little too much noise, and Jackson comes in to investigate. Kate hides in the ceiling, and Sticky zips Constance into his suitcase. Finding no rules broken, Jackson takes the opportunity to tease Sticky about the Waiting Room. Sticky responds calmly, but he glares at Jackson with such "defiant outrage" that Reynie is impressed. Sticky is strong, even if others (and especially Sticky himself) don't notice. Eventually, Jackson leaves, and the children reconvene to hear Reynie's plan.

Sticky is the member of the Mysterious Benedict Society who has been most afraid of the potential consequences of being caught at the Institute. Now he has had to face one of his worst fears in the form of the Waiting Room, and the experience has clearly taken its toll on him. Reynie tries to help his friend by encouraging him to clean himself properly, but Sticky is lost in his own mind and ignores this gesture of friendship.



Sticky has faced one of his fears and come through in one piece, but he still considers himself a coward and doesn't trust his ability to withhold information from Mr. Curtain. This continues a trend of Sticky underestimating his own courage. Reynie does not share Sticky's doubt: he believes that Sticky is strong enough to help his friends, and he tells Sticky as much. Reynie often struggles with his own self-worth, but he can see through other's insecurities and validate his friends.



Sticky is not outwardly rebellious like Constance or Kate, but he is capable of resistance. When Jackson teases him about the Waiting Room, Sticky is not only angry—he simmers with "defiant outrage." The description of his rage as "defiant" highlights that Sticky's feeling is specifically anti-authority. Sticky's low self-esteem prevents him from understanding his true potential, but Reynie's gift for reading people allows him to realize that Sticky has the capacity for furious rebellion.



CHAPTER 24

Reynie and Sticky wake up before dawn. Sticky is still afraid. He mentions that the Executives blindfolded him before bringing him to the Waiting Room, and Reynie wonders why. S.Q. comes to pick Sticky up to meet with Mr. Curtain. He tries to give Sticky advice, but he stumbles over his words and ends up giving nonsensical advice that only makes Sticky more nervous. He brings Sticky to the office, and as Sticky walks in, he declares that he is sorry he cheated. He has memorized a speech explaining that he was pressured to cheat by Martina Crowe, and he obeyed because she is a Messenger. Mr. Curtain is outraged, but he tells Sticky that he doesn't mind cheating so much, as long as Mr. Curtain knows the situation. Mr. Curtain always wants to know the circumstances so that he can control them.

Sticky's friends congratulate him on the way to lunch. In the corridor, they overhear Jackson and Jillson discussing a Messenger who has been blamed for spying in the gym. The Executives are supposed to keep an eye out for the boy's partner in crime, and the situation has led to new codes for the door locks. Kate is thrilled that both Sticky and Reynie are no longer in trouble, but Reynie feels too guilty to be happy. By supper, no one has seen Martina all day, and Reynie feels that everything he does gets someone hurt. Sticky also feels guilty, since Martina has likely gone to the Waiting Room, and he knows how horrible that is.

A hidden message starts, and Constance grumbles at the Messenger that only she can hear. Reynie wonders what will happen to her when Mr. Curtain boosts the signal power all the way. S.Q. comes over, surprised that Sticky and Reynie look upset. He hints that they are close to becoming Messengers, and then it is revealed why a new spot has opened up: Martina comes in with Jackson and Jillson, dressed as an Executive.

CHAPTER 25

That night, S.Q. Pedalian brings Reynie and Sticky to speak with Mr. Curtain. Mr. Curtain tells the boys that he has made Martina an Executive partly because of what Reynie said about Constance: keep those you don't trust close. It helps that Martina was already an excellent candidate for Executive. Mr. Curtain goes on that the real reason he called the boys to him was to appoint them both as Messengers. Sticky and Reynie are relieved and excited, and they return to their room, where Kate and Constance are waiting, to tell the girls the news.

Sticky demonstrates his trust in Reynie here. He follows Reynie's plan, even though it involves admitting to the crime that sent him to the Waiting Room. The details of Reynie's plan highlight his problem-solving abilities. Turning the blame to Martina provides Sticky a plausible reason for cheating and potentially rids the Mysterious Benedict Society of an enemy. The plan seems to be effective, especially since it appeals to Mr. Curtain's compulsion for control.



Reynie struggles to balance his natural morality with the demands of spying. Martina and an innocent Messenger have now taken the blame for the Society's behavior, which breaches Reynie's inclination for honesty. This dilemma once again highlights the toll that this mission takes on the children. In addition to putting them in physical danger, it forces them to betray their core values.



Instead of punishing Martina for allegedly pressuring Sticky to cheat, Mr. Curtain rewards her, which speaks to the twisted values of the Institute. Mr. Curtain values control through fear, and in Sticky's story, Martina abused her power as a Messenger to frighten Sticky into obedience. Her promotion opens an opportunity for Sticky and Reynie to become Messengers, but it also grants their enemy more power.



Mr. Curtain thrives on deception, so it is difficult to assess which parts of what he says are actually true. However, what he says about following Reynie's advice suggests that Mr. Curtain genuinely likes Reynie (as much as Mr. Curtain can like any child). This bodes well for Reynie's status at the Institute—and, indeed, Mr. Curtain grants both Reynie and Sticky the jobs they need to move forward with their investigation.



They signal the news to Mr. Benedict on the mainland. He responds that the children must seek “with open eyes” to find “a place you must exit to enter.” The message is cut short, though, when Mr. Curtain comes out to the plaza, and the children are left unsure what the message is supposed to mean. Kate and Constance leave, and the boys go to bed. Reynie is writing a mental letter to Miss Perumal when Sticky asks if their promotion, which should be encouraging, scares Reynie as much as it does Sticky. Reynie laughs and admits that it does.

Mr. Benedict and his associates are the only adults the children can look to for guidance, but their distance is keenly felt. The adults can only provide help through riddles, and in this conversation, the riddle is cut short. Afterwards, Sticky admits to being afraid, and Reynie acknowledges that he feels the same. Both boys are scared, but they can be open about their fear with each other.



CHAPTER 26

Reynie wakes up from a nightmare to Jackson, who has come to bring him and Sticky to something called “the Whisperer.” Sticky points out that they will miss class, but Jackson says that the Whisperer is the reason for the classes, and for the Institute as a whole. He tells the boys that they are not allowed to know the way to the Whispering Gallery, so he blindfolds them and leads them onward. Reynie hears a sound as if Jackson is kicking something, and then they enter a staircase that winds up so high Reynie concludes they must be heading for the top of the flag tower.

The Institute has already established itself as a place that prioritizes order over education, but Jackson makes clear here that Mr. Curtain has no regard for educating his students at all. The entire Institute exists for the sake of the Whisperer. Though the boys make the trip blindfolded, Reynie remains highly observant, which allows him to notice the sound of kicking and to ultimately deduce where they’re going.



Mr. Curtain is waiting for Sticky and Reynie in the Whispering Gallery. Once inside, they remove their blindfolds and discover that the Whisperer is a large metal armchair affixed with two helmets, one blue and one red. Reynie recalls Kate saying that something important is behind the highest window, as he knows now that she was right. Besides the Whisperer, the room is mostly empty, which Mr. Curtain explains is so that he can totally control the Whispering Gallery. He emphasizes the security of the project, and adds that the Whispering Gallery has one door, and Mr. Curtain has the only key.

Mr. Curtain continues to display his obsession with control. He created the Whisperer and designed the Whispering Gallery, but he still fears losing some aspect of control if he decorates the room. He has complete authority over the room, down to holding the only key. This presents an issue for the Mysterious Benedict Society, who will not be able to enter the Whispering Gallery without Mr. Curtain.



Mr. Curtain boasts that despite its simple appearance, the Whisperer is an incredible invention. He explains that he built it using his own brain as a model, which allows him to control the machine with only his mind. It is capable of both transmitting and perceiving thoughts. The only limitation is that Mr. Curtain must be connected physically to the Whisperer, but he plans for modifications that will allow him to “bring peace” to millions of “troubled souls.” He continues to explain that the Whisperer requires the assistance of unsophisticated minds, since its mental processes are not as complex as Mr. Curtain’s. When a Messenger sits in the seat, the Whisperer directs them to think certain phrases, so that Messengers essentially filter Mr. Curtain’s thoughts through to the Whisperer’s processors. Reynie recognizes this as a lie. He realizes that the Messengers don’t know their thoughts are transmitted to others.

Once again, an outward appearance does not match something’s interior capabilities. This time, the Whisperer’s simplicity misrepresents its power. Mr. Curtain’s description of the Whisperer shows that he controls his Messengers through a specific, self-aggrandizing narrative. His promise to “bring peace” to “troubled souls” is also reminiscent of propaganda. It justifies Mr. Curtain’s mind control while patronizing his victims. He also describes his Messengers’ minds as unsophisticated in yet another example of his disregard for children.



Mr. Curtain holds up a package and asks the boys how many items he is holding. Reynie guesses that there is something inside the box, but he knows Mr. Curtain is looking to surprise them, so Reynie and Sticky say that he is holding one item. Mr. Curtain triumphantly upturns the box, spilling hundreds of pieces of paper, and explains that one package may hold many things. Similarly, one phrase can contain many thoughts. The boys understand that Mr. Benedict's Receiver only detects the phrases, not the underlying information within them.

Mr. Curtain tells Reynie to take his turn in the Whisperer first, after which Sticky will have a turn. Reynie hesitates, afraid that the Whisperer will reveal him as a spy, but finally he sits down in the chair. A voice speaks to him; it is neither his voice nor Mr. Curtain's, but the neutral voice of the Whisperer. The Whisperer asks Reynie his name. Reynie debates how to proceed, but the Whisperer picks his name from his thoughts before he can consciously answer the question. The Whisperer asks what Reynie fears most, and he tries to lie, but the Whisperer senses the truth. It reassures Reynie that he is not alone, which overwhelms Reynie with feelings of pleasure and peace. He realizes this must be why Messengers love their special privileges--the Whisperer rewards good behavior by soothing fears. This is so effective that Reynie finds he wants to give into the Whisperer.

Before he gives in entirely to the Whisperer, Reynie tries to determine if Mr. Curtain can hear his thoughts through the device. It doesn't seem like he can, so Reynie begins the process. When he regains consciousness, he finds that he was in the Whisperer for two hours. Sticky quietly asks Reynie if the process hurts. Reynie reassures Sticky it doesn't, and then repeats himself louder when Mr. Curtain calls that he "dislikes all secrets save [his] own." Mr. Curtain is impressed that Reynie lasted two hours in the machine, since most Messengers lose their concentration after 30 minutes. Reynie rises from the seat, but the Whisperer's phrases echo in his head, and he wants to sit back down and begin again. He tries to shake himself free of this desire.

Sticky nervously takes his turn with the Whisperer. He unknowingly answers its questions aloud, which lets Reynie hear Sticky's half of the conversation. Sticky tells the machine that his name is "Sticky," but after a pause he changes his answer to "George," apparently at the Whisperer's request. When the Whisperer asks Sticky's greatest fear, Reynie hears the reply: "Not being wanted. Not being wanted at all."

Reynie easily predicts what Mr. Curtain will say, but he underplays his intelligence to appease Mr. Curtain and fit the man's belief in children's inferior intellect. Mr. Curtain's description of one phrase transmitting many thoughts is a more abstract version of the recurring theme of mismatching outsides and insides. Mr. Benedict's Receiver detects the messages' cryptic "exterior," but lurking within are more thoughts.



The Whisperer, the tool Mr. Curtain uses to deceive the world and halt critical thought, is a machine that seeks truth. It has a neutral voice, which mirrors the way that truth is neither positive nor negative. It sees past Reynie's attempt to lie to his subconscious. Though the Whisperer seeks truth in the minds of its users, it produces falsehoods. The Whisperer detects that Reynie fears being alone, so it reassures him that he is not alone, generating a false sensation of pleasure. The Whisperer is strong enough to undermine Reynie's commitment to Mr. Benedict and his mission, even though Reynie knows the Whisperer to be a tool in an evil scheme.



Mr. Curtain unwittingly acknowledges his own hypocrisy. He wants to know everyone's secrets so that he may control them, but he regularly employs deception and secrecy himself. Reynie, meanwhile, proves to be exceptional in a new way, as he withstands the Whisperer for two hours. The Whisperer has a profound effect on him. Though the pleasure it induces is false, he wants to return to it.



Like the Executives, the Whisperer refuses to acknowledge the name Sticky has chosen for himself. Its conception of truth is oversimplified. Sticky reveals that his greatest fear is "not being wanted," which shows the impact his family's rejection has had on him. This fear informs most of Sticky's insecurities and anxieties, and it explains why he can usually be convinced to face danger simply by being asked.



CHAPTER 27

At lunch the next day, Reynie and Sticky tell Kate and Constance about the Whisperer. They reveal that Mr. Curtain is considering training Reynie and Sticky as Executives after the Improvement, and that they would get to use the Whisperer once a week for their service. Constance is doubtful that the Whisperer can be worth it, and both boys are reluctant to admit how happy the machine makes them. A new round of hidden messages starts up, which causes all four children discomfort, especially Constance.

A Messenger comes to the table and invites Reynie and Sticky to eat with the other Messengers, but the boys pretend to have a contagious stomach virus to get out of it. Kate compliments Sticky on his boldness, but Sticky is ashamed; he actually wanted to join the Messengers. He guiltily wonders if his convictions are so weak that a simple invitation can sway him. Reynie is concerned that the Whisperer saps too much of his energy to be a Messenger *and* an effective spy. Constance irritably reveals that the voice she is hearing in the hidden broadcast is Reynie's. Sticky realizes that Mr. Curtain can record thoughts, and Reynie notes that Mr. Curtain's journal entries suggest this is a new development. This explains why Mr. Curtain won't need Messengers after the Improvement: he can have all his messages pre-recorded.

Reynie suspects that once Mr. Curtain has all his messages recorded, he will boost them to full-strength. Reynie doesn't mention this, though, because he doesn't want to frighten Constance. She has shut her eyes tightly in anxiety, which gives Reynie an idea. He recalls Mr. Benedict's message that they should explore with "open eyes *now*," implying that their eyes were previously closed—or, Reynie realizes, blindfolded. The children use Sticky's memory and Kate's gift for estimating distances to track the path the boys took to the Whispering Gallery. It appears to lead only to grass, but Reynie suggests that the phrase "exit to enter" in Mr. Benedict's message means that they must exit the buildings to enter a place they can't access from indoors.

Reynie concludes that the traps near the island's boulders are intended to keep students away from the boulders themselves, which hide secret entrances. Sticky asks how Mr. Benedict would know this, and Reynie points out that Mr. Benedict must have used his telescope to see Jillson bringing Sticky into a secret passage to the Waiting Room. Sticky tears up at the thought that he didn't go to the Waiting Room for nothing.

The Whisperer is causing divisions in the group. Reynie and Sticky are embarrassed that the Whisperer has enticed them so strongly, which leads them to keep their feelings secret from Kate and Constance. Mr. Curtain has not identified the Mysterious Benedict Society as spies, but he is unknowingly sabotaging their ability to work as a team.



Sticky's fear of being unwanted also manifests as an eagerness to be wanted by others. This tempts him to accept the Messengers' invitation, since their offer indicates that they want to spend time with him. Realizing this about himself only worsens Sticky's already low self-confidence. Reynie is struggling as well. He fears that he will not be able to balance his duties without burning out. The possibility of failure is very real, especially as Reynie takes on more and more responsibility, and this highlights the negative effect the mission has on the children.



Once again, the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society use their unique skills to help the mission. Without Sticky's memory, Kate's sense of distance, and Reynie's knack for puzzles, they could not succeed, which exemplifies why Mr. Benedict insisted that each of them is crucial for the success of the mission. The wording of "exits" and "entrances" in Mr. Benedict's clue is also the second time these words have been significant—the children last heard the words used when Milligan told them that "for every exit, there is also an entrance." This recurring language highlights the novel's motif of doubleness. It also speaks to the importance of creative problem solving, as turning an entrance into an exit (or vice versa) mirrors how the children use things for tasks besides their intended purpose.



Sticky has mostly recovered from his time in the Waiting Room, but his experience there was clearly traumatic, and it continues to affect him greatly. When he learns that being brought to the Waiting Room gave valuable information to Mr. Benedict, he is comforted to know that his suffering at least helped the mission. Once again, a child has endured horrors for the sake of defeating Mr. Curtain.



Later that day, the children hunt for a secret passage near the boulders behind the dormitories. They find an entrance, but they can't determine how to open it. They try a variety of methods, until a frustrated Reynie kicks a boulder and the stone door swings open. Reynie realizes the doors must be built to accommodate Mr. Curtain's love of speed and his habit of ramming his wheelchair into doors. The children enter, and they make their way through the secret passage until they come to a metal door. Sticky resolves to confront it more bravely than he confronted the Waiting Room, so he gives the door a kick. The door doesn't open, however, and Sticky only injures his foot. Reynie points out that this door is locked with a numeric keypad.

On the locked door is a note that reads "LOSE the new code? Turn OVER for a new code!" The children turn over a note, but find only a different note from Jackson, scolding S.Q. for leaving this clue. After some deliberation, it strikes Reynie that "LOSE" turned "over" (that is, upside-down) becomes the numbers 3507. Now that they have the code, the children worry about what might be on the other side of the door. They wonder if it might be a trap. They have no chance to investigate further, however, because Kate hears Mr. Curtain's wheelchair approaching. The children hurry through the door.

CHAPTER 28

The children find themselves in a warm room that smells of ink. The room is in the process of being disassembled, but it is clearly busy very often. Inside are two tables of printed material, a printer printing page after page, and a television. The members of the Mysterious Benedict Society cram themselves into a crate to hide as Mr. Curtain comes in. Within the crate, Sticky desperately gestures to Kate, and she sees that his **spectacles** fell on the floor. She manages to reach her **bucket** and withdraw her horseshoe magnet. She pulls the spectacles over with the magnet and brings them into the crate just as Mr. Curtain looks over.

Sticky has demonstrated great courage in continuing to help the Mysterious Benedict Society after enduring the Waiting Room, but he still considers himself a coward. He tries to move past his cowardice and push onward bravely, but he just hurts his foot and embarrasses himself. Instead of proving his bravery, this gesture has only brought Sticky more shame. To truly realize his potential, he must confront his shame and self-loathing head on, just as he faced his fear of the Waiting Room.



Jackson does not appreciate S.Q.'s wordplay and scolds him for leaving a clue to the code. The contentious relationship between these two Executives suggests that Mr. Curtain's henchmen do not function with the same cohesion as the Mysterious Benedict Society. While Mr. Benedict, his associates, and the children value ingenuity and teamwork, Mr. Curtain only cares about control, so his Executives simply carry out his exact orders without bonding with each other.



Kate's bucket proves its usefulness once again as she uses the tools within to retrieve Sticky's spectacles. Sticky looks to Kate for help, and she happily provides it. However, the fact that Sticky is comfortable looking to Kate for help does not convince her that she can do the same, and she continues to insist on appearing invulnerable throughout the story. Sticky's spectacles also represent his anxiety. He drops them when the Society is embarking on one of their most dangerous investigations yet, which underscores that Sticky is facing his fears and proving his bravery without knowing it.



A few minutes later, Mr. Curtain leaves the room, and the children get out of the crate. Sticky looks through the stacks of papers and discovers they are government press releases dated for the future. They are reports that Mr. Curtain plans to send to newspapers once he names himself Minister and Secretary of all The Earth's Regions (M.A.S.T.E.R) and ends **the Emergency**. Reynie realizes Mr. Curtain created the Emergency as the first step in this plan. Mr. Curtain believes that fear is the most important aspect of humanity, so he has created a fear the whole world shares. The next step is to soothe that fear with messages, until everyone loves the Whisperer as much as the Messengers. This will then make everyone love Mr. Curtain.

They find another press release claiming Mr. Curtain is the best man to handle the "amnesia epidemic." Further research indicates this is another problem Mr. Curtain plans to create by brainsweeping those who might oppose him. The entire Institute has been an experiment to make sure his plan can work. Once the Improvement is enacted, the Institute will become the Amnesia Sanctuary, where Mr. Curtain can isolate any possible resistance.

CHAPTER 29

Kate notices a door behind the tables, and what she sees horrifies her. She fetches the others, and they find an underground warehouse with a sign designating it "Memory Terminal." It is full of brainsweeping devices. The children leave the secret passages and return to the dorms, where Sticky relays their findings to Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict asks them to wait for a reply. As they wait, Reynie hopes that Mr. Benedict finds a way to save everyone without demanding anything more from Reynie, who feels too exhausted to continue. He is worried that the Whisperer has revealed who is truly is.

When Mr. Benedict at last responds, the message is simply, "Know thine enemy." The children don't understand, so Sticky asks Mr. Benedict to clarify which enemy. There is no response, so Sticky tries again. Reynie stops him from trying a third time, pointing out that there must be a reason for Mr. Benedict's silence. Kate checks the island with her spyglass and is alarmed to see a Recruiter standing by the bridge. He seems to be looking up at their window. Reynie finds it odd that a Recruiter is standing in the shadows alone in a position where only they could see him. Kate looks through the spyglass again and realizes the man is Milligan in disguise. They realize this must be the "enemy" they should know. Sticky signals to the mainland. The response urges them to hurry to Milligan, repeating "hurry" even as the children rush outside.

Mr. Curtain's plan is finally laid bare. He has manufactured The Emergency in a grand-scale deception that will enable him to seize political power. He has created a problem that he can then solve, which will earn the public's trust. His plan involves undermining people's free will and independent thought twofold: first to generate the fear that characterizes the Emergency, and then to soothe that fear and secure the world's loyalty. He plans to use his two primary tools, deception and fear, to seize absolute worldwide control.



Not only does the Institute hide all of Mr. Curtain's deception, but the Institute itself is a deception. Mr. Curtain is so obsessed with achieving uncontested control that he plans to eliminate any possible resistance. If he succeeds, every person on Earth will either be mind-controlled or brainswept by Mr. Curtain.



Reynie craves guidance from an adult. The pressure of saving the world weighs heavily on him, especially with the pressure of leading his friends and deceiving Mr. Curtain. He struggles to resist the pull of the Whisperer's superficial pleasure, and his self-doubt resurfaces as he fears that the Whisperer has revealed him to be weak.



Although Reynie is grappling with insecurities, he retains his insight. He concludes that Mr. Benedict must be staying silent for a reason, and when the children see the Recruiter, Reynie notices that the man's position is unusual. This helps them realize that the Recruiter is in fact Milligan in one of his disguises. Milligan's reappearance in yet another disguise is a reminder that the Mysterious Benedict Society must rely on deception, no matter how much they value truth.



The children quickly sneak through the nights and meet Milligan. He looks and even smells like a Recruiter, but his lack of a smile gives him away. He informs the children their mission is completed, and he has come to take them off the island. Reynie is relieved, but Kate resists. She asks if Mr. Benedict has formed a plan, and Mulligan reluctantly says that he has not, but he wants the children off the island for their safety. Kate points out that Constance is in danger no matter where they go, since they don't know what will happen to her once Mr. Curtain boosts the power all the way. Reynie realizes that they can't leave. He is ashamed that it took Kate to show him, but he knows now that they have to stay for Constance and all the people Mr. Curtain has brainswept.

Reynie thanks Milligan, but he says that he plans to stay. Kate hugs Reynie and says the same. Sticky looks longingly toward the mainland, but he agrees that they are the only chance Mr. Benedict's plan has. Milligan tells them that Mr. Benedict prepared a message in case the children insisted on staying. He reminds them that each of them is essential to their success, and that they must rely on one another. They must also rely on Milligan, who will be remaining on the island.

CHAPTER 30

Reynie has a nightmare about leaving his friends behind to join Mr. Curtain. He spends the day worrying about the evening's Mysterious Benedict Society meeting, since he knows his friends will look to him for a plan, and he doesn't have one. When the meeting comes, Kate looks to him for a plan. Reynie admits he doesn't have a plan beyond disabling the Whisperer, but Kate happily seizes that idea as a good plan itself. She points out that despite Mr. Curtain's security, the Whisperer's computers must have an access point. Kate offers to look for this herself, and Sticky has to restrain himself from lying to protect the Whisperer. He is ashamed of himself, and he manages to give her directions to the computers.

Reynie doesn't want to let Kate go alone, but she insists, and he doesn't argue. He is "tired, very tired, of always trying to do the right thing." Constance says that if Kate gets caught, they will find a way to save her, and the others are moved by this. The girls head out of the dorm, leaving Sticky and Reynie in silence as they both try to hide how much the Whisperer is affecting them. Reynie feels like a traitor for not insisting he accompany Kate. He writes a mental letter to Miss Perumal expressing his fear that he is too weak to resist the Whisperer's false happiness. He worries that he is not who he thought himself to be; he'd never expected doing the right thing to be difficult. It is especially hard as the group's leader. The others look to him for help, but who can Reynie look to?

Kate is often annoyed at Constance, but she proves to truly care about the little girl when she insists on fighting Mr. Curtain to help protect her. This is also an example of Kate refusing to accept help--Milligan has offered her a way out, but she will not give up on the mission. Reynie continues to struggle against his exhaustion and the lure of the Whisperer, and his shame only grows when he realizes his desire to abandon the Institute is cowardly. Mr. Benedict and the other adults want to bring the children home, but the children have matured too much to unquestioningly follow the orders of adults. They must finish the mission they started.



Mr. Benedict hoped the children would still be youthful enough to rely on adults, but since they have grown up past that point, he requests that they rely on each other. By rejecting the offer to leave, the children have already proven their commitment to each other and to Mr. Benedict, but they will need to depend on each other even more as the story progresses.



Reynie continues to feel the burden of leadership, to the point that he dreads seeing his friends because he knows they will seek his guidance. His friends do expect leadership from Reynie, but Kate's response makes clear that the group's expectations of Reynie are not as high as his own. Like Reynie, Sticky struggles to resist the Whisperer, and he shares Reynie's shame. Neither boy is willing to voice this shame, leaving them alone in their suffering. The boys are distracted enough to let Kate indulge in her desire to prove her independence.



As the scope of Mr. Curtain's plan comes to light and the fight against him seems impossible, Reynie starts to lose hope. He loses hope in both the mission and himself, and this lack of hope leads him to give in to his exhaustion. He recognizes that the happiness offered by the Whisperer is false, and his craving for it forces him to doubt his morality. Sticky and Reynie both hide their difficulties with the Whisperer, leaving each boy alone to contend with his struggle. Reynie has been lonely all his life, and falling back into this state only pushes him further into despair and hopelessness.



Reynie hopes that Mr. Benedict will provide the encouragement he needs. He sends a Morse message to the mainland asking for advice on resisting the Whisperer. Minutes pass with no response, and Reynie almost gives up hope before Mr. Benedict signals back, "Remember the white knight." Reynie recalls his conversation with Mr. Benedict about the chess player who makes a bad move because he doubts himself. Reynie calms down, returns to bed, and imagines throwing away the note he's written Miss Perumal. He will write a different one.

Reynie is a capable boy and the leader of his friends, but when his hopelessness overcomes him, he needs the guidance of an adult. He turns to Mr. Benedict, and despite the distance between them, Mr. Benedict helps Reynie as best he can. His reminder about the white knight urges Reynie to have faith in himself. Reynie takes this message to heart, and his decision to start new mental letter to Miss Perumal indicates that he intends to look at the situation differently.



CHAPTER 31

As Reynie is gaining hope, Kate is losing it. She has broken into the Institute Control Building, but the air vents are too small, forcing her to navigate in the open. The corridor is lined with doors, and she is debating which to open when Jackson comes through one. Kate hides and distracts Jackson by launching a marble down the hallway with her slingshot. She goes through the door Jackson left and finds an elevator. Using it would be too conspicuous, so she climbs onto her **bucket**, unscrews the ceiling maintenance panel, and climbs up into the elevator shaft.

Kate gets her wish: she is able to undertake a mission alone, which should, in her mind, prove that she is capable on her own. However, her exploration is not as fruitful as she hoped. She navigates the Control Building with the help of her bucket and its contents. Kate often uses her bucket to enable her reluctance to ask for help from others. Without her friends to support her, the bucket is the only tool she has as she investigates the Control Building.



Kate makes the exhausting climb up the elevator cable, but the foyer outside the computer room is too heavily guarded. She is disappointed. She had hoped to destroy all the computers herself, proving that she needs no one's help. Hiding in a vent, Kate overhears S.Q. Pedalian bringing Martina Crowe to a tutorial meeting with Mr. Curtain. She follows them to eavesdrop on this conversation. In the meeting, Mr. Curtain explains to Martina (and to S.Q., who has forgotten the information) that after the Improvement, brainsweeping will make unhappy people happier and more manageable. He reveals that brainsweeping cannot actually erase memories; instead, it hides memories from their owners. He also explains that the Whisperer works by denying fears, which is why the fears come back later. The only way to truly banish a fear is by confronting it, but no one wants to do that.

Kate believes in the fight against Mr. Curtain, but her primary objective in this investigation is to prove her self-reliance once and for all. Inside the vents, she learns that the Whisperer's effects are entirely superficial. It cannot erase memories or fears; it only buries them beneath the surface. This highlights that no matter how much villains like Mr. Curtain bury the truth, it still remains.



S.Q. doesn't grasp Mr. Curtain's plan, but he is excited that the whole world will be happy. Mr. Curtain assures him that the Improvement will take place the day after tomorrow. He stations Martina on brainsweeping duty, but S.Q. interrupts to ask if they should be asking people's permission to meddle with their minds. He has asked this question before but forgotten it, so Mr. Curtain answers with amusement that the happiness is ineffective if they ask for permission. Mr. Curtain is briefly distracted by a sound in the drain, but S.Q. suggests it might be a mouse. The drain dates back to the Institute's days as a mining colony, and it connects to a culvert. Mr. Curtain muses that the culvert is human-sized. He suspects that the "mouse" might be an eavesdropper and gives S.Q. a note commanding him to investigate the culvert opening.

From her hiding place in the drain, Kate hears Mr. Curtain send S.Q. away. She suspects a trap and hurries out of the culvert. As she emerges, S.Q. and Jackson come racing toward the culvert. Kate has nowhere to hide but the freezing water surrounding the island. She is an excellent swimmer, so she swims down the coastline. Her path is blocked by sharp rocks, and she briefly mistakes them for shark fins. Once she sees them clearly, she navigates around them.

CHAPTER 32

Kate comes to Reynie and Sticky's room. She is cold, in pain, and disappointed in her mission, but she is grateful to have survived her swim. The boys help her warm up, and she tells them about her adventure. She has to admit that there is no way for the children to access the computer room, and to her surprise, Reynie congratulates her on this discovery. He elaborates that since they know they can't reach that room, they won't waste time trying. Kate shrugs, but she is secretly pleased to have been useful. The boys tell her they will signal Mr. Benedict, and they send her off to bed.

The next morning at breakfast, Reynie loudly spills juice on Kate's shoes. He whispers that the Executives know someone swam away from the culvert, and Kate's soggy shoes would have betrayed her as the spy. The spilled juice gives her a good reason to have wet shoes. Reynie and Sticky explain that S.Q. accidentally destroyed all of Kate's footprints on the shore. Jackson and Martina approach their table. Jackson holds up the marble Kate threw last night, and he demands to search Kate's **bucket** for more marbles. Kate obliges, but her marbles and slingshot are not in the bucket. Once the Executives leave, she tells her friends that she might not know as many facts as Sticky, but she isn't stupid. She assumed Jackson would find her marble, so she got rid of her other ones.

Mr. Curtain's conversation with S.Q. and Martina provides some insight into the functions of Mr. Curtain's organization. Mr. Curtain can easily justify his actions, but only S.Q. ever thinks to question them. Mr. Curtain quickly puts S.Q.'s moral qualms to rest, as S.Q.'s loyalty to Mr. Curtain overpowers his conscience. Mr. Curtain has been outsmarted by the Mysterious Benedict Society in the past, but he is still a highly intelligent man, and he is rightly suspicious when he hears a noise in the culvert.



Kate narrowly escapes the Control Building on her own, but the experience is harrowing and does not serve as conclusive proof of her independent capabilities. As she swims, the rocks on the coast look like shark fins, but when Kate comes closer, she sees that they are merely rocks. This is another instance of something's outward appearance belying its true nature.



Reynie demonstrates his leadership skills by reassuring Kate that her mission was helpful. This is important to Kate, who loathes the idea of appearing weak or incompetent. Though she dislikes asking for help, Reynie and Sticky help her without request when she returns. They warm her up, make her feel better about her mission, and send her to bed. Their willingness to take care of Kate--and Kate's grudging willingness to be taken care of--speaks to the bond between the children.



Kate's friends help her escape suspicion by thinking to solve a problem that hadn't occurred to her, which challenges her belief that she can solve any problem alone. At the same time, Kate willingly removes something from her bucket. This indicates that she is slowly becoming less reliant on her own tools with her friends at her side.



Jackson and Martina return to the table. Jackson spit out a piece of licorice when he found the marble last night, and the Executives want to check Kate's shoes to see if the licorice is stuck there. She scrapes the licorice off her shoe and passes it to Reynie, who passes it to Sticky, who passes it to Constance. Constance doesn't understand what it is, so she holds it up to look at it. When the realization hits her, she panics and swallows the licorice.

Later, the children try to make a plan. Reynie tries to say that he can't face the Whisperer, but he is too ashamed. His friends are troubled, too. Sticky feels the same as Reynie, and Kate still wishes she managed to sabotage the computers. Constance fears what will happen to her once Mr. Curtain boosts his messages to full power. As Reynie thinks that he can't face the Whisperer, he amends the thought: he can't face the Whisperer *alone*. He proposes the children follow Mr. Benedict's advice about relying on each other and face Mr. Curtain and the Whisperer together. Kate suggests she and Constance break in during one of Reynie and Sticky's sessions, but the boys are not scheduled to use the Whisperer until after the Improvement. Drawing inspiration from Constance, who has turned green after eating the old licorice, Sticky points out that they could make the other Messengers ill and take their turns.

CHAPTER 33

The children know their plan is likely to fail, but they also know they must act now or never. They grind up an emetic root (which will make people vomit) to add to the suppers that will be served to the students. Sticky comments that he feels a little guilty about making everyone sick. Kate accuses him of sympathizing with the enemy, but Reynie and Sticky remind her that not only Messengers will get sick. She scoffs, "Who needs parents when I have you two?" Nevertheless, she promises not to put too much emetic in the food.

Constance points out that the plan is dangerously incomplete. The Messengers will all get sick and be unable to perform their duties, so Sticky and Reynie can take their turns early. Once the boys are inside the Whispering Gallery, however, one of them will have to push the button to open the door, which is on Mr. Curtain's wheelchair. They have no plan for that, nor for how Kate and Constance will get inside, nor for how they will destroy the Whisperer, nor for how they will escape. The children acknowledge that the plan seems impossible, but they intend to go through with it anyway.

The children's connection is once again highlighted by their smooth, unplanned physical interactions. They pass the licorice to each other without discussion. Constance, the least amenable to teamwork, briefly disrupts the procession, but once she grasps the situation, she instinctively puts aside her own health and swallows the old candy.



The children are all suffering internally, but they are too proud to share their concerns. Reynie finally realizes that this solitary pain is unproductive. He might not be capable of facing the Whisperer, but the Mysterious Benedict Society is. With renewed hope, Reynie rallies the others and helps them feel like a team again.



Sticky felt guilty framing Martina for his cheating, and he feels that same guilt inflicting food poisoning on the students. He may lack Kate's brash bravery and Reynie's heightened emotional intelligence, but he is compassionate and empathetic. Kate's remark that Sticky and Reynie are acting like her parents also underscores that the Mysterious Benedict Society have become a makeshift family.



Constance's trademark skepticism highlights the shortcomings of the children's plan. Despite all the risks, they have overcome their hopelessness and exhaustion, and they are ready to act. After a whole book of strategizing and planning, the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society recognize that the final moments in the fight against Mr. Curtain will depend on their ability to improvise as a team.



Reynie goes to leave a note for Milligan on the shore. He also brings a sketch of the island, and if he is caught, he will claim that he came to the shore to draw. He had initially drawn his own rendering of the island, but Kate produced a much better version in only a few minutes. Reynie carefully makes his way to the shore and leaves the note, but as he is walking away, he realizes he accidentally left the sketch. He has to hurry, so he rushes back to swap the two papers, and in his rush he is less careful about hiding the note. Once Reynie is gone, S.Q. comes out to the shore. He is ashamed of damaging the spy's footprints, so he has come back outside to search for more clues.

At dinner, the children avoid eating the tampered food. Reynie watches the other students eat, and he is hopeful about their plan. His optimism is quashed, though, when Jillson approaches their table. She explains that S.Q. found a note, but it was destroyed before he could read it. She goes on that the good news is that the spy has been caught; he ran at S.Q., snatched the paper, and ate it. The spy, who the children know is Milligan, was caught, and he has confessed to being a lone operator. A group of Executives and Recruiters march Milligan through the cafeteria to the Waiting Room, and Reynie realizes that Milligan allowed himself to be caught to take suspicion of the children. All four children remember that Milligan promised he would die before he let harm come to them.

CHAPTER 34

The emetic has successfully caused most of the Institutes' students to become sick, but the children are too worried about Milligan to celebrate. They signal to Mr. Benedict that Milligan has been captured, and the response is simply, "Laughter is the best medicine." Constance, frustrated at the coded messages, starts to throw a tantrum, but Reynie sharply tells her to shut up. The children try to solve the riddle, but Reynie is distracted and Sticky and Kate do not share his natural gift for puzzles. They eventually give up for the night after Constance becomes irritable, but Reynie stays awake for most of the night trying in vain to decode the message.

The next morning, Reynie has an idea about what Mr. Benedict means. Before he can share his thought with Sticky, S.Q. Pedalian summons the boys to Whisperer duty. Reynie writes a note to himself on his hand, and they go to the Whispering Gallery. Reynie instructs Sticky to resist the Whisperer in order to stretch out the session long enough for Reynie to signal Constance and Kate. Sticky is horrified. He argues that Mr. Curtain will notice his resistance and brainsweep him. Reynie insists this is their only chance, and Sticky becomes angry that Reynie is willing to sacrifice Sticky's safety. Reynie begs Sticky to trust him.

The fact that Kate sketched a drawing for Reynie shows that even in the final stretch of their mission, the children must depend on each other's various skills to make up for their own deficiencies. Reynie's keen observation fails him when he mixes up the papers, and his hurry to remedy the mistake leads him to make an even graver one.



With Milligan captured, the Mysterious Benedict Society must face the climax of their mission without adult supervision or guidance. Milligan has proven that he cares for the children enough to sacrifice himself, but his sacrifice means he cannot help the children any further.



The children's renewed hope has subsided following Milligan's capture. They look to Mr. Benedict for guidance, but he can only respond in code. The reality of being alone on a dangerous island settles over the children, and the ensuing fear makes them testy and distracted. Constance, the youngest of the group, starts to react like a small child, but Reynie stops her with uncharacteristic anger. His frustration with the circumstances prevents him from taking his usual leadership role, and the group fails to function.



The strength of the Mysterious Benedict Society's bond is tested as Reynie asks Sticky to put his own safety at risk. Reynie's plan requires Sticky to trust him with his life. It also demands that Sticky find the courage buried deep within that Sticky doesn't believe he possesses.



The boys go into the Whispering Gallery, passing Martina Crowe on their way in. Reynie is drawn to the Whisperer, but he resists. Mr. Curtain greets them and reveals that Reynie and Sticky will be the last Messengers, as he plans to complete his project at this very moment. Sticky asks if Mr. Curtain still plans to close the Institute, and Mr. Curtain laughs that he does, but he will keep exceptional students like Sticky and Reynie to be Executives. Sticky asks if this means Mr. Curtain really wants him, and Mr. Curtain exclaims that he does. Reynie watches Sticky hopelessly. He doubts that Sticky will be able to resist Mr. Curtain's invitation and the pull of the Whisperer.

Sticky is conflicted. He is ashamed of his tendency to freeze up or run away from his problems, and he knows that he rarely lives up to expectations. This is why he insists on being referred to by his nickname; his real name, George Washington, invites too many expectations. Yet his friends in the Mysterious Benedict Society actually care about him, "quite above and beyond what was expected of him." This friendship makes Sticky realize there is bravery within him. He steps in front of Reynie and asks to go first with the Whisperer.

Sticky sits at the Whisperer, and when it asks for his name, he answers "Sticky Washington." It prompts him for his real name, and again he answers with his nickname. Reynie wonders how long Sticky can hold on. Mr. Curtain, who is also attached to the Whisperer, closes his eyes in concentration. Reynie uses this opportunity to rush to the window. Mr. Benedict and his associates promised to watch the island constantly through the telescope, so Reynie waves out the window and presses his hand against the glass. The message he wrote on his palm tells Mr. Benedict that they need Kate and Constance.

CHAPTER 35

Kate sleeps poorly that night as she thinks about Milligan's sacrifice. She is further irritated by a honking from the mainland, until she realizes the noise is Morse code. She gets up and tries to decipher it. Kate is not as good at Morse code as her friends, so it takes a few tries, but she figures out that Reynie and Sticky are calling her and Constance to the flag tower. Kate hurries to get dressed, but Constance refuses to get out of bed. Kate considers leaving Constance behind, but Mr. Benedict's plan called for all four of them. Kate refuses to be the one to ruin the plan, so she shakes Constance awake and carries her outside.

Mr. Curtain's offer to employ Sticky as an Executive appeals to Sticky's greatest wish: to be wanted. Reynie knows this, and it weakens his hope that Sticky will come through. Reynie himself is tempted by the Whisperer, so he knows how much willpower Sticky would need to resist.



Sticky believes himself to be a coward, and he hates his cowardice. But since he also hates expectations, he has indulged his anxiety and avoided situations where people expect things of him. His friends do not see him as a tool to carry out their expectations, and realizing this changes how Sticky sees himself. He discovers that he is not a coward--he is capable of great bravery, and this bravery drives him to trust in Reynie's plan.



Sticky resists the Whisperer by asserting himself for the first time. He has chosen his name, and he refuses to allow the Whisperer to tell him who he is. As Sticky proves his trust in Reynie, Reynie acts on faith in Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict promised that they would be watching, so Reynie trusts them and sends them a message.



Kate is confronted with a situation in which she could prove her independent capabilities once and for all. Instead, however, she recalls Mr. Benedict's insistence on teamwork. She puts aside pride and convenience and brings Constance with her.



Kate reaches the flag tower, which houses the Whispering Gallery. She enters the secret passage, only to find her path blocked by Martina Crowe. Kate turns and runs away, leaving Martina confused. Jillson joins Martina, and both Executives are suspicious. Martina identifies the distant beeping as Morse code, and the two hurry to Mr. Curtain's office to decode it with a code book. They realize Kate and Constance are spies.

Kate and Constance steal a ladder to climb up the flag tower. The Morse code message stops, but the Executives are already on alert, and two of them emerge to watch Kate and Constance run. Constance is getting tired, so Kate straps the ladder to her belt, puts Constance on her back, and runs faster than she thought possible to the Institute Control Building. They reach the building, but the two Executives (one of whom is S.Q.) catch up to them, and Martina, Jackson, and Jillson run out of the building toward them. Kate keeps running up a hill, but once she reaches a stone wall, Kate drops her **bucket**. Kate can't stand to lose the bucket, so she runs back for it, giving up her head start.

Once she retrieves her **bucket**, Kate starts to climb the ladder with Constance still on her back. They climb over the wall, but Jackson is almost at the top of the ladder. Kate uses her bucket to scoop up enough water to weigh it down, and then she drops the bucket onto Jackson. She lassos the flagpole and starts climbing up with Constance. Martina is right behind them, and when Kate reaches the top of the pole, she sees Martina moving too fast for Kate to pull Constance out of reach. Kate understands that the plan requires all four of the team, and Constance can't fight off the Executives. Kate tells herself that she can handle them. Part of her believes this, since "Kate's sense of invincibility was the main thing that had sustained her all her young life alone." But part of her does not.

Kate grabs hold of the rope and jumps off the flagpole, positioning the rope like a pulley. Constance is lighter than Kate, so she shoots up into the air as Kate descends. Kate tries to smile at Constance and offers reassurance. Then Kate falls into the arms of the Executives.

Jillson and Martina prove that they are more than simple-minded lackeys of Mr. Curtain. They lack the widespread knowledge of a child like Sticky, as they need to find a book of Morse code to decipher the message, but they are intelligent enough to recognize the beeping as Morse code and to decode it with a book. Mr. Curtain believes children possess inferior intellects, but his plans depend on capable young people in order to succeed.



Kate has made progress in recognizing her stubborn need to prove her self-reliance as a flaw. She has not entirely overcome this need, though, and she jeopardizes the safety of herself and Constance to retrieve her bucket. Kate's bucket represents her unyielding independence, and she is too attached to that ideal to let the bucket fall.



Kate retrieves her bucket, but almost immediately she has to give it up again. Her desire to prove herself invulnerable is not sustainable, and she must abandon it just as she must abandon her bucket. This leads to Kate's realization that she needs to sacrifice herself for Constance. Just as she comes to understand the importance of the team, she must leave her friends behind. Her "sense of invincibility" is a coping mechanism that she developed to endure "her young life alone." Now that she is no longer alone, she sees that she is not invincible--but that realization comes too late.



Kate falls just like her bucket did, highlighting how much of Kate's character is dependent on the self-reliance she constructed around her bucket. Even as she descends into danger, she tries to keep Constance from worrying. Kate often projects an air of cheerfulness to avoid seeming weak, but now she does it to help her friend.



CHAPTER 36

After a great deal of effort, Sticky stops resisting the Whisperer. Mr. Curtain is frustrated, and he begins to suspect that Sticky might be untrustworthy, but he calms down once Sticky's mind becomes receptive. The session is interrupted when S.Q. calls Mr. Curtain through the intercom to alert him that two students are breaking into the flag tower. Mr. Curtain dismisses this, since he doesn't believe children can pose a real threat.

Mr. Curtain scolds Sticky for his performance in the Whisperer, and then he turns to Reynie for his turn. Mr. Curtain is worn out from the difficult Whispering session, so he takes a break before Reynie's turn. As Reynie waits, he is tempted to join Mr. Curtain. With Mr. Curtain, Reynie could be part of something. He wonders how different Mr. Curtain is from Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict tricked Reynie into joining him with the promise of "special opportunities" and encouraged Reynie to cheat on quizzes. The only difference between the two is that Mr. Benedict "can offer [him] only suffering now," while Mr. Curtain "offers [him] a way to belong—a way to relieve the loneliness." Reynie is unsure. He wants to make Miss Perumal proud, but he feels trapped.

Reynie makes his way toward the Whisperer. He wants to give in. He thinks of Constance, wondering what will happen to her when Mr. Curtain boosts the power. He looks at Sticky, who resisted the Whisperer despite his fear because Reynie asked him to. He remembers all the risks Kate has taken. Reynie sits in the Whisperer and remembers the last question of Mr. Benedict's first quest, which asked if he is brave. Reynie decides that he isn't brave. He had only hoped he was.

The Whisperer welcomes Reynie, and its greeting makes him feel less alone. The Whisperer asks what Reynie fears most, and he realizes that he could never be more alone than if he betrays his friends. The Whisperer reassures him that he is brave enough not to betray his friends, and he almost laughs; the machine has given him the encouragement to fight it. Reynie feels confident. The Whisperer denies fears to prevent people from needing to face them, but Reynie has confronted his fear. He no longer needs the Whisperer.

Even when children are actively sabotaging his plans, Mr. Curtain is too confident that children are inferior to believe S.Q.'s warning. His suspicion when Kate hid in the culvert and his recent distrust of Sticky's resistance indicates that Mr. Curtain is smart enough to suspect disloyalty in an abstract sense. However, his arrogance prevents him from anticipating the Mysterious Benedict Society's plans.



Reynie's pervasive loneliness affects him more than he lets on, so much so that the opportunity to be a part of Mr. Curtain's organization strikes him as tempting. He rationalizes this temptation by pointing out the similarities between Mr. Benedict and Mr. Curtain, and the abundance of examples highlights the story's moral ambiguity: neither man is entirely good or entirely evil. Reynie is fundamentally practical, and he recognizes that doing the right thing is riskier and less personally rewarding than acting selfishly; in fact, following Mr. Benedict's plan has promised Reynie "only suffering." The Whisperer observed that Reynie's greatest fear is loneliness, and joining Mr. Curtain offers him the opportunity to "relieve" this loneliness.



As Reynie approaches the Whisperer, the main object standing in his way is not the broader moral implication of his actions, but the thought of his friends. Despite his love for them, he ultimately gives in to his self-doubt.



Mr. Curtain's promise to end Reynie's loneliness is useless, because the Mysterious Benedict Society has done that already. Reynie has faced his fear of loneliness head on and realized he has the strength to push through it. Finding this courage within himself inspires a wave of confidence more authentic than anything the Whisperer's superficial pleasure could replicate. Reynie is not alone, and as he comes to this understanding, he is filled with hope and courage.



The Whisperer asks Reynie to begin, but he resists, thinking of all of his friend's idiosyncrasies. He insists that he needs to polish his **spectacles** and fetch his **bucket**, and he recites one of Constance's rude rhymes. Constance herself appears in the window, demanding to be let inside. Mr. Curtain is frustrated, but Reynie points out he will not be able to concentrate with Constance's yelling. Mr. Curtain orders Reynie to open the window, and Reynie does so. Outside, Reynie finds Constance clinging to the flagpole and Kate on the ground fighting Executives. He is filled with pride and hope as he understands that the situation is bad, but the girls have not stopped fighting.

Sticky helps Reynie pull Constance inside. Mr. Curtain remarks that he always knew Constance couldn't be trusted, and that he would have taken care of her long ago if not for Reynie. This makes him realize that Reynie is a double agent. He throws his reflective glasses to the floor, rises from his wheelchair, and charges at the children. Below, Kate manages to fight off the Executives for a while, but eventually they grab her. She stops struggling, ashamed. She convinces herself that she can't do anything by herself, and that she cannot help her friends or herself. Kate sees the irony in her circumstances: "The moment she finally admitted to herself she needed help, there was no help to be found."

The Executives continue to beat Kate until someone approaches from behind. All three attackers fall to the ground, revealing Milligan with his tranquilizer gun. He is covered in slimy black mud from the Waiting Room, and his arm is in a sling, but for the first time, Milligan is smiling. Kate recognizes something familiar in Milligan. With joy in his eyes, he says, "Sorry it took me so long, Katie-Cat," and Kate realizes this is her missing father.

CHAPTER 37

Mr. Curtain looms over the children, outraged that they would betray him after all he has done for them. He laughs at the idea that children would think they could defeat him. He walks back to his chair, but he pauses when he notices Reynie staring at him intently. Reynie remarks, "It isn't laughter." He explains that Mr. Benedict is triggered by laughter, and Mr. Curtain isn't--but Mr. Curtain must be triggered by something. Reynie accuses Mr. Curtain of being afraid of losing control, and being afraid of children, too. This infuriates Mr. Curtain, but as the older man lunges for the children, he falls asleep. Sticky understands what Reynie means: Mr. Curtain's narcolepsy is triggered by anger. He uses a wheelchair and hides his eyes with reflective glasses to hide his condition.

Reynie finds in his friends the courage to resist the Whisperer, so he continues to think of them as the Whisperer tries to make him submit. When he sees the predicament Constance and Kate are in, their perseverance kindles even more hope and love for his friends.



Mr. Curtain's primary tool is deception, so it is hardly a surprise that his very identity is a lie. He has no real need for a wheelchair, and he rises from it easily to attack the children. As Mr. Curtain reveals this deception, Kate recognizes a fundamental truth. She finally comes to terms with the fact that she cannot do everything by herself. Unfortunately, she realizes this while her friends are being threatened by Mr. Curtain, leaving her alone.



As Kate accepts that she needs help, she is saved by the man whose disappearance caused her desire to appear invulnerable. Milligan fulfills his role as protector and finally provides Kate with the parental figure she has always lacked. It is clear that remembering Kate saved Milligan, too. The memory of his daughter has cured the deep sadness that Milligan once carried, and his love for her drove him to escape the Waiting Room and come to her aid.



Mr. Curtain is obsessed with control, and that obsession extends to his own image. His narcolepsy robs him of an element of control over his life, so he hides that element with his wheelchair and sunglasses. Reynie noticing this and working out Mr. Curtain's emotional trigger highlights the importance of Reynie's emotional intelligence and instinct for observation.



Mr. Curtain wakes up, but Constance sends him back to sleep by calling him a fool for trusting Sticky and Reynie. Kate comes in through the window. She is wounded but cheerful, and she tells the others that Milligan is her father. He disappeared years ago because he was captured, and he has left now to get help. Kate ties up Mr. Curtain with her rope, and Reynie approaches the Whisperer. He recalls that Mr. Curtain said the Whisperer is a sensitive machine modeled after his own brain, so Reynie speculates that they might be able to confuse it. He sits in the Whisperer and tries to convince it that he is Mr. Curtain, but the Whisperer knows he is lying and refuses to activate.

The children have subdued Mr. Curtain, but they have yet to dismantle the Whisperer, the key to his plans. Reynie proposes a plan to confuse the Whisperer, but once again, the machine refuses to accept dishonesty from its users.



Mr. Curtain wakes up and laughs that the Whisperer will only turn on if he is attached to it. Meanwhile, S.Q. radios Mr. Curtain, and when Mr. Curtain doesn't respond, S.Q. sends for a ladder to come to Mr. Curtain's aid. Kate warns that Mr. Curtain is trying to trick them, but Reynie insists that he has to try. Sticky points out that if Reynie and Mr. Curtain are in the Whisperer at the same time, Mr. Curtain can brainsweep him. Reynie believes that it is worth trying; he will do his best to resist, and he hopes that he can wear Mr. Curtain out. They sit Mr. Curtain in the Whisperer, but before Reynie can sit down, Mr. Curtain reveals that he has expanded the range of the machine to affect anyone within the room.

S.Q.'s imminent arrival puts a time limit on the Mysterious Benedict Society's attempts to destroy the Whisperer. This makes them desperate enough to bring Mr. Curtain to the Whisperer, a decision that proves unwise when Mr. Curtain reveals the machine's hidden capabilities.



Mr. Curtain starts trying to brainsweep the children. Reynie urges his friends to think of everything they love. He holds onto Miss Perumal, Mr. Benedict, his friends, and his favorite books. Mr. Curtain exclaims that the Whisperer no longer whispers—it shouts. The effect is deafening, and Reynie, Sticky, and Kate are collapsing against the effort of resistance. But when Reynie opens his eyes, he sees Constance has sat in the Whisperer's seat. He and his friends are stunned.

Reynie and the others resist the Whisperer by thinking of what they love, which speaks to the significance of friendship and connection in the novel. People cannot thrive on their own, the narrative suggests—they depend on other people (and, to a lesser extent, meaningful objects) to define and reaffirm their identities. Constance proves her dedication to her friends by taking the most vulnerable position in the room: the seat of the Whisperer itself.



Constance sits in the Whisperer and refuses to give it her name, instead shouting her friends' names and nicknames. The brainsweeping stops, and Reynie realizes Mr. Curtain is focusing all his power on Constance. She is resisting, and her "gift of stubborn independence" is stronger than anyone else's. She screams at the Whisperer that she doesn't care about what it has to offer, and she refuses to yield to its commands. As the minutes pass, though, the effort takes its toll on her, and the other children are unsure of what to do.

Like Reynie, Constance begins resisting the Whisperer by thinking of her friends. Though she doesn't openly express her love for them, this gesture emphasizes how important the other children are to her. Constance's resistance is more aggressive than Reynie's, which forces Mr. Curtain to direct his attention away from the other children to focus on Constance. She has once again proven her worth to them team. Sticky, Kate, and Reynie each have their respective gifts, but they have overlooked Constance's "gift of stubborn independence."



Constance is weakening under the strain of the Whisperer, and though Mr. Curtain is also exhausted, he smugly boasts that he will soon beat the little girl. A boom comes from behind the wall, and Milligan cries out for Kate. He is in a passage with a hidden door, and Reynie realizes that the cowardly Mr. Curtain has hidden a secret emergency exit. Reynie determines which button will reveal the keypad, but when the keypad opens up, the children don't know the code. Mr. Curtain continues to boast that the children will soon be under his control, and Reynie remembers that Mr. Curtain always says, "control is the key." They try "control" as the password, and when that fails, they try the Dutch translation, since Mr. Curtain is proud of his home country. The password works, and Mr. Curtain is so frustrated that he falls asleep.

The door opens, and Milligan runs in to hug Kate. Reynie and Sticky rush to help Constance, but she is strapped into the Whisperer. As the boys try to free her, Rhonda Kazembe and Number Two come in, followed by Mr. Benedict. Mr. Benedict congratulates the children on doing so well. He kneels besides Constance and loudly informs her that she can stop fighting, and Constance groggily asks what took Mr. Benedict so long. She easily slides her tiny wrists out of the metal cuffs and gets out of the chair. The children are stunned to realize Constance could have gotten free at any time. As she stands, she stumbles, and Mr. Benedict steadies her. He looks her in the eyes, tells her he is proud of her, and thanks her for her efforts. Constance beams.

Milligan lays the sleeping Mr. Curtain on the floor as Rhonda ushers the children to the secret exit and Mr. Benedict takes his brother's place in the Whisperer. The others, even Number Two, are astounded to realize Mr. Benedict plans to stay behind and disable the machine, even though Mr. Curtain's agents will certainly kill him. Mr. Benedict asks Milligan to bring Mr. Curtain away from the machine, and he reassures the children and Number Two not to worry about him.

CHAPTER 38

The group makes their way through the passage and out to the shore, where a boat is waiting. Milligan drops Mr. Curtain on the ground to help the children into the boat. Everyone is climbing onto the deck when Sticky cries out, and everyone realizes that Mr. Curtain has freed himself and is running away. Milligan fires his tranquilizer gun, but Mr. Curtain dodges the dart and disappears into the secret passage. Milligan grimly tells the children that his priority is their safety, so he won't chase after Mr. Curtain. As he prepares to shove the boat from shore, he gently whispers to Kate that he will teach her a better knot.

Milligan's desperation to reach Kate shows that despite his absence in her life, he loves her deeply and wants to protect her. The secret door speaks to Mr. Curtain's cowardice, and it also highlights his impulse for deceit, as it is yet another feature of the Institute that is not what it appears to be. Mr. Curtain's fixation on control and deception has become predictable. In fact, Mr. Curtain's obsession with control is so single-minded that Reynie easily guesses the code.



The adults only reach the Mysterious Benedict Society once the danger is passed, which signifies that the mission has been fundamentally the work of the children. Constance proves her remarkable bravery when she steps away from the Whisperer, revealing that she willingly put herself through torture to defeat Mr. Curtain. She responds to Mr. Benedict's gratitude and pride with none of her usual snark, instead displaying genuine childlike happiness. This interaction reveals that Constance is far more than a stubborn brat. She is a steadfast and brave child who longs for approval as much as the other members of the Mysterious Benedict Society.



Mr. Benedict values truth, but he hides elements of his plan from even his most trusted associates until the last minute. As the adults usher the children away, leaving Mr. Benedict to finish the last step of the mission, the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society are finally able to be children and look to adults for guidance.

Though the children have largely accomplished their mission, Mr. Curtain has escaped. No element of the world is unambiguous or straightforward, not even success. Milligan's affectionate comment to Kate about her knots indicates that he intends to fully assume his duties as her father, including helping her perfect the skills she has had to pick up on her own.



Sticky asks what will happen if Mr. Curtain stops Mr. Benedict from disabling the Whisperer, and Rhonda answers that Mr. Benedict has instructed them all to go into hiding. Milligan expertly navigates the boat to the mainland, but Constance shouts at him for leaving Mr. Benedict. They arrive at the mainland and load into a station wagon.

Before he leaves to retrieve Mr. Benedict, Milligan tells the story of escaping the Waiting Room. In the story, Milligan holds his breath for several minutes and swims to the bottom of the mud, where he pries apart the floorboards and chisels through the mortar. While under the mud, his desperation to return to the children reminds him of how he felt when he first woke up with “Milligan” as his only memory. He realizes that the voice saying “Milligan” belonged to a child. He recalls a mill pond, and he pictures a little girl swimming there. She asks if they can return to the mill, and he promises that they will go to the mill again. “Mill again” becomes “Milligan,” as Milligan understands that his name is his unkept promise to his daughter. Once he remembers this, the rest of his memories return.

Kate fails to hold back tears. She has been so excited to have her father back, and now he intends to leave on mission to rescue Mr. Benedict, which is “not just dangerous—hopeless.” She fiercely insists that either Milligan will stay with her, or she will go with him. Reynie alerts everyone to Mr. Curtain, who is leading a troop of Recruiters across the bridge toward them. Milligan plans to distract the enemies, but Reynie tells everyone to stay put. He asks them to trust him, and every person in the car realizes that they trust Reynie entirely.

Mr. Curtain stops at the end of the bridge. He orders the Recruiters to turn back, insisting that the station wagon is a decoy. The Recruiters march back across the bridge. Once they are gone, Mr. Curtain rises from his wheelchair and approaches the station wagon. Milligan aims his tranquilizer gun at Mr. Curtain, but Reynie stops him, revealing Mr. Curtain to be Mr. Benedict in disguise. Milligan is stunned; he has never seen Mr. Benedict speak as unkindly as he did to the Recruiters. Reynie explains that he identified Mr. Benedict by the man’s unwieldy driving of the wheelchair. With the group reunited, Number Two drives the station wagon away from the island.

Mr. Benedict has prepared for a worst-case scenario, but Constance still objects to following his orders. She is more openly emotional than the others have seen her as she shouts at Milligan to wait for Mr. Benedict, which speaks to how strongly she cares about Mr. Benedict.



In his flashback, Milligan is revitalized by the memory of his daughter and the hope of returning to her. He realizes that he left his promise to her unfulfilled, which mirrors the broader context of their relationship: Milligan has been unable to provide Kate with the childhood she deserves. Just as the members of the Mysterious Benedict Society held on to their identities by thinking of people and things they loved, Milligan’s love for his daughter serves as the foundation on which he reconstructs the rest of his identity.



Kate is usually able to hide sadness behind a joke, but she fails to do so when she loses hope in reuniting with her father again. When Mr. Curtain appears on the bridge, Reynie’s mature and confident response shows that he has come into his own as a leader. He commands the respect and trust of not only his fellow children, but the adults as well.



The Mysterious Benedict Society’s mission comes to a close with one final instance of deception. Mr. Benedict, the advocate of truth, disguises himself as his evil brother to ensure the safety of his allies. Only the ever-observant Reynie sees through the disguise.



CHAPTER 39

Mr. Curtain escapes the island, but Mr. Benedict successfully convinces governmental officials to raid the Institute. His claims are finally credible now that Milligan remembers the government passwords of his days as a secret agent; further, Kate stole Mr. Curtain's journal from the Whispering Gallery during their escape. Most importantly, the Whisperer is no longer broadcasting Mr. Curtain's messages. The Emergency ends, and "minds closed to truth were opening again." Government officials frequently come through Mr. Benedict's house in search of clues, but Mr. Benedict believes Mr. Curtain is too smart to be captured by adults. Only children could ever have beat him. With Mr. Curtain removed, Mr. Benedict and his associates begin helping the victims of brainsweeping: "recruited" children, Helpers, and many Executives. Milligan leads the search for these people, and Mr. Benedict modifies the brainsweeping machines to restore memories.

Mr. Benedict insists that the children are the true heroes of the adventure. A few weeks after leaving the Institute, everyone sits down to have their first proper dinner since the children returned home. Kate asks how Mr. Benedict found the secret exit, and Mr. Benedict explains Milligan found it. Kate teases that "it's always about entrances and exits" with Milligan, and he responds with a hearty laugh. Milligan spent years in sadness after "exiting" his life as a father, and now he has "entered" it again.

At the other end of the table, Reynie is puzzling over what to call Miss Perumal, who is sitting beside him. His absence in the past weeks made Miss Perumal realize how much she loved him, and immediately upon his return, Miss Perumal asked to adopt him. He gave his consent with a tearful hug. Reynie decides to call Miss Perumal something in Tamil, her native language, and he plans to ask Sticky about Tamil words for mother. Sticky is also at the table. He seems to be the only unhappy member of the group, though he tries to hide it. He asks how Mr. Benedict disabled the Whisperer, and Mr. Benedict explains he finished what the children began. He convinced the Whisperer he was Mr. Curtain and gave it orders that confused it beyond function.

Rhonda brings out a cake for Constance's birthday, and it is then that the other children learn that Constance is turning three years old. They realize this is why she is so stubborn and so prone to naps—she is only a toddler. Constance insists that she is not stubborn.

Earlier in the story, Mr. Curtain claimed to value "open minds," but in reality he has been closing minds against the truth. With him gone, the public's minds are open again, and truth can flow freely. Mr. Benedict proves another way in which he is the direct opposite of his brother: Mr. Curtain disdains children, while Mr. Benedict believes that only children could ever be smart enough to take on Mr. Curtain. Mr. Benedict also reverses the function of the brainsweeping machines, turning them into restorers of truth.



Kate notices that Milligan often finds and discusses entrances and exits, and she is right that these words have appeared a number of times throughout their adventure. Milligan's belief that he is "exiting" one life to "enter" a better one also applies to many of the characters, and they find their entrances over the course of the chapter.



In addition to finding a family among the Mysterious Benedict Society, Reynie has reunited with Miss Perumal. She has adopted him, granting him a mother to look to for guidance and protection when he needs it. Sticky has yet to fully overcome his own loneliness, but he tries to conceal this to avoid spoiling his friends' joy.



Constance is perhaps the greatest example in the story of something that is more than it appears. At the start of the book, the other children see Constance as a rude, unhelpful, and immature girl who obstructs the team's progress. She has instead proven to be a loyal friend, a valuable ally, and exceptionally intelligent and mature for her extremely young age. Still, she retains some of her contrariness, as seen when she stubbornly insists that she is not stubborn.



The next day, Mr. Benedict pulls Sticky aside to inform him that his parents have arrived. Mr. Benedict explains that after Sticky ran away, Sticky's parents became ashamed of how they had treated him. Influenced by Mr. Curtain's messages, they convinced themselves Sticky was "better off" without them. Sticky recalls hearing this phrase, which he had taken to mean his parents were better off without *him*. Mr. Benedict continues to explain that the Washingtons realized they needed Sticky even if he didn't need them, so they have put all their resources into locating their son. They began their search before the Whisperer was disabled, indicating that their love was powerful enough to resist the broadcasts. Sticky starts to cry and runs to his parents. They reunite, and the household throws an impromptu party in celebration.

During the party, Number Two finds Mr. Benedict asleep on his desk with an expression of pure joy. He has asked Constance if she would be "willing to adopt [him] as [her] family," and she accepted. Later, Kate and Reynie discuss how all the children are finding their families. Constance in particular is getting a father and two sisters, since Mr. Benedict already adopted Number Two and Rhonda years ago.

The children are engaged in a snowball fight while their families watch happily. Mr. Benedict is so happy that he laughs himself to sleep over and over until the sun sets. Number Two wakes him and asks him to call the children inside for dinner. Mr. Benedict says that they should be allowed to play. If only for the moment, the four members of the Mysterious Benedict Society get to be children.

Neither Mr. Benedict nor Sticky's parents attempt to excuse the Washingtons' behavior toward their son. However, the Washingtons make clear they regret their actions and love Sticky more than any prize money he could win for them. Sticky realizes that he is, in fact, wanted by people who love him, and he reunites with his parents.



Mr. Benedict has followed his own advice to Reynie about building a family with people you love. He has already adopted Number Two and Rhonda, and when Constance is the only member of the Society left without a family, he offers to adopt her. He honors Constance's independence and agency by asking if she will adopt him as family, granting Constance the power in the situation so she does not feel condescended to. Mr. Benedict's excitement at her acceptance demonstrates how much he has come to love his new daughter.



The members of the Mysterious Benedict Society have suffered terribly over the course of the book, both physically and mentally. They have taken on responsibilities far too great for children their age, so Mr. Benedict is happy to see that they have a short opportunity to be children again.





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