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THIRD

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ABEL KEOGH

Bonneville Books
SPRINGVILLE, UTAH

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ISBN 13: 978-1-59955-494-5

Published by Bonneville Books, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc., 2373 W. 700 S., Springville, UT 84663

Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Keogh, Abel, 1975-
The third / Abel Keogh.
p. cm.

Summary: In the year 2065, the government passes a law that no one may have more than two children unless they purchase a credit from someone else. Ransom Lawe learns that his wife is pregnant with their third child, but he cannot afford to purchase a credit. His love for his wife and unborn child comes up against the risk that the Census Bureau will discover his family's secret.

ISBN 978-1-59955-494-5

1. Science fiction, American. 2. Population policy--Fiction. 3. Birth control--Fiction. 4. Families--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3611.E69T48 2010
813'.6--dc22

2010043974

Cover design by Angela D. Olsen
Cover design © 2011 by Lyle Mortimer
Edited and typeset by Megan E. Welton

Printed in the United States of America

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

To Marathon Girl.

Also by Abel Keogh

Room for Two

ONE

The tram's doors hissed open, flooding the platform with the heat and stench of a hundred human bodies packed tightly together.

Standing on the platform, Ransom Lawe put a hand over his nose and mouth as the air washed over him. He took a step back, waiting for the passengers to exit. Only a gray-haired man wearing a patched, navy blue suit pushed his way toward the exit and off the tram. He held a worn leather briefcase above his head. Once the man's feet touched the platform, the waiting crowd shoved its way up the stairs and onto the tram.

Ransom took a deep breath and surged forward with the others. Once on board, he used his mass to push toward the missing window opposite the door. Most of the tram's windows were rusted shut from years of neglect, and though closed windows were nice in the winter, at this time of year they turned the trams into cauldrons of heat. The second car on the tram Ransom caught to the Recycling Center each morning had a back window that had been broken for years, allowing the hot, dusty air to flow through the cabin, providing some relief.

Ransom reached the window just as a bell gave out a sharp ring, and the door snapped shut. Setting his metal lunch bucket on the floor, he grabbed a handrail, and the tram surged forward.

A hot breeze began drying the sweat from his face, and he took a deep breath of the dusty air, happy to have a momentary reprieve from the stench-filled car. Glancing around at the other passengers, he was bored to discover that most looked familiar. There was the man with the pockmarked face who wore the same

bow tie every day and always got off on the 23rd Street stop. The woman with short hair and coffee-colored skin who always had her nose in a worn paperback. And the three employees wearing blue power company uniforms who stood in a tight circle at the back of the car, talking. They were people he saw every day on his commute to work, but he knew none of their names—strangers brought together by the thirty-minute ride into the heart of the city where it seemed almost everyone worked. No one made eye contact. Instead, they stared out the dirty windows or looked down at the floor in silence.

The lucky ones sat on blue plastic benches that lined the inside of the tram. Ransom looked down at the two women who sat in front of him. They wore identical work uniforms—black slacks and white blouses with the words *Census Bureau* embroidered across their left pockets in black lettering. Ransom recognized the narrow-faced older woman, her blouse yellowed around the collar from sweat and age, but he hadn't seen the other woman before. She seemed like a duplicate of her companion, only without the crow's feet and the permanently etched worry lines across her forehead. The younger woman's blouse was clean and pressed. Ransom figured she must be the older woman's daughter, a recent Census Bureau hire. There was no other way to account for the snow-white blouse.

The tram arrived at the next stop, where the platform was packed. As the doors opened, a dozen people headed toward the exit and off the tram. Then the new passengers pushed forward. It was obvious there wasn't going to be enough room for everyone.

For the better part of a minute, people tried to force their way onto the tram. Ransom could feel the crowd press against him. He held tight to the handrail, determined not to lose his spot by the window.

The bell rang. The doors tried unsuccessfully to close. Over the crowd, Ransom could see three people holding the car's rear doors open as they fought for room. The bell rang a second time, and the tram began moving forward. Two of those trying to board let go as the tram picked up speed. The third man held on to the

railing, probably hoping to make it to the next stop. But a hand from the woman directly in front of him shot out and caught him on the shoulder. The push caught him off guard, and he tumbled onto the platform as the doors banged shut.

Ransom peered out the back window as the tram sped down the tracks. The man who had been pushed off leaned up on his elbows, stuck his thumb between his middle and index fingers, and shook his hand at the departing tram. Two dozen disappointed passengers still remained on the platform behind him. Half of them watched the tram speed away while the rest looked in the opposite direction, most likely hoping to catch sight of the next one.

A baby's loud, piercing cry surprised Ransom. Looking toward the front of the car, he tried to catch a glimpse. At six feet five inches, he was taller than most of the passengers, but he still couldn't manage to see the baby or mother. He did, however, notice that several riders near the front seemed to be looking toward the left corner of the tram. The woman and her child must have boarded early enough to land a seat.

The tram pulled up to the next platform and stopped. Between each wail, Ransom could just make out the frantic hushes of the mother trying to quiet the child. It didn't help. The baby's cry grew louder and more acute. Ransom felt bad for the mother. With the heat and smell of the car, he couldn't blame the baby, though he did wonder what the woman was thinking, bringing a child onto a packed morning tram.

"I wish it was illegal to bring kids on these things," a female voice said.

Ransom looked down at the bench in front of him, thinking that one of the two women was talking to him.

"Why'd she even bring it?" the younger woman asked, looking at the older one. "Doesn't her building have a care center?"

"From the way it's crying, it sounds like it wants attention. Maybe it's a third and she doesn't have enough time to care for it properly," the older woman guessed, her voice full of contempt.

Ransom felt a flash of anger at the woman's comment but didn't say anything. Instead, he bit his lower lip and stared out

the window. He preferred not to hear more of their conversation, but they were sitting too close, and he couldn't just move to another part of the tram.

The doors swung shut again, and the train lurched forward. The baby continued to howl. Ransom did his best to put the women and the baby out of his mind. He leaned forward into the dry air.

The tram came to a sudden stop. The tightly packed passengers stumbled in one mass toward the front of the car. Ransom gripped the handrail tightly to avoid being thrown. As he looked around, he noticed that everyone seemed to be okay. He leaned his head out the window to see what was going on, his knees bumping those of the older woman as he did so.

"Hey, watch it!" she barked.

Ransom ignored her. Fifty yards ahead was the 16th Street station. A crowd of people stood on the platform, staring at the stopped tram. He turned and looked down the tracks. A tram heading the opposite direction was stopped about twenty yards down the line. That could mean only one thing: a power failure.

He pulled his head back inside and checked the time. It was quarter to eight. He still had fifteen minutes to get to work. If he started walking now, he might make it on time.

The infant's cry, which had come to an abrupt end when the tram stopped, started up again.

"Open the doors!" a man shouted somewhere near the front of the car. His voice was loud and momentarily drowned out the baby's wails.

"Be patient. The power will be back on in a minute," suggested a female voice from somewhere in the middle of the tram.

"Shut up!" the man retorted. "Some of us have places to go."

Two men who were pressed up against the middle doors turned and tried to pry them open.

Things were quiet for a beat. Then the baby let out another scream. Ransom looked at the men struggling with the doors, hoping they'd open them soon. A bit of fresh air and more space was what everyone needed.

"I don't care if it's sick," the man blustered. "I have a right to

ride to work without your little parasite screaming in my ear.”

There was another pause, then something that sounded like the mother trying to hush her child. The baby continued to cry.

“If you won’t shut it up, then I will!”

There was the sound of scuffling, followed by the cry of, “Give me back my baby!”

Ransom looked to the front. A large, muscular arm held the infant high in the air by one of her legs. The baby looked about two months old. She had dark eyes, olive skin, and a large mat of brown hair that hung in loose strands toward the ground. She wore pink shorts. The bottom of her white T-shirt hung down to her neck, exposing her soft belly. He couldn’t see the face of the person holding her, but the man’s cruelty was obvious.

The baby quieted for a moment, seemingly surprised to find herself upside down. Then her face turned crimson, and another cry burst forth.

A more delicate arm reached up and tried to grab the child, but it was quickly swatted away.

The man with the deep voice chuckled. “A breeder like you needs to be taught some parenting skills, like how to rock it to sleep.”

The man swung the little girl back and forth by her leg. Ransom cringed as the baby’s head just missed the car’s front wall.

“Give her back, right now!” the mother demanded.

“I’m just putting it to sleep,” the man said. “As soon as it shuts up, you can have it.”

“If you don’t give her back now, I’ll kill you!” the woman yelled.

Ransom felt a bead of sweat run down his back. He glanced over at the men who had been trying to open the door. They’d stopped working and were staring toward the front of the car. Just about everyone was trying to get a glimpse of the commotion, but no one made a move to step in.

Helping out was simply asking for trouble, of course. Better to mind your own business and go on with your life. Ransom looked down at the lunch bucket between his feet.

“Don’t threaten me, breeder,” the man snarled, “or I’ll bash

its head!”

The man swung the baby far enough that her head lightly struck the wall. It was so quiet on the tram that the small thud echoed through the car. The baby’s face puckered up, and she let out a piercing cry.

The woman screamed. Once again, she reached for the child.

The man raised his free hand and brought it down on the woman. There was the sickening sound of flesh meeting flesh. “Try that again, and I’ll spill its brains all over the floor!” The man’s voice rumbled through the car like thunder.

Ransom found himself pushing through the crowd. He ignored the cries and cursing from the other passengers as he shoved them to the side. A moment later he stood across from the man, the baby, and the woman.

For the first time, he got a good look at the mother. She was probably five and a half feet tall, with an olive complexion like her daughter. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore a tiny gold cross around her neck. Her right eye was swollen and puffy, and blood ran from her nose onto a navy blue T-shirt. Her fists were clenched, and her eyes filled with anger.

The man holding the baby had small, deep-set green eyes. His shaved head glistened with sweat, and the muscles in his arms and neck pulled at the sleeves and collar of his black shirt. He looked to be Ransom’s size, even though Ransom had a good five inches of height on him. He wore black boots and black pants. Around his waist was a belt containing handcuffs, mace, and a nightstick. A silver shield with the Census Bureau logo imprinted on it was pinned to his front pocket.

Ransom paused. Census Bureau Sentinels only had jurisdiction when it came to population crimes. Their main job was to round up women who were concealing an illegal pregnancy or children for whom their parents didn’t have a replacement credit. As a result, they had earned the nickname *snatchers*. They had the reputation of having little respect for the law when it suited their purposes, so their jurisdiction usually didn’t stop them. They were commonly known for their strength, fierceness, and cruelty. They inspired enough fear that even the police rarely bothered to investigate complaints

against them. When it came to sentinels, the unspoken rule was to leave them alone and hope they'd do you the same courtesy.

The baby's continued screams drew Ransom's attention back to the child. Her face was bright red. Two steady streams of tears ran from her eyes and down her forehead to the floor.

She was just out of reach.

Another two feet forward and to his right, Ransom could at least make a grab for the child. He took a half step toward her when the deep voice of the snatcher reverberated through the car.

"Move any closer, and I'll drop the baby on its head."

Ransom stopped and faced the sentinel, who stared at Ransom through his tiny green eyes. "Back up," the man barked. "This matter doesn't concern you."

"Give the baby back." Ransom did his best to keep his voice flat and steady.

The sentinel's eyes betrayed a faint element of surprise. He likely wasn't used to someone talking back to him. "If you know what's good for you, you'll mind your own business," he said, looking back at the baby as though the conversation was over.

"Give the baby back to her mother," Ransom demanded, his voice rising.

Now Ransom had the sentinel's full attention. His eyes went from Ransom's face to the Recycling Center logo on Ransom's breast pocket.

"Are you kidding me? You're just a recycler. Why don't you go pick up some trash?"

Ransom ignored the taunt. "I'm not going to ask you again."

He took a step toward the sentinel so there was about six feet between them. Out of the corner of his eye, Ransom saw the mother move closer. The sentinel saw it too. His eyes darted from the mother to Ransom, then back to the mother. He seemed to realize that he couldn't stop both Ransom and the baby's mother from grabbing the child.

Without warning, the sentinel pushed the mother, dropped the baby, and lunged at Ransom. The woman's head made a dull thud as it smacked against the window. Ransom ducked under the sentinel's arm and managed to catch the infant just before her

head hit the floor.

The mother sat up and rubbed the back of her head. She looked at Ransom, then rose to her feet and grabbed the baby from his arms. She retreated to the corner of the tram, where she held the child close to her breast.

The baby stopped crying.

Ransom stood and turned to face the sentinel, who had fallen into the crowd and lay atop three passengers. Everyone else was backing up, trying to get out of the way.

The sentinel rose to his hands and knees and shook his head. He grabbed a handrail and pulled himself to his feet, turning to face Ransom. Then he caught Ransom unprepared, his swing connecting with the side of Ransom's jaw, despite his failed attempt at ducking.

Ransom's mouth filled with the coppery taste of blood. His legs gave out from under him, and he found himself facedown on the tram's floor. Then there was a sharp kick to his side. The air rushed out of his lungs, and he curled up, fighting for breath.

Two strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders and flipped him on his back. The sentinel looked down at him with a smirk on his face. A bead of sweat fell from his forehead and landed squarely on Ransom's chest.

"I told you to mind your own business," the sentinel growled. "Maybe next time you'll listen."

He raised his leg, positioning his boot over Ransom's face.

Ransom instinctively raised his arms and waited for the blow. It never came.

Through the spaces between his fingers, Ransom caught a flash of silver, then the sentinel swatting his neck as if bitten by a mosquito. Ransom lowered his hands and saw the sentinel staring at a small object between his fingers. It was about an inch long, half of its length in the form of a thin needle. The sentinel glanced in the direction of the woman and opened his mouth to say something, then suddenly grabbed the pole next to him for support. His body swayed from side to side before he fell to his knees. Eyes rolling to the back of his head, he fell to the floor, face-first, next to Ransom.

It was absolutely quiet on the tram.

Ransom pulled himself to his knees. He could feel his breath coming back to him. He spat blood out on the floor. His jaw hurt, and a few of his back teeth felt loose.

He looked over at the woman, confused by what had just happened.

Suddenly, the sounds of the men trying to open the doors started up again. Moments later, there was a hiss as the middle doors were forced open. A blast of fresh air rushed through the car.

The passengers made for the exit as fast as they could.

The woman picked a yellow sling from the floor and put it over her shoulder. A drop of blood fell from her nose to the fabric. She placed the baby in the sling and stepped over the body of the sentinel, heading for the exit.

“Wait,” Ransom called.

The woman turned and looked at him. “Thank you for saving my baby,” she said. “One day I’ll repay you.”

“What did you do to him?” Ransom asked, looking at the motionless body.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

She knelt next to the sentinel and pried open his hand, retrieving the silver object. She slid it into her pocket, then pulled herself to her feet and checked the baby, brushed the dust from her pants, and headed toward the door.

“Who are you?” Ransom tried again.

“He’ll wake up soon. You should get going.”

“Wait,” he called, but the woman had hurried down the steps of the tram.

Ransom pulled himself to a standing position. His jaw and side throbbed with pain. He staggered to the tram’s open doors and spotted the woman thirty yards down the street. She was walking fast, weaving her way in and out of the throngs of people. Ransom hurried down the stairs and started after her. He was still winded and stiff from the fight. Within twenty yards, he had to put his hands on his knees while he caught his breath.

When he looked up again, she was gone.

Then he heard a high-pitched police whistle. Three cops were running down the street toward the tram. The middle one had a

silver whistle between his lips that he blew as he ran.

Quickly, Ransom got in the back of a nearby line for a grocery store. Once the police ran past, he hurried down the street as fast as he could walk, anxious to put as much space between him and the tram as possible. It wasn't easy. He was still dazed and hurting, and the sidewalks were crowded with people going to work, groups of kids in their yellow-and-green uniforms hurrying to school, and people standing in line waiting for stores to open. To make faster progress, he stepped off the sidewalk and walked in the gutter. But even that path had obstacles. Donkey carts were parked in front of stores, their drivers unloading burlap bags filled with produce and supplies. There were piles of manure—some fresh, others days old—that had been swept to the gutter but not yet collected. Ransom ended up back on the sidewalk.

As his distance from the tram increased, Ransom's adrenaline ebbed and was replaced by fear. He wondered if the sentinel would be able to give the police a good enough description to ID him. The man had seen his uniform and knew where he worked. If police showed up at the Recycling Center, it wouldn't be too hard to figure out who he was. It was a rarity for people to be much taller than six feet. As far as Ransom knew, he was the tallest employee at the center.

He chastised himself for intervening in something that wasn't his business. The last thing he and his family needed was for him to miss work and spend a few weeks in jail. Money was tight enough as it was. What had he been thinking?

A pack of stray dogs ran out into the street. The lead dog, a German shepherd with spots of fur missing from his body, looked at Ransom with sad brown eyes. Ransom reached down to the gutter and pretended to pick up a rock. Immediately, the pack of dogs turned and ran across the street.

Ransom checked his watch. It was eight o'clock. He was late for work.

Ignoring the pain in his side, Ransom picked up the pace and hurried the remaining blocks to the Recycling Center.