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SHARI J. RYAN

NO WAY OUT | BOOK 2

# LOCKED OUT

All I wanted ... was to be released.  
Now, I want to go back to where it was safe.

# LOCKED OUT

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NO WAY OUT SERIES - BOOK TWO

SHARI J. RYAN

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Edition 2

Formally titled “Savior”

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## CHAPTER ONE

REESE

**Snatcher is on** his feet, staring me down with a deadly look in his eyes. I only hold my focus on him for a brief moment before looking over at Sin, gauging his reaction to everything Snatcher just said. *This was a setup.*

Rage blazes through me, my anger directed more toward Sin than Snatcher right now. *That asshole took me for a fool.* I search the room, taking in my surroundings during the few short seconds I have to make a move. Without thinking twice about it, I lunge toward the fireplace and grab the iron poker. I swing it around in front of me, unsure who to attack first. I've had it. I've had it so badly.

"Whoa," Sin says, placing his hands up in defense. "Take it easy, Reese."

"Let me go. Now," I seethe.

"Reese!" Sin jumps toward me and tries to rip the poker out of my hand, but I fight him. I fight him hard, falling to my knees, pulling it toward me. Sin is stronger, though. This isn't a fight I could ever win, but I refuse to go out without trying. I fall flat to the ground as the poker slips from my grip, burning against my skin along the way.

"Just do it," I grunt.

When nothing happens, I push myself up on my hands and knees, looking up to stare this bad ending in the face. I look up just in time to see Sin spin around and thrash the poker against the side of Snatcher's head. Snatcher falls immediately, his head slamming into the small, worn table on the way down. Blood trickles from his ear and again, I'm left wondering if he's dead or alive.

Looking over at Sin, I clench my teeth together until a pain sears through my jaw. There's so much I want to say to him right now, but I refuse to give him the benefit of knowing what's going through my head.

"That wasn't true," he says. "He didn't tell me to bring you back here." Whether I believe him or not, it doesn't matter. I'm getting the hell out of here...with or without him.

"Whatever."

He reaches his hand out to me, thinking I'm actually going to take it. "I'm not the bad guy here," he adds in.

*Except that's not what you have been telling me from the moment I met you.*

"Did you kill your mother or not?" I ask him. "Don't brush me off this time. If you don't answer me, I'm leaving and I'll find my own way out of this shit-hole without you."

"You're starting to talk like me. I'm rubbing off on you," he grins. I suck in a deep inhale and grit my teeth. I'm not backing down again. "Can we at least discuss this after we get out of here?" Walking over to Snatcher, he squats down by his head and places his fingers over the artery on his neck as he looks up at me with a blank look.

"Well?" It is his father. And I hope he's dead. From what Sin has told me, he'd be okay with that outcome too; although, I'm not sure what to believe right now.

"I didn't kill her," he says, looking back down at Snatcher. "And he isn't dead yet." Sin stands up quickly and takes me by the arm, pulling me down the short, dark hall.

The rest of the house looks the same as the living room and kitchen—yellowed, and worn. The scent of stale cigarette smoke is more pungent in the enclosed hallway and it's making my stomach churn.

Sin pulls me into one of the two bedrooms and makes his way over to the dresser. He tears out every drawer, dumping them all over. I don't know what he's looking for, but he shoves small items into his pockets. I can't tell what they are. I move a little closer toward him, curious to see what else he's going to take. He doesn't seem to care that I'm watching as he pulls out a few envelopes and shoves them in his back pocket. Moving over to the mattress, he flips it onto its side and looks underneath. "Nothing," he says.

"What are you looking for?" I ask.

He doesn't answer me, just continues ripping things apart, instead. Next, he dumps the nightstand drawer out onto the floor and then kicks it. He rushes past me, grabbing me by the wrist again, pulling me back out into the hall and into the next room.

This room is painted in blue, unlike the rest of the house. It has grey curtains, posters hanging on the wall, and a floor to ceiling bookshelf filled with books. "Was this your—"

"Yes. Home, sweet fucking home."

"You're a reader?" I move over to the bookshelf and examine the titles, intrigued by this unknown fact about Sin, momentarily forgetting about our current situation. Most of them are classics—even more unexpected. "I never would have assumed."

"You know what assuming does?" he asks, with an angry lilt to his voice.

"Screw you," I respond.

"You wish." How did we get to this point? *How did I let things get to this point?* That is what I should be asking myself.

He nudges me out of the way and takes a book, "The Aeneid", from the top shelf and opens it.

"Robert Fitzgerald, huh?" I ask. "I've read a couple of his books."

"Good for you," he says, looking at it for a moment before tearing the first page out. He folds it up and drops it into his pocket among the other things he has shoved in there. As he replaces

the book on the shelf, he turns around to look at me. The veins in his eyes are red and sweat is beading up on his forehead. "We need weapons." *I thought there were no weapons in this godforsaken place.* "Let's go." He walks out into the hallway, quickly moving ahead of me. "Hurry up."

By the time we reach the living room, soft groans warn me that Snatcher is starting to come to. And from the looks of it, Sin is well aware of this as he grabs the fire poker. For a moment, it looks like Sin might go back after Snatcher with it, but instead, he takes a deep breath and moves into the kitchen.

I stick close to Sin, watching as he grabs the knives from the butcher block, then tears open all of the drawers until he retrieves two guns and a flashlight. "Back downstairs. Go. Now," he says.

I don't question him, as I never wanted to come up here in the first place, and I nearly trip running down the stairs into an area I feel only slightly safer in. I get the whole "*Snatcher doesn't come down here*" thing, but really, it doesn't seem like much would stop that man from doing whatever the hell he wants to do. He's obviously deranged...like the rest of the people in this town.

The door slams upstairs and Sin's heavy feet trudge down the stairs. He throws a backpack at me and slips another one over his shoulders. "Grab some clothes from the closet and take your damn doll."

"Quit being an asshole," I snap. I've held my anger at bay for the past twenty minutes, but it's foaming in my mouth at this point.

"Gotta live up to my name," he says, throwing the doll at me.

"If you didn't kill her, why the hell were you locked up? I'd have to expect there's a bigger reason than you just being rude to everyone."

"Do you hate me yet?" he asks, in response. What kind of question is that?

"I certainly don't like you right now," I say, pulling the bag over my shoulders. He tosses a gun to me and I struggle to catch it, but manage to grasp it by the bottom of the barrel.

"Used one before?"

"Yeah, in my short fifteen years, when I was free and living in the middle of the country where people left their front doors unlocked at night, my mother made sure to teach me how to murder someone," I grit with scorn.

"Jesus, you're hopeless."

I walk over to Sin and stare up at him and the scowl stretched across his face. I slap my hand against his cheek as hard as I can, instantly feeling an itchy burn across my hand. "Asshole."

He grabs his jaw and grins, cocking his head from side to side. "Well, there she is." His hand loops around my back and he pulls me in closer.

"I have a gun in my right hand," I remind him.

"Oh. I thought you were just happy to see me." With that, he leans down and crushes his lips

into mine. *No. This has to stop.* Although, as much as I fight against it, I can't ignore the fact that he takes my breath away. He makes my knees weak, and he makes me want more of his crude-laced tongue. *Damn him.*

When he pulls away, he traces his thumb down the side of my cheek. "I like you, Reese." He follows his unusually kind words with another quick kiss. "And that wasn't my gun you felt. I am happy to see you."

I wish I didn't have electrifying zaps shooting through my core right now. I hate what he does to me. I hate that I have no control over my feelings. I hate that I can't be angry at him when all I want to do is slap him again. Yet, now I know what inflicting harm will evidently lead to. "I still don't like you," I lie.

"Good. Let's go."

"It's the middle of the night," I remember, as we walk up the steps toward the basement's hatch door. "Do you have a plan?"

"My first plan is to teach you how to shoot that weapon you're holding."

"At night?"

"By the time we get to where we're going, it'll be sunrise." The thought of walking more than we've already walked today sort of sickens me. My legs are aching and my feet have blisters from these boots. "Oh, before we leave, do you still have that key I gave you?"

The key. The one he gave me as a birthday gift on the first day I met him. "I do."

"Where is it?" he asks.

"I thought it was mine." It's the only thing anyone has given me in three years besides stale or moldy food.

"It is, but it may be of use to us in getting out of here. It's important that you hold onto it."

"Is there a door that's going to lead us out of hell?" I have a feeling that's not the case; that there is no true way out of here. If there were, people would have found it by now...or at least, I have to think that.

"I don't know if there is a door, but I know there is a way out."

He opens the basement hatch to the dark night sky and the distant sound of—I don't know what the sound is, actually. "What is that noise?"

He locks up the basement door and turns in the direction my shed was in. "You don't want to know."

"No way. Don't pull that bull on me. What is it?" The sound stops. It was almost like the combination of someone crying, mixed with radio static.

"I can just show you if you'd like?" Sin says, continuing on ahead of me.

This time, I don't respond. I have a feeling whether I want to see it or not, I won't have a choice. He gets some sick thrill out of trying to scare the shit out of me, and I'm done letting him think it's working. Whatever it is making that noise will not scare me. I won't allow it to.

We walk past the flattened shed and I stop. I lean down to move some of the smaller broken

boards, but now I feel compelled to move more in search of the mattress I slept on for so long. "What are you doing?" Sin asks.

"I need to find it." I'm slinging bigger planks of wood now, getting closer to the bottom of the pile. Surprisingly, Sin doesn't ask any more questions and helps me instead. He breaks through the pile faster, revealing the top of the mattress. I step over the pile he's created and shove the mattress to the side a few inches, finding exactly what I was looking for.

I drop to my knees and sweep my hand over the gravel covering the untouched piece of floor. "May I borrow your flashlight?" I ask.

He hands it over and kneels down beside me. "What is it?"

I click the flashlight on, shining the light on the spot that tracked how many days I survived. "Eleven-hundred-fifteen."

"I don't understand."

"Days." I take a rock from the rubble and scrape it alongside the last line, needing to add in four more. Four days seems like an eternity ago, yet it has only been four days and I'm no closer to escaping than I was eleven-hundred-and-nineteen days ago. Sin's hand gently presses against my back as I create the last line. When I drop the rock, he pulls me into his side and places a kiss on the top of my head. No words are needed at this moment. He gets it. I know he does.

I turn the flashlight off and hand it back to him. "I don't want to waste the battery." Standing up, I step back over the piles of lumber, looking to Sin for the next direction, which I'm assuming is the empty horizon in front of us.

Sin takes my hand and we continue in silence until I hear the sound of cries again. "Is it a person or an animal? Just tell me that much."

"The difference between the two is hard to decipher here, Reese. One is as dumb as another, but we're all trying to escape. And when we try to escape, the consequence causes the sounds you are hearing."

## CHAPTER TWO

## SIN

## FIVE DAYS AGO

**I take a seat** at the kitchen table and clasp my hands together, staring at the back of her head as she puts the roast together. I haven't eaten in hours and I'd happily eat that thing raw at this point. "Dad called again."

Mom drops everything and cleans her hands off on the dishrag, but doesn't turn around. Her shoulders slouch forward before they straighten back out. I hear a heavy breath expel from her lungs as she turns around. "How do you suppose he found us?"

I look into her sad, hazel eyes as she traces her fingertip down the length of her scar that reaches from her eyebrow to her lip. "He won't be able to get in here," I tell her.

"I wouldn't put much past him, darling." I wouldn't either.

"I won't let him hurt you again," I assure her. "I would—"

"Don't say it, Sinon. I know what you're capable of. I don't want you to be like him. You understand that, right?"

"Of course, Mom, but I'll do whatever I have to, to keep you safe."

She sits down in the chair across from me and takes my hands in hers. Her lips press together and a tear falls from her eye. "I love you very much."

"I don't like it here," I tell her. It has been six months and I haven't figured out how to adjust to this environment. I'm not sure anyone could adjust to this place. I didn't question Mom when she made the decision. Her life has always been devoted to research on the human mind. She isn't afraid of the prisoners like most people would be. She's like a psyche whisperer, or so she calls herself.

She has spent most of her adult life hopping from prison to prison to assist with counseling as well as research. When she was given this opportunity in Chipley, she saw it not only as a golden opportunity, but also a chance to escape our life with Dad.

"It'll take a while to get used to," she says, as if she's already used to this completely inhuman compound. I'm here because of her. I'm seventeen—not old enough to be on my own, plus she needs me.

"Can we leave if we need to? Is there a way out?" I've asked her this many times, but she won't answer me. She tells me she was sworn into this society as a caretaker and has committed to keeping certain information classified. I'm not exactly sure who I would tell even if I had the opportunity to do so, but Mom takes her work very seriously.

"There is, yes," she responds curtly. A helicopter dropped us in. I was given a sedative and fell asleep in an office, then woke up here. They told me it was for my own safety.

"But you won't tell me where or how to leave," I confirm.

"Do you want to leave, Sinon?" I look at her for a long minute, debating my answer.

"Yes, but I'll stay with you," because I wouldn't have anywhere else to go if I left. She knows this. Her question is invalid and I know it as well as she does. Dad lost the custody battle after his last episode and I can't imagine one relative who would take me in, even if it were only until I turn eighteen.

"It's only for a year more," she reminds me. "Then you and I will go live up north, and we'll start over." She smiles at the thought. She's always talked about moving to Boston since there are so many great job opportunities for her profession there. I'd be happy to live in a city and have a different kind of life than what I've always known.

"One year," I say, leaning over and placing a kiss on her cheek. "I'm going to get back to work."

"Dinner will be ready in two hours. I have a night shift tonight, so we need to eat earlier," she says. Her night shifts involve delivering food drops to the Level One prisoners confined to the hospital at the top of the hill. That building gives me the creeps. "Oh, and don't forget about your school assignments. You have a few more to complete by the end of the week." Home-schooled, compound-schooled; same thing. I miss my high school. My friends. Wrestling. The longer I'm here, the more hostile I feel toward Mom for pulling me away from a life I enjoyed.

I grab a bottle of water out of the fridge and head back outside to continue chopping wood—not exactly my career aspiration, but it keeps me in shape. Although, the work seems endless since there's a never-ending need for wood considering the sheds are always going up for the new prisoners. When I got here, there were only a couple dozen, but now there are at least fifty.

I get through almost a half cord of wood before a tap on the shoulder pulls me out of my focus. I drop the ax and wipe the sweat from my head. "Hey, man. How's it going today?"

"Good, good. I got two more sheds to build this week. These folks are pouring in by the dozen this month, huh?" JJ says.

"Yeah, I don't know what's going on," I tell him. "I can get you another quarter before I call it quits for the day."

"That works. Your ma home?"

"Yeah, she's cooking dinner."

"Anything good tonight?" JJ eats over a couple nights a week. I'm pretty sure JJ sleeps over a couple nights a week too. We do the whole "don't ask, don't tell" thing because I don't want to

know. I want Mom to be happy, but it's still weird to see her with anyone besides Dad.

She and JJ became close soon after we got here. I'm guessing it was the comradeship of being two of the dozen caretakers here. Maybe it was more, though. "Yeah, she's cooking up a roast."

JJ rubs his hands together and pats me on the head before jogging off toward the house.

I finish chopping up the last quarter and stack all the wood against the basement wall. *I'm starving.* I walk in through the back door and I hear Mom and JJ having a quiet conversation. Walking up to the far wall in the kitchen—the one adjacent to the living room, I place my ear against the wall, listening to what they're saying.

"He's going to come here," she tells him.

"There's no way he can get here," JJ tells her.

"You don't know this man."

"I'll protect you and Sinon," he says quietly to her.

I don't need to be protected. I can take care of the two of us. I walk around the corner, finding them in an embrace and kissing. *Awesome.*

"Dinner almost ready?" I ask, knowingly interrupting them.

Mom pulls away from JJ with a look of shock. She straightens her shirt and fidgets with her hair. "Sinon, I thought—"

"You said two hours," I remind her.

"This isn't what you might think..."

"No judgment," I say, turning away and walking back into the kitchen.

I grab the oven mitts and take the roast out of the oven, placing it down heavily on the stovetop. I then take the loaf of bread from above the fridge and begin to slice it up as Mom comes around the corner. Her hands are on my shoulders. "Sinon, we need to talk."

"About what?" I ask.

"Look at me," she says.

I place the knife down and turn to face her—the worry in her eyes. Then there's JJ standing behind her with his hands in his pockets, unable to make eye contact with me. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I thought it might be too much for you to deal with," she says despondently. "I didn't want to make things harder for you."

"I want you to be happy," I tell her. The look on my face might not confirm that, but I do. I'm just not sure how I feel about JJ. He's a nice guy and all, but—I don't know. There's something about him that bothers me.

"And I am. We are." JJ steps to the side of Mom and places his arm around her waist. "Are you okay with this?"

"Does it matter if I am?" They give each other a look, a look that annoys me, making me feel like I'm on the outside of this situation...which, I am. I'm irritated because I'm stuck here, miserable, with no friends and here she is, enjoying her time in this goddamned, confined town.

She said this eighteen-month stint was for research to further her career. She said she had no choice. JJ isn't research, though. And if anyone was left without choices, it was me.

"Yes, it does," JJ says. "We want you to be okay with this."

"I want to leave," I tell them. I want out of here. "Tell me how to leave. Do I have to call someone to make this happen?"

"It's not that easy, son." He did not just call me "son". Hell, no. "What can we do to make this easier for you?"

I take a slice of bread and barge out the back door. "Sinon!" Mom yells from the back door. "It's almost dark. You shouldn't leave the area right now." Screw them. Screw this damn town.

Darkness falls over me within the hour after I left. I've been walking aimlessly into the opaqueness of the dark canvas ahead of me. There's got to be a way out.

It must be hours by the time something appears in view, but since it's dark, I can't make out what it is until I'm in the shadow of the overwhelmingly large wall. It has to be at least ten feet high and surrounded by water. I didn't think there was running water anywhere on this compound. Good to know there is.

I approach the water, and step into the shallow end, keeping my focus on the wall I intend to climb over. As my foot makes contact with the water, every part of me begins to burn viciously, and I can't figure out how to make it stop. My body falls to the ground, and through incredible pain, I struggle to pull myself out of the water just as my muscles lock up completely. Groaning and writhing along the now damp dirt, I try to piece together what just happened. My mind is blurry, and it takes me minutes to realize the water must be poisoned or some shit. I pull myself up to my knees, but I feel too weak to stand completely.

"That'll kill you," a voice says. "Your body can only handle so much of that before it hits your bloodstream."

I look up, finding Dad standing over me. He offers me a hand, but it's still hard to move, so he yanks me up to my feet, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt. "Where is your mother?"

"How did you get here? How did you find me?"

"That's not important." With my arm pinched within his grip, he pulls me back toward the house.

"It's not this way," I tell him. Regardless of distaste for Mom's newfound relationship, and the fact that I'm stuck here against my will, I will still do everything to protect her from him. I will never watch this man hurt her again.

"Which means it is," he says.

"I'll kill you if you try to hurt her again," I grunt.

"Sin, Sin, Sin. Are you too stupid to realize who hurt who here? I bet you aren't threatening death upon your mother if she hurts me again, are you?"

"You deserve to feel pain. You deserve to suffer. You're a shitty excuse of a father and a shittier excuse of a husband." I spit at him and pull myself out of his grip, thankful to have my

strength restored.

"I will kill you if you touch her. That's a promise," I say again.

He laughs at me as he continues walking forward. "You're too scared to step on an ant, son. Please."

I want to prove this asshole wrong in every way possible.

## CHAPTER THREE

REESE

**"Are you getting tired?"** Sin asks.

"I'm fine," I lie. I'm exhausted. We haven't slept in what feels like days and I don't even know what we're walking toward, other than the sounds that are starting to freak me out. The bits of food we both ate yesterday have been replaced with an emptiness gnawing at my insides. At least as a prisoner, I was being fed once a day. My energy has depleted but I don't want to complain. I know what it'll get me with him. I feel like I'm walking in dizzying circles when I've done nothing but walk in a straight line for the past several hours. The sun is flirting with the horizon line and I hope that means we'll stop soon.

"We're almost there." Wherever there is. At least the sounds of cries and static have stopped over the past hour.

"We've walked all this way so you can teach me how to shoot a gun?"

"No, we've walked all this way so you can see what those noises are. And so we can possibly find something to eat." While the thought of food should be making me drool, I've learned well enough to know food does not just appear and that we will likely have to fight for it. "I haven't been down this far in a while. Years, actually."

I pick up my speed as I try to make out what I'm looking at—could be a mirage at this point. Is that—oh my God. It's water. Water! I've dreamt of submerging myself in a pool of warm water. I've dreamt of it for so long. Feeling the coolness cover my skin and my hair turn to silk against my back, is something I never thought I would experience again. Sin is on my heels and as I approach the edge of the water, my focus locks onto something else. A wall. A wall short enough to climb. Is this the way out? Please, God. Let this be my way out. I begin to take my boots off, but Sin's hand grips around my arm. "No," he says quietly.

"No? Are you kidding me? Get away from me. I'm going in whether you like it or not." Sin grips my arm a little tighter and yanks me away from the water this time. He pulls me down alongside the water to the other side where he points at the water. "What? It's water. I need water, Sin."

His hands cup around my head and he adjusts the angle in which I was looking. "Look through the water." It's murky and swirling around, but I concentrate on looking beyond the

surface, and I can't make out what I'm looking at.

Unintentionally, I gasp when I come to the unfortunate conclusion of what I'm seeing. I force my focus down the length of the water, seeing more and more. Breathing heavily, I turn around and look at Sin. His eyes are straining and his forehead has wrinkles I've never seen before. "Those are bodies, Reese."

"I know." I turn back and look again at what must have been a massacre at some point. "Who did this to them?"

Without skipping a beat, he says, "They all did this to themselves. I was dumb enough to almost become one of them once."

"I don't understand."

He squats down in front of the water and pulls me down with him. "Give me your finger."

"What? Why?" He takes my hand in his and bends all of my fingers down except for my pointer finger. "What are you doing, Sin?" He tugs my hand toward the water, forcing the tip of my finger to touch the water. A deep burn runs through my finger hand, causing all of my muscles to twitch. I jerk my hand away from him, falling backward onto my butt. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I slap his arm with force, but he laughs.

"The water is poisoned with a cocktail of deadly flesh eating bacteria," he says.

"And you couldn't just tell me that? You had to infect me with it just to get your point across? Why do you have to be such a goddamn—"

"Say it for me, baby."

I groan loudly and pull myself up from the ground. Turning in circles for a brief moment, I feel like a crazed lunatic right now. I have nowhere to run and I feel like imploding from the amount of anger building up within me. "I can't stand you," I grit. "You dragged us all the way down here so you could burn me?"

"I think we've already been over this. Yes."

"Screw you, Sin!"

"We've been over that, too," he smirks. That smirk I want to slap. He reaches into his back pocket and retrieves a gun. "Here you go."

"You're handing me a gun when you know how pissed off I am?" I return his little snide smirk.

"Yeah, because I know you're not dumb. Being alone here is way worse than having a hot stud tagging along. And by the way, touching the tip of your finger to the water won't do any permanent damage, so quit freaking out."

"You like to tempt your fate, don't you?" I ask. No, I wouldn't shoot him. Being alone here would be worse than falling into the pits of Hell. Although there's no reason he needs to know I feel like that. I take the gun from his hand and point it in the opposite direction, looking through the sights, pinching one eye closed. "What'cha gonna shoot over there, princess?"

Keeping my fingers off the trigger, I turn around, pointing the gun at Sin's head. "Call me

princess again, and you'll see."

"Hey now," he says, walking toward me. "Joking or not, we don't point weapons at people's heads unless we intend to kill. And we both know you don't want to kill me." He presses my hand down so the gun rests against the side of my leg. "Hold on one second," he says, walking ahead of me over to a nearby tree and pulls a branch down, snapping it so it dangles lower than the rest of the branches. He points at the one single leaf hanging from the end and looks back at me. "You're going to shoot this."

He walks away from the leaf and moves around behind me as I lift the gun back up and aim it toward the leaf. "I got it."

"Make sure you use your sights. Look for the leaf within the sights." Holding onto the gun tightly, I straighten my arms and hold my focus between the sights. "Hold on," he says softly. His hands slide down the length of my arms and he repositions the way I'm holding the gun. "Keep this arm bent and move your hand...here." His touch is making it hard to focus. Maybe he knows this because he removes his hands but doesn't move away. I try again to focus and I finally position myself so the leaf is in my sights. "Go ahead."

I release the trigger and jerk backward into Sin's chest, feeling a rush of energy press through my veins. My heart is pounding and my breaths are short—I feel amazing.

Sin walks ahead of me toward the leaf and I lower the gun back to my side. He snatches the leaf off of the branch and brings it over to me. "How did I do?"

"Not bad," he grins. "Actually, that was pretty epic." He shows me the leaf and the bullet hole in the exact center of the leaf. "You might just be a natural."

I hate the way he's smiling at me—the crooked grin that only shows part of his teeth. I hate the way he's looking at me—the way his lids are half closed from looking down at me. I hate that he just took the gun out of my hand and placed it down on the ground. I hate that his hands are around me. And I hate—I hate that I don't hate the way he's touching me and the way his lips taste—the way his tongue tastes. The way my body aches for more. I hate what he's doing to me because I love it way too much.

His hands are cupped around my face and they're far gentler than they've been any time he has touched me in the past couple of days. His kisses soften and he pulls away just enough to look into my eyes, and I swear to God my knees literally just went weak. I try not to blink because I'm trying to read his every thought, but it isn't the thoughts I'm reading, it's the pain I can see instead. Pain that mirrors my own.

The pain disappears as his lips close back over mine. I forget about anything I'm feeling—the hunger, the aches, the thirst—it's all replaced by everything he's giving me. He lifts me up, allowing my legs to tangle around his waist. "Do you still want to screw me?" he growls.

"I never said I wanted to screw you," I mutter.

"It was assumed when you said, 'Screw you.' So, what's it going to be?" His mouth is peppering kisses from behind my ear down my neck, making it hard for me to conjure up a

sarcastic response.

Giving up the battle, I let out a weak, "Yes."

He walks us over to the tree and falls against the trunk heavily; his hands skating up the bare skin on my back. My body shudders at the contact of his skin against mine, and I squeeze my arms around his neck tightly, needing whatever comes next. Slowly, he squats down against the tree until we're both seated on the ground. My shirt is torn off quickly and his hands are everywhere I want them to be. His lips follow the path of his hands and I'm losing my will to remain upright.

My breaths are out of rhythm and his are harsh against the sensitive skin over my stomach. With his hand around my back, he lowers me backwards until I'm lying flat. He's hovering over me as I press his shirt up, pulling it over his head as he loosens his belt, allowing his pants to fall to his ankles. "Sin," I breathe.

He stops mid-kiss and looks down into my eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Protection? We have none."

"I do," he whispers into my ear. "Regardless of being held hostage here like you, I'm still a man and I still had hopes. It was one of the things I needed from my bedroom yesterday."

For some reason this makes me feel even crazier inside, just thinking about the turmoil he was going through yesterday, and yet, he was still thinking about this—us. My questioning for his hate toward me is slowly diminishing. Anger is ugly and hard to see through, but it will always be present here in this situation we're confined to. I feel it too, but I can see through it. I can see him. Who he really is. I wiggle out of my pants and panties, feeling the strange sensation of the cool dirt soothe my backside. With the sunlight bright and acting as a spotlight, I take note of the faint freckles over his nose and the dull scar in the center of his chin.

He tears open the wrapper of the condom and unrolls it over his—wow. I missed a lot being locked up, and this is more than what I imagined. He lowers his body carefully over mine, keeping his knees planted into the ground as his hand travels down the center of my stomach and lower. Much lower. My eyes jerk open as I feel his finger slip inside of me. Unlike the person Sin has proven to be, the gentleness of his touch is appreciated and incredible. His finger moves in and out of me slowly, causing a melting sensation to ooze through every one of my limbs. The pressure building within is causing noises to escape from my throat, sounds I've never felt the need to make before. "I think you're ready now," he says into my ear.

His lips press against my cheek, then the corner of my lips and as his lips make contact with mine, he presses himself inside of me. It's painful at first, but not painful enough that I'd dare to ask him to stop. The soft touch of his hand feathering over my breast creates a growing desire that can't be tamed without more than what he's already giving me. I grip my hands tightly around his hips, feeling my body arch away from the ground, using him to move faster and a little harder. I don't know how much experience he has, or hasn't had, but my God, this man knows exactly what he's doing. The pain is long gone and has been replaced by a numbingly

beautiful ache. I feel as though my body is moving toward the edge of a cliff and I'm not sure where my last step will be before I fall.

My begging cries grow louder as the feeling of free falling falls upon me. Everything tightens and my heart stills as I take that anticipated fall. Tremors quake through me as everything relaxes heavily into the earth. Sin moves heavily against me a few more times, groaning against my ear until he falls on top of me, breathing heavily against my neck. "My God. You have made the last five years of my life worth surviving," he utters. "I was so lost, Reese. So damn lost. And I'll be damned, but I'm so grateful you're the one who found me."

Maybe he isn't as big of an asshole as I thought.

"I'm still glad I said 'Screw you,'" I smile against his cheek.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## SIN

**Reese is like** my own personal detox. For every moment of anger and hostility this girl has redirected toward me, I have grown a new appreciation for the badass side I see growing within her. I can't take my eyes off of her as she slowly slips her clothes back on, all while trying to hide the struggle of a smile painted across her pretty little lips. "I should practice shooting some more," she says tying up the laces on her boots.

I haven't made much of an effort to get dressed as I'm sitting here against the tree in nothing but my boxer shorts, so I reach up and grab a branch, tugging it away from the tree. "Here, shoot that leaf," I point to the one dangling inches over my head.

"Are you out of your mind?" she asks, tying her hair back up.

"Yup. Now shoot."

"I could shoot your hand off, or—or I could end up putting a bullet right through your head."

"Well, I wouldn't do that. That would kind of suck." I continue holding the branch still. "Come on. Show me what I know you can do."

"Sin, no. I'm not doing it."

"What happened to the girl with confidence?" I stare at her for a minute, watching a darkness seep in through her eyes. There it is. She walks over to the pistol and lifts it back up, inspecting it for a moment, stalling. She backs up until she's at least ten feet away from me and lifts her arms up, holding the pistol just as I showed her. "Back up some more."

I can see she's debating whether or not to argue, but I also think she doesn't want me to remind her of the confidence issue. She backs up another five feet. I'll quit bugging her now since I guess I would like to keep all of my fingers. She lifts the pistol back up and squints her right eye shut. My eyes are locked on her chest and the heaviness of each one of her breaths. "Sin," she breathes out.

"You won't hurt me," I tell her. She squeezes her finger over the trigger and releases. I squint, nervous at first to look up at the leaf and hopefully all of my fingers. With one eye open, I glance up, seeing another hole directly through the center of the leaf. This girl is damn good. "Shit, girl. You got some sick gift there. You sure you never shot a weapon before?"

She drops the pistol down by her side and walks over to me slowly. The wind is blowing the

loose strands of her blond hair across her forehead and I unintentionally lose myself in the moment, seeing something change within her. I don't know what it is, but she's driving me nuts. She kneels in front of me and leans in toward me. "How do you know I wasn't taken here for my bad behavior? How do you know *I* wasn't being committed to Applebrook the day you saw me in the hall? How do you know I didn't murder someone with a weapon," she looks down at the pistol, "just like this one." She leans in closer, her lips close enough to touch. "Have you considered the thought that maybe you've had me all wrong?"

Holy fu— her lips crush into mine as her legs wrap around my waist. An ache in my groin has me losing my mind and trying to figure out how to get her clothes off as fast as I can. But that thought is interrupted when she stands up, leaving me with the wind of her presence as she walks off back toward the water. This chick will most definitely be the death of me.

She takes her bag from the ground and slings it over her shoulders before squatting down in front of the water. I watch her observing the dead bodies at the bottom of the pool. The train of thought running through her right now is intriguing and I want to know exactly what she's thinking because regardless of her being locked up for three years, she still seems like she's got this hidden secret of intelligence I'm dying to uncover. "We need to keep walking," I tell her.

"We need water. Is there any water that isn't deadly?"

"There is, but it ain't near here." I finally stand up against the tree, feeling a slight unease in the back of my head. I reach around to the wound, checking on the damage left behind from the food fight. I pull my hand back around to check for blood, displeased to see that there is, in fact, blood coating my fingers. "Hey," I say, softer than I intended. This wound is starting to make me a bit nervous. I can't afford an infection right now. I don't have much for medical supplies and what I have has to last us until we die or get the hell out of here—whichever comes first.

Reese runs over to me with worry laced through her blue eyes. "What's the matter?" She looks down at my hand and back up at my face. "Did I do that?" She thinks she shot my hand.

I nod and laugh quietly. "No, babe." I wipe my hand off on my pants and turn around. "It's my head."

"Where's the first-aid stuff?" she asks, urgency filling her voice.

"In my bag." Reese runs over to my bag, rummaging through it. She pauses for a minute while she's in there and I know the first aid shit was right on top, so she shouldn't be having much trouble finding it.

She still hasn't moved. I hear her unfolding paper. What the hell? Why now? I move up behind her, tearing the paper out of her hand. "I just need you to help me with my head." I shove the paper into my back pocket. Damn, I can't keep much from this girl.

"What is that?" she asks.

"My head, please," I say, although it comes out more as a growl.

"It looked like directions. Do you know how to get out of here?" she asks.

It's the question I've asked myself hundreds of times, yet the only information Mom left for

me makes no goddamn sense.

"No. Just, Jesus, can you help me or not?" She presses on my shoulders, forcing me to sit in front of her feet. She squats down behind me and I can feel her eyes inspecting whatever the damage must look like. It can't be good if she's looking at it as long as she is. "Am I dying, or what?"

"It's infected," she says quietly. I can't say I'm surprised. The ache has been running down my back for hours, but I've done my best to ignore it. Being inside of her made forgetting about it pretty easy. Although I think if I suggested that as a quick fix right now, she'd probably just call me an asshole again. "This is going to hurt."

"It already hurts," I remind her.

"It's going to hurt more," she says, obviously needing the last word.

"Do what you need to do." She takes the small bottle of rubbing alcohol I threw in my bag and pours it over my head. Every nerve in my head feels like it's in shock or on fire, and dammit to hell, I can't even remember my name right now.

Although regardless of not being able to think straight, I sure as hell feel the needle piercing back through my skin again. "Just tightening it back up."

"Wasn't it already tight?" Jesus. I'm shrieking like a girl at this point and if the circumstances were different, she'd be laughing at me for reacting this way. Shit, that hurt. "Are you done?"

"Yes, you big baby," she says, blowing on the spot gently. My body can't take much more of the dizzying sensations hitting my skin right now.

"Just stop, please. Thank you." I stand back up, feeling out of sorts again. This has to stop. I did not need this. We didn't even get much food out of it and we're both starved nearly to death at this point. We need to find something to hunt, which is why we need to keep walking. The prisoners have cleared this place of any animal years ago. The only place we have any hopes of finding anything is at least fifteen miles from here, and I don't know if I can even make it that far at this point.

She puts the medical supplies back inside my bag, zips it up and hands it over to me. "Sorry for going through your stuff. I shouldn't have."

Great. Now I'm the ass. "It's fine."

She takes her bag and places her pistol into her pocket.

"Is the safety on?" I ask, and she looks at me with confusion. I guess that means she wasn't actually a murderer before finding herself condemned to this place. I reach into her pocket and pull the pistol back out. "See this?" I point to the safety switch, showing her how to lock it in. Looking embarrassed, she takes the pistol from my hand and slips it back into her pocket.

"So, it's at least a fifteen mile walk, , but I'm hoping we'll find food and water there."

"Hoping?" she replies.

"There are no guarantees here, Reese. I think you've learned that over the past couple of days. All we can do is cross our fingers and hope for the best right now." I begin walking alongside the

dam in the direction away from the main camp. I hear her following in my footsteps and I'm gathering she doesn't want to talk too much. She's probably regretting everything that just happened between us. I took her virginity and she's probably sore and shit. Plus, I'm acting like a dick. Is there really any other way to act here, though? I reach my hand back to her, waiting for her to succumb to my assholiness. A minute passes, but I still hold my hand out, waiting for her to take it.

She finally slips her small hand into mine and grips her fingers around mine. Without much to say, I bring her knuckles up to my lips and kiss her gently. I hear a sigh of relief expel from her and I pull her into me. "I'm sorry," I say. I don't know why I said sorry or even what I'm really apologizing for, but it felt like something I needed to say.

"I didn't know you were capable of speaking such a poisonous word," she replies under breath.

"I'm capable of more than you give me credit for," I remind her. "Look, Reese." I stop walking and bring her in front of me. "We haven't had much water and hardly anything to eat in days. I've got an infection and—"

"What are you saying?" she snaps. "You promised me we were going to make it out of here, Sin. You promised me. That's why I'm here with you. I was ready to give up days ago. I was ready to give up in the shed, actually. Do you know how many times I tried to...to—"

"To what?" I growl.

"End it all. The pain. The starvation. The thirst. Did you know a person can go a couple of weeks without eating or drinking before—before your body shuts down? I do. I know this because I tried it. At the end of it all, during the days I started hallucinating and wondering how long I would have to lie in the middle of the cold, wooden ground, waiting to die. And then I realized I couldn't sit there waiting for it to happen, so I began to eat the rations I had stored. I made myself sick for a week after. I thought my stomach was going to explode or implode—I couldn't determine what I was feeling. I just thought I was going to actually die from eating due to whatever damage I must have caused while I was trying to starve myself to death."

I can't get mad at her. I did my own stupid shit. Locked in a dark cell, with no light, I tried to convince myself I was dead a number of times, hoping it was just true. It never was. It made me feel crazier by the day. "I get it."

"So don't sit here and give me your stupid death warnings because neither of us are dying here. We would have already died if that was our destiny. So, sorry, you're stuck with me, and you're stuck with your stupid hot body and your even stupider cocky personality. Suck it up, Sin. We're finding food and water, and then we're getting the hell out of here."

I can't help the small smile biting at my cheeks. I don't know why this girl was brought here, but with as many shitty hands that life has dealt me, I sort of won the royal flush with her. I continue pulling her ahead into the blinding sunlight.

"Do the prisoners come down this far?" she asks as we turn a slight bend in the path.

"Not usually. Why?"

"Do you know who that is?" she asks, pointing up at the tree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

REESE

## THREE YEARS AGO

"**I'll be home** at six tonight, Reese," Mom shouts into my bedroom. "Just a short shift today."

"See ya later," I yell back. A short shift for mom is nine hours. I wouldn't call her a work-a-holic, but she's a devoted nurse who loves what she does. Now that it's summer and school and soccer are over for a few months, she's picked up some more shifts. I do think she overdoes it, but she shoos me off when I tell her that. I try my best to pull my weight around here and help out. I babysit every morning and the family pays me pretty well, so it's enough to take some of the burdens off of us at least. Mom and I are more like friends than we are mother and daughter, but it's because we've been in this survival thing together since Dad died. She needs me just as much as I need her. Dad's death forced me to grow up much quicker than I probably should have, but that's life.

I head into the kitchen to make myself breakfast, finding Mom's lunch bag sitting next to the gallon of milk. *Crap*. I don't know what's with this hospital she works at now—most of the time it's like it's an empty shell filled with no more than thirty patients. There's no cafeteria there or any place to grab food. And of course, it's a bit of a walk to the grocery store—too long to make it there and back during a break. We don't have a working car anymore, so we walk everywhere. Thankfully, we are only a fifteen-minute walk from the hospital.

I have to bring this down to her or she won't eat today. With her diabetes, she can't go without lunch and she wouldn't dare to test that awful boss of hers with an extended break. He'd probably fire her on the spot. This guy, Jackson Crownwell, is supposedly the wealthiest man in this county—he owns both hospitals and a bunch of local shops and office buildings here. He's sort of like the mayor I guess, but our town doesn't have a large enough population for a mayor—or that's what I've been told anyway. It doesn't make much sense to me. Any time I've asked questions, Mom usually just says it's politics and not to worry about it. So, I don't.

I pour myself a small bowl of cereal and eat it quickly so I can get down to the hospital. I debate calling her at work to let her know I'm coming, but she may get in trouble for taking a non-emergency call during her shift. It's best if I just slip in and out before anyone sees me.

She'll have her lunch and I'll have some peace-of-mind.

I step outside, lifting my face up to the sun, still appreciating it after living here for seven years. Before Dad died, we lived up in Washington. It was always raining, dark and kind of gloomy. We lived there because of Dad's job at Microsoft, so we didn't have much say about our distaste for the climate. After he died, Mom took a dive into a funk. She was miserable and depressed, as was I. Dad was everything to us. He supported us and cared for us so we wouldn't ever have to worry about needing or wanting anything. He took pride in giving us a good life. Regardless of how much financial planning he did for our family, though, it was all taken from us when he was in the car accident on his way home from work one night. He was in a coma for six months and needed multiple surgeries. Mom cleaned out the bank accounts at the chance of keeping him alive, but in the end, it just wasn't enough. Anyway, we had no reason to stay living in the rainy state, so we moved down to a more affordable and sunny location in Oklahoma. With Dad's life insurance money, Mom bought us a tiny house and went back to school so she could support the two of us. It was a wise investment, but the money ran out quickly and she fell into a pile of debt, which is why everything she makes now basically goes to her credit card and loan payments. Life dumped on us. Still, Mom developed a new outlook and pushed through our troubles with a smile, constantly reminding me that life will get better. I believe her. I have to. I want her to be happy again. A real kind of happy. Not the fake kind she portrays for my sake.

I walk through the dirt lot of the hospital and up to the front doors, noticing how little the grounds have been cared for lately. I haven't been here in a few months, but it looks like they kind of let the place go a little, which is strange. Mr. Crownwell is usually on top of all this. After all, he has an image to maintain.

I walk up to the front desk, finding Miss Amy, the receptionist, where she usually is. I will say, this hospital has had basically no turnover since Mom started working here five years ago. "Reese Pieces, how is my favorite young lady?" she squeaks, running out from around the desk and wrapping her arms around my neck. Miss Amy is about sixty, old enough to be my grandmother. She's a vibrant woman, full of energy and always has a smile on her face. Her hair looks a little grayer than the last time I saw her and she's wearing a touch more makeup than usual; although her dark red lipstick is something that has always been constant with her. It makes her teeth extra white and her smile large. "Are you here to see your mama?"

"She forgot her lunch today and I didn't want her blood sugar levels to crash."

"You are such a sweet young lady. Your mama sure is lucky to you have you as a daughter." She pats me on the head and returns to the back of her desk. "Let me see if I can locate her for you." She searches through the computer for a minute and lifts up the receiver on the phone. "Paging Laura Daniels. Could you please come to the front desk," I hear Miss Amy's voice boom through the speakers in the hall.

It takes a couple of minutes but the front desk phone rings and Miss Amy quickly picks up the call. "Is that her?" I whisper.

Miss Amy nods her head with a small smile and holds up a finger. "No problem, Laura." She hangs up the phone and hands me a guest badge. "Go on up to the third floor. She's at the nurses' station there."

I decide to take the stairs up the three flights since the elevators are notoriously known for being super slow. I don't like being here. Maybe I don't have the natural born instinct Mom has to help people get better, and it might be because of the combined scent of bleach and ammonia. The smells and the sounds here always make me feel a little ill.

I'm breathless by the time I reach the third floor, and I approach the nurses' station just as Mom is running in the opposite direction. "Reese, honey, wait right there, I'll be back in one minute. There's an emergency."

There are no other nurses at the desk, which is unusual since there are typically four or five sitting here. After a minute or two, one of the nurses comes back and sits down behind the desk. "Hi, Reese!" she says, sounding a little breathless herself. "Everything okay?"

"Hi, Sunny. Yeah, Mom forgot her lunch, so I figured I'd bring it by."

"Such a sweetie," she says. "Your mom should be back in just a minute. We have a little situation with one of our patients today."

"Oh. I hope everything is okay," I tell her, suddenly curious as to what's going on.

Her lips pull into an unsettled grimace. "Not exactly. One of our patients who has been here for the past two years became—" she leans over the counter to come closer to me, "unruly today. We were supposed to release him, but after a departing conversation with Mr. Crownwell, I guess he—well, he tried to—" she places her hand up by her mouth, and in a whisper says, "kill him." She shakes her head with disappointment. "He's just a kid too, maybe only a couple years older than you. He was very troubled and sick, though. He was accused of some very volatile actions, but as a minor, we treated him and thought he was well enough to be released into a youth probation program. That was until he attacked Mr. Crownwell today. I'm not sure what will happen to him now."

My eyebrows scrunch together, curious as to what she's going to say. "What did he do to be placed here in the first place? What volatile actions?" I prompt her to continue.

"Nothing. It's nothing for you to worry about, honey. Your Mom will be back in just a minute." Just as she finishes her sentence, I hear a struggle down the hall. I hear groaning or grunting, I'm not sure which. "Reese, why don't you come stand here behind the desk with me." I do as she says, unsure of what's happening. I don't make it completely behind the desk before I see five nurses escorting a patient down the hall. The patient is not exactly struggling against them, but he looks like he's in some type of pain.

"I didn't do anything," he yells at one of them. "Where are you bringing me?" None of the nurses respond. There are handcuffs around his wrists and he's in a hospital gown. He's looking right at me as he approaches the nurses' desk. For a minute, I feel frozen with fear because of the way he's looking at me. But as he comes closer, I see that it isn't a frightening look, it's a

pleading look.

"Help me," he says to me. A striking pain runs through my chest, feeling remorse for this boy I've never seen before. It seems like whatever he's being blamed for might be wrong. I don't know the actual reason he's here or where he's going, but he looks scared. Although I realize the people in this hospital are mentally ill, I can't help wondering how ill this boy is or if he deserves whatever it is they're doing to him. He doesn't exactly look sick. He just looks hurt. His eyes are large and sky blue with a pleading look clouding over his gaze. And he won't take his eyes off of me.

"We should help him!" I tell the nurses. "Where are you taking him?"

No one answers me. Where's Mom? She'd help him. I need to find her. "Reese, you should stay here," Sunny says softly, as if she could hear my thoughts.

"What are they doing to him?" This hospital has always been a place to help those who can't help themselves, and this doesn't seem right to me. Unruly patients fight back, they cuss at the nurses and they have hatred in their eyes. This boy has none of those characteristics.

Ignoring Sunny, I run down the hall, looking in every room for Mom. Halfway down the hall, I finally hear her voice, but then everything goes quiet. Where is she? I continue looking in every room until I reach the end of the hall. I peer into the last patient's room and find a man standing in front of the bed with his hands on his head. He looks very upset. I realize I'm staring when he looks up at me. "Who are you?" he asks.

"I—uh—I'm Nurse Daniel's daughter."

"Oh, are you?" he says with an angry lilt. Without much warning, he moves across the room quickly and takes me by the arm. "Then, I don't like you."

"You don't even know me," I say nervously. "Let go of me!"

"His lips curl into a snarl and he wraps his arms around me tightly, holding his hand over my mouth, keeping me from screaming. His hand is so large; he's partially covering my vision as well. My feet are no longer touching the ground and he's taking me down the back stairwell. He's running down the stairs so fast, I feel like we both might fall. Panic is rushing through me and I don't know what's happening. I've never been this scared. I live in a safe town. I live among friendly people.

The second we exit the hospital and the sun beats down on us, I see a van in front of us—a white van with no windows. I hear the doors unlock and the man opens the trunk door. He tosses me inside and I hit my head against metal inside of the van. He climbs in after me and hovers over me, glaring at me with a look of what can only be described as death. Shaking and scared, I plead for him to release me, but I feel a needle puncturing the skin below my shoulder.

Everything becomes dark. The door of the van slams shut and the panic within me calms. I think I'm falling asleep.

## CHAPTER SIX

## SIN

**It's been years** since I've seen him—the man in in the tree. Clearly, not much has changed. "Yeah, I know who he is." I mean, I haven't actually spoken to him before, mostly because I don't think he speaks. I've only heard the rumors of what he did to land himself in the hospital years ago. Unless someone offers up the information on himself or herself here, we're not given much info on our fellow inmates. He was already in Chipley when I got here.

"Well, why is he sitting in that tree?" Reese asks.

I stop and turn toward her, gripping her shoulders. "Babe, everyone here is criminally insane." She looks confused by what I'm saying, like I hadn't said this to her already.

"There's a difference between a criminal and a person who has a psychological disorder," she states. "Why are they grouped together like this?"

Here's another one of those instances where I feel like I'm dealing more with a fifteen-year-old than an eighteen-year-old. "Reese," I collect my thoughts, or try to, but her question is making me think of a logical answer. "Clearly, these people have proven that their criminal actions were the result of insanity." There. Yeah, that works. Is that what happened? Because, if that's the case, why was I sent to Applebrook?

"That makes sense, I suppose," she says, looking from me over to Rooter. Walking past me, she makes her way to the base of the tree, seemingly studying the guy, intrigued almost.

"Reese." Please don't do anything stupid.

She ignores my voice as she examines the length of the tree. Oh, this is going to be great. Doing exactly what I assumed she was considering, she hops up and grabs ahold of two branches, while walking herself up the side of the tree until she can lift herself up on the level of branches. "For God's sake, Reese, get down here!" I shout up at her.

Again, she ignores me. I fidget uncomfortably, watching her approach the height where Rooter is sitting. "Hi," she says sweetly to him, placing her hand over his back. "Are you okay?" Is she serious? Of course he's not okay. None of us are okay. Rooter looks over at Reese, but without shock or surprise. He's studying her eyes. She places her hand on his back and situates herself between two branches. "Do you need help?"

Rooter nods his head, but doesn't break his gaze into her eyes. Which is really starting to piss

me off right now. Maybe if Reese knew what I've heard—that Rooter used to run some kind of cult where they convinced people to kill themselves, she might feel differently. I guess once he was arrested and brought into custody, he refused to talk. From what I heard, he didn't blink or show much sign of life, aside from his moving chest and beating pulse. Because of this, they brought him to Applebrook. Evidently, they weren't able to break him either and they sent him over here to rot and die like the rest of us.

The hopeless—that's what we are. We are the people who aren't counted as part of any population. We are considered dead, according to the records in Oklahoma. Why Jackson Crownwell doesn't just kill us before dropping us into this shithole, I still haven't figured out. I have to think there's some kind of reason to his madness.

I can't hear much from down here, but I can see Rooter whispering something to Reese. My head is starting to spin with assumptions and I want to get up there, throw her over my shoulder and get her down. "Reese!" I shout up instead.

She looks down at me, holding up one finger, telling me to hold on. Rooter looks down at me, too, as her head is still turned away from him. The second Rooter's lips twitch into a smirk, I pull myself up the tree quicker than I thought possible. "What are you saying to her? I thought you didn't talk," I seethe toward him.

Rooter just stares at me and doesn't say a word. I know he said something to Reese though. "Sin, calm down," Reese scolds me. She's telling me to calm down? Me? I try to breathe in through my nose with hopes of calming my growing rage, but it isn't working.

My aggression has grown at a rapid rate since Reese stepped into my life. I used to have the ability to control myself like no other, but for some reason, with her in the equation, I go from zero to sixty faster than I can blink. My heart starts pounding in my chest and it's like I can't breathe, but words bubble up my throat, making regret easy when all is said and done. It's one of the biggest reasons Reese keeps calling me an asshole. I know I've been an asshole to her, but in all honesty, I can't control myself. Maybe it's the fact that I haven't had a damn thing to fight for in five years, and now I feel like I have a purpose.

"What did you say to her?" I ask Rooter. Knowing he isn't going to answer me, I climb a little higher, getting close enough to knock this asshole off his branch.

"Sin, please calm down," Reese urges me again. "I know why he's sitting up here." She points behind me and I follow the length of her arm out into the distance. We're up against the property line of Chipley, and over the tree line is the outside world. There's nothing but flat open land with hay bales scattered around. I can probably see at least ten miles into the distance and there's nothing out there. Nothing. Not that it matters. The fact that there's no gate, fence, or dam beyond the trees pisses me off. I have heard rumors of another way, although it's likely just a tease. "How long would we have to survive if we could get across that water?"

Rooter looks over at Reese at the same time I do and he nods his head frivolously. "Even if you make it across, the bacteria will have already seeped into your skin. You'd likely die within

minutes," I tell her. "Plus, the top portion of the wall is electrically charged. That's why you saw all of those bodies at the bottom of the water."

*Yes, we're screwed.*

Reese looks over my head and back out at freedom. While I'd expect to see some kind of sadness or loss of hope in her eyes, there seems to be determination instead. That worries me. She doesn't think before acting or speaking. That'll get her killed here.

"We'll see you soon," Reese says to Rooter. Another smile spreads across his face. With another deep breath, I lower myself to the ground, waiting for Reese to descend, too. Of course Rooter leans over to whisper something else to her and I swear to God, she has ten seconds before I really do pull her down.

She pats him tenderly on the back and lowers herself down the tree, slipping a little on the way. Once she's on the ground, she walks on ahead of me without a word.

Stalking up to her, I take her by the arm and fling her around. "What the hell was that?"

"What was what?" she asks, asserting an attitude.

"Hmm, I don't know. The suicide whisperer wants to be your friend. That's so great, Reese. I don't know why I didn't suggest that idea myself."

"Suicide whisperer?" she asks. She doesn't look put off by this, but rather fascinated.

"Should I remind you again as to what reason all of these people are in here?" I say.

"No, but why don't you tell me why you were removed from Applebrook and brought here? As you said yourself, the hopeless and the dangerous criminals are the ones who are brought here. Surely, you would never stoop so low as to appear hopeless, Sin. So, what is it that made you appear so dangerous?"

I look at her, waiting for her to blink or get that fearful look she gets in her eyes every time she presses me with questions about my past. Questions she knows she doesn't truly want answers for. This time, there's no fear, there's just pure anger. I tilt my head to the side a little without breaking eye contact. "I tried to kill Jackson Crownwell." And if I ever see that bastard again, I won't fail twice.

"It's a shame you didn't succeed," she says. "I'm here because of you, right? Isn't that what your dad said to me?"

"You know you've been snapping at me for days for having mood swings, and now you're kind of acting like a bitch." I'm going to go ahead and assume she just put the pieces together and realized I'm the person to blame for all of this—for the demise of her life.

"Maybe you're a little confused, but I'm not the one who dragged you out of Applebrook and then threw you into the back of a van," I tell her. That wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault that she went looking for trouble that day.

"How did you know I was thrown into the van?" she snaps back.

"I saw you." I let out a long sigh, hating to have to admit all of this to her. "I watched from a window as he threw you in."

"You knew?"

"Yes. I watched as you were thrown into the darkness. I saw the fear in your eyes. I witnessed the exact moment your innocence was torn away from you. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was for what you were about to go through, but I was restrained."

"Your father has kidnapped others?"

"No. He took you because your mother took me." I swallow the bile rising up my throat, feeling the hatred toward myself while again admitting what I've caused this poor girl.

"My mother took you?" she asks. Confusion forces lines across her forehead, and I hate that I have to be more detailed with my explanation.

"I was blamed for my Mother's death, Reese. I was taken away because of it and detained in Applebrook after being diagnosed with psychosis. Because I was a minor, and they didn't have any real proof, they sentenced me to two years and then a probation program following that." Freedom was just around the corner for me. "I was supposed to be released the day you saw me getting dragged off down the hall, but Mr. Crownwell had other plans for me." Reese has this look on her face like I'm telling her the world ended last year. *Although, would I even know if it did?*

"What happened then?" she asks, appearing to have trouble swallowing her thoughts.

"Unfortunately for me, I had overheard a conversation Mr. Crownwell was having over the phone about Chipley. I was sent to his office for my discharge papers and I found myself frozen at his door as I listened to his plans, what he had rolled out, and how he was laundering the state's money by maintaining Chipley as an overflow project for Applebrook." Mom had always told me that Chipley was a place where sick people could become well again. I believed her. Now I know it's a place where the hopeless come to rot. "I was still in shock when he turned to find me listening to his conversation. I had caught him. He employed my mother and he knew I had lived in Chipley for almost two years before my mother—I wasn't supposed to know the truth."

"Wait, you lived here before?"

"Yes, my mother was a caretaker. Things were different then." Or I was just on the other side and never saw what was actually happening. "Anyway, because of everything I heard, Mr. Crownwell had me re-detained for 'trying to kill him.' He couldn't release me back into the public with the information I had." I was supposed to be released back to my home town—the normal life I had before Chipley. Mom planned it all out. Her death. My arrest. And my freedom.

"So, you really did nothing to be here?"

"No. I'm innocent. Like you."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

REESE

"**You said I was taken** because of you. What do I have to do with you?" I ask him. I feel like I need more air. I can hardly breathe, even with the vast open space of nothing but trees and oxygen surrounding us.

"Reese," he stops the conversation. He needs to tell me the rest. I need to hear it all. The questions that have been burning through my mind for the past three years have answers and I need them all.

"Please," I beg.

"Your mother was the nurse who had to inform my father of my continued sentence and that I would be held in solitary confinement for an indefinite amount of time. Not only did my father lose my mother, he lost me too. And for some screwed up reason, even though he was convinced I was the one who killed my mother, 'the love of his freaking life', he still wanted to be near me. He was obsessed with my mother and me. *Obsessed*. He went crazy. He had already gone crazy."

I think I've come to figure that out. A sane person wouldn't lock a fifteen-year-old up in a shed. "I can see that," I say softly, backing up, needing some space. Needing space from myself at this point. I drop down against a tree, pulling a bottle of water out of my backpack, grateful for Sin raiding Snatcher's fridge before we left. "Keep going."

"My father inflicts pain onto others as they have done to him. You were the retribution—the revenge on your mother for taking me from him," he says. "He took you from her."

"I was taken as a punishment to my mother—the woman who wanted nothing but to devote her life to helping others?" I confirm, mostly for myself. This senseless purpose for my condemning is because someone wanted revenge against Mom. Not me.

"I don't understand this. If you didn't kill your mother, then—" His chest heaves in and out as if he's contemplating the answer to the question he's hoped I wouldn't ask. "Who did?"

"No one killed her," he tells me. "She's not dead; although, she might as well be. I'll likely never see her again. And if I did, I'm not sure how I'd feel, facing the fact that she is alive and I've been held here as a prisoner for five years."

The wind has been stolen from my lungs. The words melted on my tongue, and my thoughts are spinning like a top. She's alive. No one killed her. And no one knows this?

"You said she was buried behind the shed," I remind him.

"She is. I buried some of her belongings--things that made her still feel like she existed--into the dirt, so I could forget about her. She isn't buried in a literal sense, but the thought of her as a mother is buried behind the shed." What mother does this to her child?

"Sin, if she isn't dead, where is she?"

"I don't know. She abandoned me here with nothing but a fucking note—a note telling me to bury some of her belongings and then inform my father that I had found her dead. She said he would blame me for her death and I would be removed from Chipley and tried as a minor. She told me to plead innocent. Instead, I was diagnosed with psychosis and held in solitary confinement at Applebrook. She thought her plan would work. She thought an apology for bringing me to Chipley would make me feel better. She thought that if she admitted her mistakes, I would forgive her. She admitted that everything she had done was wrong, but that her plan was the only way both of us could survive."

I'm trying my hardest to comprehend all of this, but I can't. Why couldn't his mother just leave on her own and take Sin with her? If she was a caretaker, she should have been able to come and go as she pleased. "If she wasn't a prisoner, then why?"

"She knew too much. When she asked to leave, Jackson Crownwell made a deal with her. Her plan that she left me on that note was part of that deal. The plan revolved around no one finding out about Chipley." Sin takes a seat beside me and wraps his arm around my neck, placing a kiss on my temple.

"That's why your father assumed you murdered her?" I ask, leaning my head against his chest.

"Once I was brought back to Chipley after another three-year sentence at Applebrook, I found my father. I unleashed on him. I blamed him for everything. I told him he was the reason she was dead. I tried to convince him that he murdered her. It was my form of revenge on him, I guess. My mother brought us to Chipley in the first place so we could get away from him. Then he found us, and I still don't know how." He closes his eyes and nods his head, like he's trying to get his thoughts straight. "You know, when you lose your mind, you become weak enough to be convinced of something you didn't do? That's what I did to him. Because he deserved it."

"Everyone still thinks your mother is dead?" I ask.

"Yes, and no one will ever know anything differently."

"I'm sorry," I tell him. I'm sorry because he's just like me. He didn't ask for this. He was more or less taken against his will, too.

"You shouldn't be sorry. I should be sorry and you should hate me."

Hate? This wasn't his fault. He didn't ask for his. I didn't ask for this. Life was stripped away from both of us and I can't hate him for that. "Then why do I think I love you?" I ask.

"Love? What the hell is love? Abandonment? Is that love? No, you don't. You don't love someone after a week. I know that much. You love that you're not alone. You love that you're no

longer in the dark. You love that there is some kind of screwed up light of hope out there. But, let me assure you, Reese, you don't love me. No one can love me."

"Stop," I yell. "Love is when someone will put their life on the line for someone else. Love is offering food to someone when you're starving. Love is giving someone hope, even when we both know there is none. Maybe this kind of love isn't the type where I can't eat, can't sleep, can't breathe, but this love is one I don't think I could survive without. It doesn't matter what you say to me, you won't change the way I feel."

Sin grabs his bag and throws it over his shoulders, angered and unsettled. He doesn't look at me and if he wants to get offended by the truth, he can. "Don't let your feelings get you killed," he spouts off, spitting a mouthful into the dirt. "Love gets people killed."

"Like who?" I run up to his side and step in front of him, continuing my strides backwards. "Who did love get killed?"

"Look around, Reese!"

"Yeah, we're surrounded by nothing except hundreds of criminally insane assholes fifteen miles away. So again, who was killed in the name of love?"

"Romeo and Juliet, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, and Orpheus and Eurydice. That's who."

I can't help but to laugh, partially because in what world could he compare us to Romeo and Juliet? This is no romance. This is love growing from boredom of hatred. "Who are Orpheus and Eurydice?"

"Don't worry about it." He takes me by the shoulders and pushes me off to the side so he can continue walking.

"You know one second you're pounding me into the dirt, moaning in my ear and the next you're—you're...you know what, screw this. Screw you. Screw this goddamn town and everything and everyone in it. If you want to be an asshole, go be an asshole, but I'm not going to be following you around like a lost puppy while you do." He continues walking as if I didn't say anything. As if I don't matter. We're probably going to die out here and I can't even die next to someone who knows how to be a decent human being.

I stop. I'm done. I don't even know what we're walking toward. Is it the simple idea that there might be living animals out here? Because I haven't even heard a single bird or cricket chirp. I haven't seen an insect or any sign that they exist. The trees are thinning out and I only see open space ahead—something I've grown to hate. After being confined for so long, all I dreamt about was open space, but now it's like there's too much of it and I feel like I'm free falling into oblivion. Being contained felt safe, secure, and presumable. Maybe I'm just losing my mind.

"I don't do the chasing game, Reese. If you want to stick with me, keep walking," he shouts back at me. I wasn't stopping so he'd stop, too. I wasn't stopping to get a reaction out of him. I stopped because I'm not sure I can be around him anymore. And as much as I thought he had all of these magical answers—ways out of this purgatory, I'm seeing now that he's no more knowledgeable on a form of escape than I am.

I've made up my mind. I'm stopping. I don't want to follow him anymore. "Sin," I yell over to him, unsure if he can hear me with how far away he is now.

But he does. He turns around, continuing to walk backwards. "What?"

"I'm not going with you."

"So you're just going to sit here until you rot and die? Good plan, smarty."

"I don't want to keep fighting against this pre-determined ending. I give up." Is that what I'm doing? Am I giving up? An hour ago, I refused to give up...but I was wrong. Is it the starvation that's finally making its way into my brain? Or the thirst my entire body is now quenching? There really is no way out, and I'm not sure how much more I can fight to pound this conclusion into my head. I'm tired. I'm weak. And this man hates me more than I hate myself. Maybe I am giving up. I got out of the shed. That's what I wanted to do. That's what I survived to accomplish. I just never assumed how much worse life could be on the outside of those wooden walls. I'm ready to call this what it is. What it has been for the last three years—a slow, painful, and miserable death.

I drop my bag to the ground, feeling the weight of my body anchor to the dirt. There are no trees to lean on now, there's just my bag, the ground and the sun. This red dirt will eventually swallow me up and take me into the earth where I must belong because I sure as hell don't belong here anymore. I rest my back against the backpack and lift my face up to the sky, feeling the scorching sun have its way with my already burnt skin.

Closing my eyes, I try to imagine Mom's face. I try to remember the happiness Mom and Dad had for each other before he died—the love that I hoped I would feel some day. Most of the girls I was friends with in school had divorced parents and stepparents and horror stories involving their largely blended family. I knew I was lucky to have two parents who didn't have to put me through that. Although luck only runs so deep since Dad was taken from us at such a young age. It was like the world was punishing us for having lives that were too perfect. Well, the world won again...our lives were destroyed. Mom's life has been destroyed twice, and mine twice. Now, the official destruction will occur as I lie here staring up into the ball of fire that most people consider to be spectacular. It'll be the death of me. It'll burn me alive, and I could only be so lucky to starve to death first.

Heaviness coats my chest, like someone were sitting on me or stealing the air out of my lungs. Is this how it's supposed to feel? I try to move my lips and my tongue, but neither budge. I even try to focus on the burning sensation covering my exposed skin, but I don't feel that either. My back doesn't ache and my feet aren't sore like they were. I feel like I'm lying on a pillow in the clouds, floating into oblivion. If this is what dying is supposed to feel like, I wish I had stopped fighting years ago.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## SIN

**I'm not turning back** for her. That's what chicks like to do. They crave attention and they want you to go running after them so they can play up the dramatic bullshit. Love. Fuck love.

I don't know how long I've been walking since Reese stopped following me, but I'm guessing now that she was pretty serious about giving up on this idea of finding food and water. I thought it was just for attention; although, if that were the case, I would have assumed she'd pick up her pace when she realized I wasn't playing into her game and turning back for her. Twisting around to see if I can catch a glimpse, I see now that there is no sight of her for as far as I can look, which right now, is probably at least a couple of miles. I can't turn back for her. Not now. I need to get water and food. That's why we were coming out here. I'm surprised as hell that I've made it this far without croaking, but dammit to hell, I'm not giving up now. I can smell the water. Or I hope it's water. Drinkable water. She didn't realize how close we were.

I come up on a small creek...a creek thin enough to step over, but there's water. God, could I be lucky enough to find some fish or frogs in this murk? I dip my hand in slowly, testing it for the flesh eating crap that's in the water closer to the camp. Nothing so far. I grab a bottle out of my backpack and dunk it in. Pulling it out, I admire the floating particles of dirt and whatever other sediment is in this crap. I place the bottle down and search through my bag for the iodine I grabbed from Dad's dresser. That stuff is like gold in this town.

As I pour the iodine into the bottle and close it up to let it sit, I find myself looking back down the path I had been walking, wondering what the hell Reese is really up to. I heard her say she was giving up and I hadn't thought much about it until now. What did she mean by that? She was preaching to me just an hour ago about how we can't give up. How we've come this far and have to keep fighting. It seems odd she would just flip a switch. Although, adding in the combination of starvation, dehydration, and exhaustion, God knows what's going on with the signals in her brain. God knows what's going on in mine, or what has been going on in mine for years. What has this place done to me?

Never mind. I know what she meant by that and I ignored her. I ignored her because deep down, I know damn well, I am my father and I refuse to let anyone know how much alike we are.

I screw the cap back on my water and drop it into my bag. Dammit, I swore to myself I wouldn't do this with her. I swore. Now I'm chasing after her like a moron.

She hasn't once struck me as the type to be brave enough to tough this place out alone. I know she has been trying to put on this whole tough girl act, but I see right through it, or I thought I saw right through it. I'm second-guessing myself now, though. Maybe the girl is batshit crazy.

I continue walking for what feels like way longer than the time it took to leave her, but there's no sight of her anywhere. No footprints, nothing.

As I see the tree line approach in the distance, I know for sure she was still following me past the point of where the trees ended.

Shit.

I pick up the speed, feeling the heaviness in my head weigh me down more than it already has been. Please don't tell me I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing. The closer I get, the more confirmation I have. My legs are carrying me at a speed I didn't think I was capable of at this point. I'm fearful of the damage that has already been done, and I'm fearful for the damage that might be irreversible.

Shouting as loud as I can, I startle every one of them to divert their attention from her to me. She's screaming. She's alive. Thank God. I whip my pistol out and start popping it at every moving target. There's a newbie, she looks like she was just caught robbing a bank, except this is nothing like robbing a bank. Her hands are up in the air, dried blood encircles her mouth and her eyes are large with fear, for good reason since my pistol is aimed directly at her head.

This is the fear I was trying to help Reese avoid. The desperation which follows starvation—cannibalism. All of them have fled, except for those who I shot dead. I let the woman, still staring at me with unblinking eyes, go. "Get the hell out of here!" I shout to her.

Reese is writhing in pain, lying ten feet in front of me. It takes me a second to analyze the landscape of damage covering her body. Bite marks, deep flesh wounds over fatty areas, blood dripping from her nose, likely from the fight she probably put up. There were at least eight of them, and only one of her. Slowly, I walk over, guilt saturating every fiber in my body. I am an asshole. I can't control my moods, my behavior, or my attitude and this is what it's caused. I don't have enough medical supplies to treat her. I barely had enough to treat my head and I'm afraid we've used most of what we had for that.

I drop to my knees, scooping my hand under her head. I want to tell her I'm sorry, but it's too late for an apology. I want to tell her I was wrong. I want to tell her I love her, too, and that it's making me lose every piece of sense I thought I had left. People don't love each other after a week, but I think I loved her since the moment she tried to protect me in the hospital five years ago. She didn't know me then, yet she still believed I was good. Since that day, she's the only one who has believed I am good. But the truth is clear, I'm not good. I'm as evil as everyone else here.

"Hey," I say softly, nervous to hear her words. Nervous to see the look in her eyes when she opens them. She thinks she's seen it all now. She probably thought being kidnapped and locked up in a shed for three years was the most horror one could experience in a lifetime, and she should have been right about that. Survivors are supposed to get their time to share their story, grieve, and work on a form of survival after the storm has passed. I wanted that for her. The second I found her in the shed, I wanted her to have a survival story, but in truth, I'm not sure either one of us will have anything like that. If I manage to escape, I'll be nothing more than a runaway convict, regardless of doing nothing to earn that title.

Reese's eyes remain closed as her head twists from side to side. Her face is crunched in pain and her arms and legs are trembling. Her bare stomach is contracting and expanding quickly and each time she exhales, trickles of blood drip from her open wounds. I open my bag and pull out the last of the medical supplies, debating which of her wounds are worse. "Reese," I whisper softly.

She struggles to open her eyes and tears follow. "I wanted to die," she says. "That's all I wanted."

"You don't want that. You don't." Of course she does. That's all I've wanted, too.

"Yes, I do. Sin, please."

"Please, what?" No. No. Don't you fucking say it.

"Do it," she growls through a groan. "End me."

"No! Are you out of your mind?" I shout.

"Yeah, I am. So are you. Now do it."

I take my pistol back out, my hand shaking as I tighten my fingers around the pistol's grip. "This is what you want?" I press the barrel up to her temple, watching as her eyes clench tightly. "Open your eyes so I can see them one last time."

She does and I lean down and press my lips against hers, feeling her mouth tighten and tremble. Her tears fall between our noses and now tears are about to fall from my eyes, as well. I can't do this. I don't care how much she wants this. "Do it," she cries. "Don't drag it out."

"This isn't some sick love story, Reese. I'm not going to end you and then finish myself off so we can both rot here under the sun until some of those fucks come back here and dispose of our bodies to feed their starvation."

Her eyes unclench and she looks up at me, scared—but I think it's fear that what I'm saying is true—that I won't end her life. "Then give me the gun." She grits her teeth and reaches up to take it from my hand. "Give it to me, Sin."

"I have a plan," I tell her. It's the same plan I've had since I got here. "I think I can get us out."

I hate how hope fills her eyes. I hate the possibility of her believing what I'm saying. I hate that I've convinced myself of this lousy ounce of hope. "You can't get us out," she says, taking the pistol from my hand. I grab her wrist and twist it around so the barrel is against my forehead.

"Kill me first. If you can kill me, you can do what you want to yourself, but I'm not going on without you."

"I hate you," she grunts. "I hate you, Sin."

"I'm pretty sure you told me you loved me just a couple of hours ago."

"But I hate you now, because you reminded me of how fickle love is, and how confused I must have been for the past week."

"You weren't confused. I was confused. I love you, Reese. I shouldn't love you. It's been a week. But it's like we're the last two people standing on this godforsaken earth, and when that happens, you can either love the other person or hate them. And I don't hate you. I would have shot you dead if I did. And you would have shot me by now if you in fact hated me. There is no gray area here—there's love and hate. Your actions with that pistol will define which of those two you decide upon. Do you love me or hate me?"

She drops the pistol and lowers her head back down, closing her eyes. "Asshole," she breathes.

"Hold that thought," I warn her. I take the rubbing alcohol out and pour it over her oozing wounds. Her shrieks pierce my ears, but I deserve it. I didn't warn her first. I use the last two bandages to cover the largest of the flesh wounds. "You're going to be okay." I help her sit up, and as she's up straight, she slaps me with whatever strength she must have had left. It stings like a bitch, but I deserved that too. "Do you have more clothes in your bag from my mother's closet? Your shit is all torn up."

She nods her head, looking over toward her bag that's surprisingly still intact. That's how desperate these assholes are. They'll eat flesh before looking for actual food. I go through her bag and toss a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt at her. "How much farther is it to wherever we're going?"

"I found running water about five miles away."

"Help me up," she demands. Without thinking, I scoop my hands under her arms and bring her to her feet.

"Are you steady?"

She nods, holding her head with both hands. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

"Get changed," I tell her. I reach into my bag and grab the water I pulled from the stream. "Here, drink this."

She carefully slips off her ravaged pants and shirt, revealing how many more bite marks are covering her body. Jesus. "Where did they come from?" she asks.

"They were probably following us after our encounter with Rooter. Look, I know I'm a little controlling, and in your eyes, I'm probably acting as an arrogant know-it-all, but it's only because I've been here long enough to study these people, their behavioral patterns, and the stages of starvation. I can tell you just by looking at someone how long they've been here, how long they'll survive, and when is the last time they've likely eaten."

She pulls the shirt over her head, squinting against the pain. "Is that going to happen to me? Or you?"

I shrug my shoulders because I honestly don't know. I want to say it depends on the strength of our minds, but it's like our minds become diseased when hunger fully takes over. The next stage of starvation is what she just encountered. She and I aren't there yet, and I don't know exactly what will happen when we reach that point, but I'm hoping we find food. I just haven't found much hope in that department yet. "I can lie to you and say no, but I'm going to try my hardest to stop lying to you." The thought of doing to Reese what those animals just did to her causes a pain in my stomach, but when all control is lost, I'm not sure what will happen.

## CHAPTER NINE

REESE

**I thought I was dying.** I even had a smile on my face. That was only until the shadows overwhelmed me with a cool breeze, followed by the heat of several mouths hovering over my exposed skin. We don't live in a world where vampires, zombies and werewolves exist, yet that was all I could consider. This isn't real life. But it is. They weren't monsters; they were starving human beings who will revert to any sort of behavior to satiate their hunger. I tried to fight back, but I lost the struggle when teeth sunk through the flesh on my thigh. The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced. I'm not sure I'd even know how to describe it, rather than thick nails plunging into me as if my skin were nothing more than a delicate piece of bread. I'm not sure how I have the strength to walk or continue on this endless trek, but I'm seeing now my choices are limited.

I sip on the oddly tasting water Sin has given me. He told me it's clean and I wouldn't care if it wasn't right now, but my body is craving every ounce of the liquid. "There's one thing I don't understand, Sin."

"Yeah?"

"There are starving people all over the world, and yet, I haven't heard of a case where those people suddenly turn into cannibals. So, why here?"

"'Why' is always the question. Why are we here? Why are we alive? Why do we fight for the food that is likely poisoning our brains?" The food. It's the food. "Reese, they want us dead. All of us."

It isn't bad enough they're holding us here as prisoners? Why not just execute us and save the trouble? I'd ask, but I'm guessing there's a roundabout answer for that too, just like everything else.

We walk up on a small creek. Water. Nothing has ever looked so beautiful. I want to drink it and feel it, drown in it. "Is this real?"

Sin laughs quietly. "Yeah, it's dirty, but—"

"It's water." I peel off my shirt and my pants because I need to feel the water on my skin. Stepping out of my boots, I place them neatly along the edge, yearning to feel the coolness against my body.

"What are you doing?" Sin asks.

"Jumping in. What does it look like I'm doing?" I squat down to test my finger in the water, untrusting after the last pool of contamination we came across. I allow my finger to linger for several seconds before confirming the water won't try to eat me alive again.

"You have open wounds all over your body, Reese." I shouldn't have to be reminded of this. It hurts like hell, but the water made me forget about everything else for just a quick minute. I release a long breath, acknowledging that he's right. Am I in hell? Is that what this is? Did I do something so wrong in my life to deserve this?

I sit down on the edge, still in my underwear. "Are you going in?" I ask Sin.

"I wouldn't do that to you," he says quietly.

I look back at him, the look on his face, wanting to call his bluff after all of the shit he has done to me. "You can go in. Don't waste the opportunity because of me."

Sin walks over and sits down beside me. "I'm not going in." I hear his words, but my eyes and focus are directed on the toad perched on a rock across the creek.

"Sin," I whisper, slowly lifting my hand to point at the toad. My stomach turns and screams and my mouth waters. "Sin." I try to get his attention again, but he isn't looking at the toad. His eyes are set beyond the creek, squinting into the distance. He stands up and pulls his gun out, hopping a few rocks to cross the water. I try to focus on what he's looking at it, but I don't see anything. I hear the blast from his gun and I scoot backwards toward my clothes, quickly dressing myself. I step into my boots and follow him. "Sin?"

After moving through the maze of trees, I find Sin crouched down on the ground, hovering over something. His hands are on his head and laughter begins. I slow my strides as I approach him, feeling a tad nervous about what he's covering. As I approach his back, I see a dead hawk lying in front of him. He drops his gun and scoops his hands under the bird, bringing it up to his face. "Hungry?" he asks me.

Does he need to ask? "Can we start a fire?"

"We don't need a fire." He leans forward and wraps his mouth around the hawk's body. My throat tightens and my stomach gurgles with pain. I shudder at the thought of eating this thing raw, but Sin doesn't think twice about it. He manages to take a decent bite out of it and then falls backward onto his butt with relief. "It's good."

"Sin," I whisper softly. "Starvation wouldn't entice humans to eat uncooked animals, right?"

He looks up at me with an unsettled look on his face. "I'm starving," he says.

So am I, but...I can't do that. He hands the bird over to me and the stench brings a wave of nausea with it. I shake my head. "I can't."

He looks back down at the hawk, thoughts running through his tired eyes. "Shit." Looking back up at me with concern. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

I don't want to answer him. I don't want to point out the truth faster than it takes him to comprehend that there is no difference between him and the other prisoners here. "It's okay."

You're just hungry."

"No, I've hit the next phase," he says.

"Phase?"

"The food here is injected with a hormone that alters the chemical balance of our brains. When starvation ensues for too long, the part of our brain that tells us to cook our food and to dislike eating our own species no longer works properly. It happens in some faster than others. The food is all laced to maintain the population here. For those who continuously lose the food battle, they will eventually end up like this—me—or like those who attacked you earlier." His words are defining the fears I was considering. The thought of Sin attacking me, or me attacking him for survival has sickened me.

"Is there anything else you should tell me? These secrets and revelations keep popping up and taking the wind out of me, and I wish you would just share it all, Sin."

"What else is there to know? This is going to happen to you, too. Is that what you wanted to hear?" No. That isn't what I wanted to hear. I wanted to wish and hope I was strong enough not to conform to Neanderthal behaviors.

He looks at me for a long minute before standing up and grabbing some loose pieces of wood from the nearby trees. "Grab some dry leaves over there," he tells me. I do as he says and bring the little amount of brush I can find over to him, watching as he quickly starts a small fire.

"That was fast."

"Survival 101. Never took the class?"

"Afraid I missed that one," I tell him.

"Here." He tugs at my arm so I sit down beside him and he wraps one of his arms around me, shifting us so I'm in front of the fire. "Take these sticks." I place my hands around them as his hands cover mine. With a quick motion, we both continue rubbing the sticks against each other as small puffs of smoke billow off to the side. He removes one of his hands to add in some of the leaves I collected. He holds a couple of them up to the flame long enough to catch and burn along with the sticks. It only takes a few minutes before we have a decent size flame growing.

Sin grabs another stick and impales the hawk before holding it over the flame. My stomach is turning angrier the longer we have to wait and the thought of taking a quick bite as he just did minutes ago doesn't seem as revolting as it did. I close my eyes, inhaling the burning scent, trying to avoid looking at the bird. But my mouth continues to water, and my patience is gone. My starvation is more than prominent, the pains within me surging beyond the outer pains.

"This should be good enough that you won't get sick from eating this." Won't he get sick after eating it raw? He tears off one of the legs and hands to me. My mouth fills with water and I take a bite, quickly following it with several more, feeling the urging to fill my stomach at a rate that will surely make me sick. "Hey, slow down. You can't eat that much, you'll vomit it all up. You haven't eaten much in days and your stomach is not a normal size." I look at him, waiting for him to crack a smile and tell me he's joking. I want to eat as much as I can and I don't quite care about

becoming sick after. Feeling full isn't something I've felt in longer than I can remember.

"I'm still hungry," I tell him, shoving more food into my mouth.

He takes the bird from my hands and takes a bite for himself. "Take a break. Trust me." Sin's eyes close as he takes several small bites. I even think I hear a soft moan escape his lips, similar to the sounds he was making when we were satisfying a different hunger, and the sound makes me want to hear it more. "This is a damn good bird."

The hunger within my stomach turns to a dull pain, a manageable pain. A type of sensation I don't remember feeling before. Maybe it's fullness, or maybe it's my body going into shock after eating meat. I haven't eaten anything like this since the pot roast Mom made the night before I was taken. The first few months I was locked in the shed, I would try to imagine and remember what the savory taste was like, how it made my taste buds tingle. After a while, though, I forgot what it tasted like. I couldn't figure out how to imagine it anymore. I have forgotten what almost everything tastes like. Nothing sweet has touched my tongue in over three years. I imagine it would hurt my teeth if I were to taste it now. I imagine my tongue wouldn't know how to react to such an incredible sensation.

There were times when I would run my tongue down the length of my arm so I could remember what salt tasted like. After a while, I couldn't taste it anymore, though. I didn't taste salt until Sin kissed me, and it made the hunger grow in more ways than I thought possible. "Do you want more?" he asks.

I take what's left of the bird and nibble along the meaty area, feeling the warmth of each bite fill the ache within me. "If we continue in this direction, we may find more, but it's getting dark. Do you want to call it a night?"

I nod my head and place the bird down against the trees behind me. "How is your head?"

"It's fine." It's not fine, but unless he's bleeding, he won't say otherwise. He grabs his bag and places it down behind him, lying down and resting his head on it. He takes my arm and pulls me with him, my head falling heavily against his chest as his arm tightens around me. "I'm sorry I left you earlier."

"It was my fault." I wanted him to leave me behind. I wanted to die. I still might want to, but as long as I'm here within his embrace, I can tough it out a little longer.

"Reese," he whispers. "I really do love you. I love you for making loneliness a little less painful."

I close my eyes, feeling a tiny smile pinch at my lips. In a world outside of Chipley, Sin probably wouldn't look at me, but here, I'm the only thing he has. He's all I have. Maybe he was right about love and its variable meanings, and I'll take whatever this is.

Falling asleep has come easily, but only until Sin jerked his body out from beneath mine. He's curled in a ball, vomiting against a tree. He doesn't say much in between the episodes, but I attempt to rub my hand over his back, which he allows. After emptying all of the food out of his body four more times, he falls backward, clutching his stomach.

I take a piece of the torn clothing from earlier and soak it in the creek. When I return, he's groaning. I wipe his face down and press the cloth over the back of his neck. "I'm going to die," he says.

"You're going to be okay, Sin."

"No, you don't understand."

"You just need to get it out of your system," I insist.

"What if it was a trap, Reese? They can see us. They know we're here. They know we're trying to cheat the system. They know we're trying to escape. And they're not going to let us."



## CHAPTER TEN

### SIN

**I think there's a hole** in my stomach and I feel like I'm burning from the inside out. Someone did this to me. Someone had to have done this to me. I try to force up more bile, but there's nothing left. My head is pounding again and I think I'm seeing double. Cool water is running over my forehead and Reese is repeating something over and over, but I can't make out what she's saying.

Another shooting pain writhes through me, forcing my body to contract into a tighter ball than I am already in. I have felt sorry for myself a number of times over the past several years. I've blamed everyone for the demise of my life and it has been those times where I have felt like giving up. Right now is one of those times. I think I'm finally losing this battle. I promised myself I would go out fighting, and God knows I have tried.

"Sin, we have to go," Reese shouts in my ear. How the hell am I supposed to move right now? My stomach is cramped into a tight knot and I think the rest of my senses are gone at this point too. It's the next phase. My body is shutting down. It's all part of the plan. "Sin." Reese's hands are around my wrists, pulling me up. I can hear the panic in her voice. There's going to come a time very soon where we both choose to give up at the same time. It feels inevitable.

A cold sting burns across my face and it helps me to focus on Reese and her hand winding up to hit me again. "Whoa," I groan.

"Let's go. Now." I watch her lift her arm and shoot her pistol a couple of times, and with the slow motion I feel like I'm moving in, I turn to see what she's shooting. It only takes a second for me to stand the hell up and grab her by the arm. With each step I take, I feel like I'm breaking through the earth's surface from my heavy weight. And then there are the trees that are swaying. Fuck. I don't know if I can do this. "Where are they coming from?"

"I don't know," I say, winded.

She stops behind a tree to catch her breath, and I stop beside her, holding myself up against the tree, breathing in and out at the same rate she is. We watch as the oversized hawks fly by, several at a time. "Was it because we killed one?"

"Again, I really don't know. I don't know much of anything. No more than you do, anyway." Things change here all of the time, or at least whenever fuckface Crownwell decides to do this.

He doesn't want anyone getting too comfortable with their lives here.

"Well, what are we supposed to do? Just keep running? Because it seems like that's all we've been doing for days and I still don't have any clue what we're running from or what we're running to. Are we trying to find a way out?" She keeps asking me the same questions, like I'm going to give her different answers. Even when I was living here as the "caretaker's son", I knew next to nothing of my surroundings, the real reasons Mom was working here, as well as any reason why the other people were living here. Whenever I inquired, I was brushed off or ignored. It wasn't until I overheard Crownwell's phone call that I knew exactly what this place was. That man will do whatever it takes to keep this place a secret. For good reason. When anyone finds out about Chipley, he's done. Personally, I'd like to let every prisoner out of this place and let nature take its course, but I'm guessing that won't happen.

"Yes, we have to keep running. I want to get us out of here."

"Sin, how long are we going to keep running away from things? If it's not people trying to kill us for food, they're trying to kill us to become food, and now there are these hawks or whatever the hell they are, and they want us dead too. Neither of us is completely sure we even want to continue running, and yet, we're supposed to just keep going. We need a plan. We need to know what direction we're heading in. Don't you understand this? Don't you get it? We could be running toward our death!" she shouts with frustration. "Why are we going to keep running toward our death when it would be so easy to just give up and die? I need a reason, Sin. Give me a reason!"

"Me, Reese. Can I just be enough of a reason right now? I know I'm nothing, and I know I'm an asshole, but, Jesus, for me, will you just have a little hope?" I have no hope, and I'm asking her to have hope. "Why did you want to survive all of that time in the shed? Was it because you had hope that some day you would get out?"

"Yes," she says quietly, seeming a little out of it. I take her hand, ignoring the pain in my stomach, the need to vomit, and the throbbing on the back of my head.

"Look, I wanted to head in this direction for food, but also, I heard a rumor of a way out, but it was only a general direction. What other shot do we have right now?"

"Sin," she whispers. "The sky." She points off into the distance between the thickly covered branches, but all I see is the darkness of the night.

"What is it?" I ask her, settling back down into the ground. I can't keep walking right now.

"It's orange and yellow. Do you see the shapes? They're beautiful." I glance over at her, waiting for her to crack a smile or laugh. Not that I could figure out how to do either of those right now, but I don't know what the hell she's talking about.

"You being funny?" I ask her.

The confused and yet amazed expression covering her face doesn't change after my question. Her focus is locked on the small portion of the sky we can see. "No, don't you see it?" And there's the smile, but it's not a joking smile. It's a smile as if she just found her exit from hell.

And it's worrying me.

She takes some steps back into the path we were just running down and continues forward as if she were in a trance. *Dammit.* I stand up and follow her, bouncing from tree to tree as support. We walk for what must be a mile before the trees fade into a large open field of grass. There's grass. I haven't seen this much grass in years. Reese slips her boots off and tucks them under her arm as she runs ahead. "Feathers!" she shouts. "Do you feel the feathers beneath your feet, Sin?" *Feathers?* "And the horses. Look at all of them. I used to ride, did I tell you that?"

I finally catch up with her and stop her. "Reese, the sky is dark, the feathers are grass, and there are no horses or animals anywhere." She tugs her arm out of my hand and continues running forward.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she shouts back to me. "It's so beautiful out here."

"Reese," I call calmly. I don't want to get into a scuffle with her, but I'm pretty sure she's hallucinating. Another phase.

"Look, Sin!" It takes me some time to catch up to her again, and when I do, she points off into the distance. "Do you see that?"

"No, Reese. There's nothing but grass." She reaches out and claws her hand around the air, twisting her wrist as if she were opening a door. A door that isn't there.

"Are you coming?" she asks. I'm left scratching my head as she ducks her head down a couple of inches and walks in through the empty air as if she were trying not to hit her head on something. "Come on!" I follow her, though, without concern of hitting my head or a door closing in my face. She spins around, her eyes wide with excitement. "Do you see the door?"

"The one you just walked through?" I ask, trying my hardest to hide the sarcasm. If she is in fact hallucinating, there's not much I can do to convince her of anything other than what she's seeing.

"No, that one," she points to more open space. She places her boots down into the grass and reaches inside; retrieving the key I gave her while she was in the shed. She kneels down and extends her neck, squinting her eyes at something as if it were right in front of her nose. She places the key carefully into what I only see as air, and twists it. Her other hand mimics the action of opening another door and her head jerks backward. "Oh my God. We're saved," she cries. "Sin, it's the way out. We're saved. We're saved." She falls onto her hands and pulls herself forward. "I see my house. My mom must be inside. I'm going to see my mom. I'm going to show her I'm still alive. She's going to be so happy, Sin. Do you have any idea?" My heart crumbles into a million pieces at the hope she's going to lose. I don't know whether to stop her or let her figure it out. Regardless, she stands back up and continues forward, the smile on her face only growing larger. I can't break this to her.

"Reese," I call over. "Can you wait?" I feel so damn dizzy and weak. I need to close my eyes just to settle myself down.

"I know it isn't much, just a little farmhouse for the two of us. But we painted it blue and added the white shutters ourselves. I helped mom plant those rose bushes in front and we lined the little dirt path with plants just so it would feel more like home. It still looks exactly the same. She didn't leave and she didn't give up hope. I have to believe that." Her words stir in my head as I do my best to refocus my attention on where she's going. I can't lose her again, and with her lucid visions right now, it would only take a few minutes to get lost. Lost. We are lost in the middle of fucking nowhere. We've been walking in so many different directions that I don't know which way we came from. Not to mention, the horizon only reveals more grass on every side.

Where did she go? I turn around, finding her—finding her...walking toward a blue house with white shutters. "What the hell is going on?"

"Come on," she says, smiling, waving me forward.

Every step I take is hesitant. A house like this would not be in Chipley. A house like this isn't in Chipley. She opens the front door and continues waving me toward her. This is insane. I'm most likely insane. I am.

I enter into the small house that smells of flowers and...just...clean air. And something is cooking, something that's making my taste buds burn and my cheeks clench. "Mom?" Reese calls out, turning a corner. "Mom!" Before I follow her into the next room, I hear cries—loud, cheerful cries filled with elation. I turn the corner into a small kitchen, seeing Reese squeeze her arms around her mother. Her mother's face is red, with tears barreling over her cheeks and her hands are wrapped so tightly around Reese that her skin is white. They both fall to the ground, locked within each other's embrace, crying harder and louder as the seconds pass. "Mom, I missed you so much." Her mother—the nurse I remember—doesn't respond. However, as her eyes open and she finds me, fear illuminates her face and she pulls Reese with her as she backs away across the floor, as if I were standing here with a gun pointed at both of them.

"I won't hurt you," I say softly.

"You already have," her mother responds.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

REESE

**My arms are around** my mother's neck. My mother's neck. The warmth, her scent, the softness of her skin—I never thought I'd experience any of this ever again. I had forgotten all of my senses. It's like when Dad died. I took his pillow and I slept on it night after night, inhaling his scent, inhaling all that was left of him until it was gone. The memories always fade just enough to make it impossible to remember exactly what everything felt like or smelled like.

Tears are rushing down my cheeks and my heart is beating tersely against my chest. I can feel it all. I want to smother myself with the sensory overload. I want to drown in it and erase all of what is behind me.

Except what is behind me is Sin, who is staring at the two of us with a confused look on his face. Mom seems scared of him, which leaves me questioning what she knows about him. She must blame him, just like Snatcher blamed me for Sin's outcome. It's not fair for either of us.

"Mom, he's okay. He saved me."

Her head shakes quickly, sureness written across her face. "No. No. No," is all she says. Her voice. I had forgotten the sweetness, the passionate tone in which she enunciates all of her words.

Sin places his hands up in defense and takes a couple steps back. "It's okay. I'll wait outside," he says.

"No, Sin. No. Sit down at the table," I point across the room to the small, oak table we shared so many family dinners at. Standing up, I pull Mom with me as I pull out a chair out for her and for Sin. I sit down on the other side, running my fingers over the worn wood, remembering each scratch and where it had come from. This was one of the only pieces of furniture Mom and I took with us when we moved from Seattle. We couldn't get rid of our family dinner table. The memories, the laughter, the stories, and jokes—too much had happened at this table to throw away such a keepsake. And now here I am, freed from captivity, sitting across from Mom and Sin, who are both staring at me with concern. Both for different reasons, of course.

"Reese," Mom says quietly, reaching across the table and placing her hand over mine. "This is a hallucination. I am not really here. This house and this table, none of it is really here. But you kept me alive in your mind and that is why you can see me, talk to me, assume what I might

say and do if I were to see you again. You know I miss you and you know I haven't given up on you. You also know who you should be wary of trusting, but I know your instincts will keep you safe."

"This isn't a hallucination, Reese," Sin says to me, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from Mom. "This is real. What she's saying isn't true. I wouldn't be seeing all of this, too, if it weren't real."

My chest aches. My stomach aches more. I look back over at Mom. "Did you tell him what our house looked like?" she asks.

"Yes, I told Sin before we came inside," I reply, unsure of what that has to do with anything.

"Sin. What a peculiar name," she says.

"Because you know me as Sinon," he grunts.

"Yes, I do," mom chuckles. "Reese, your mind is weak, as is Sinon's. You can feed into each other's hallucinations. Your mind will believe whatever it is told. It's a powerful weapon you must both be mindful of."

"Sinon?" I question. "Is that really your name?"

"Yes, that is my given name; however, I prefer to go by Sin, as I have for the past several years."

"Wasn't Sinon a Greek god?" I ask. I only ask because I have never heard the name before, outside of my English class when we were learning about the Trojan War.

"Yes," he says, breaking our stare and peering down at his fidgeting fingers. "The betrayer of Greek Gods. That's what I was named after."

"Well, it's just a name. It doesn't mean you need to live up to it," I joke with quiet laughter. Becoming sidetracked from the truth that I don't want to consider, I continue to believe this is all real. I will pretend for as long as I can until I'm proven otherwise. "Mom, is there food? We're both very hungry."

She closes her eyes for a brief second and slowly stands from the table, turning toward the refrigerator. She pulls out two large plates filled with food. She was expecting us...because this isn't real. She places one plate in the microwave and sets the timer. As she prepares the other plate, I look over at Sin, who is now sweating and pale. "Are you okay?"

"No." He swallows hard and places his head down over his folded arms.

"Goodness gracious," Mom cries out. "Your head, Sinon. What in the world happened?"

"The food fight," I explain.

"Oh dear. Oh that is not good."

"Can you help him?" I ask her. "You're a nurse." She leans over the table and places her hand down over my shoulder. "Only you can help him, dear." Mom would never leave someone in pain or hurt. This isn't real. Mom takes the second plate from the microwave and places them down on the table. "The memory of taste will quench your hunger temporarily." I've lost my mind. Isn't that the last phase before there are no more phases? Sin keeps mentioning these damn

phases. I can only assume this is it after this.

I shovel in the warm chicken covered in thick brown gravy and fill my mouth with as many roasted potatoes as possible. I don't feel sick from eating too much or too fast as I did earlier with the hawk. I feel as though I could eat for days and never feel full. With much effort, Sin lifts his head and does his best to get some of the food into his mouth, too. His eyes look like they aren't focusing and his cheeks are sagging. I'm scared I'm losing him. "I wish you could help us," I tell Mom, knowing it's no more than words drifting through my own head.

I take gulps of water from the glass Mom has given me. The coolness of the liquid spilling down my throat is soothing, or I guess only the thought of it is soothing. I close my eyes to relish in the comfort. I wish this were real. I wish I were home. I wish this were a nightmare. But as I open my eyes, I remember that my wishes don't come true. Sin and I are lying in the center of an empty dirt area with nothing in view. No hawks chasing us, no house, no food, no Mom. Just us, sitting in the middle of nowhere, waiting to die. I curl my body into Sin's and wrap my arm around him, holding him closely.

His arm wraps around me in return and he sighs into my ear. "I may not wake up, Reese."

"I may not wake up either," I tell him. This is the part I was afraid of. The part when we both give up at the same time. The part where neither of us is strong enough to convince the other to keep pushing forward. I'm eighteen. My life was supposed to be ahead of me. I promised Dad I would go to college and get a good job. That was all he ever wanted. *I guess I'm going to have to let you down, Dad.*

"Tell me something about your life before you came to Chipley with your mom," I ask him softly. "If you die first, I want to say the right things when I bury you."

He groans a little before words percolate on his tongue. "I won the state division for my weight in wrestling. I had a full academic scholarship to Oklahoma State, but I decided to put it on hold for two years to stay with my mom in order to protect her from my dad."

"You could have been Greek God turned Greek frat boy," I laugh quietly.

"Well, as for me, I was going to be a nurse like my mom, but I still had three years of high school left. I hadn't really begun to make future plans, and now I'm glad I didn't. I guess I'd feel more sorry for myself than I already do."

"Am I supposed to say that if I have to bury you first?" A small smile tugs at the corner of Sin's lips, even though his eyes are still closed.

"No, you can say I was a fighter and a survivor until there was nothing left to survive for."

"Well if I'm the one saying this, that means I wasn't enough for you to survive for."

"You're right," I tell him. "Let's just plan to stay alive."

"Plans don't always work out," he says, his words slurring into a long breath.

I listen to his even breaths float along the slight breezes. The white noises of the quiet surroundings ease me into a sleep I've needed for days. I do my best to block out the thought of people trying to eat me, killer birds, and a dream of a life I left behind.

A dreamless/nightmareless night brings in the morning dew, covering my exposed skin with droplets of water. A chill travels up my spine and my eyes struggle against the heaviness of my lids.

The chill and the dew immediately disappear when I am able to focus on my surroundings. I'm in my bed at home under a warm blanket with Sin lying beside me. Our naked bodies are meshed together in a tight embrace and a warm flush fills my cheeks. "Sin," I whisper. The whisper seems to echo between the walls, but doesn't have much of an effect over Sin since he doesn't budge. I press the heel of my palm into his side and nudge his heavy body.

His eyes finally peel open as the sunlight pours into my room, shining directly into his eyes, highlighting the blues and green hues that make up the abstract canvas of beautiful colors within his irises. "Guess we're still alive," he says, inspecting me with a gentle smile.

"Do you see the bedroom we're in? And the bed we're lying in? Do you see the cream colored walls and the blue teal comforter covering our bare bodies?" I ask.

"Keep talking," he says.

"Do you feel the warmth from the sun pouring into the white, trim-framed windows? Do you feel my skin against yours?"

Sin moves so that he is hovering over me, staring down into my eyes, making me believe this is real. His hands travel aimlessly over my body, warming every inch of me, forcing a sensation of need to travel through every one of my nerve endings. Maybe death would feel like this. His lips press against my neck and down my center, his tongue tracing circles along the way. Would my breaths be so calm if this were happening? Would the swelling ache between my legs keep me begging for more? After he covers every part of me with his tongue, Sin pulls himself back up to where our lips can reconnect. With ease, he slips inside of me, thrusting and grinding his body against mine, bringing about a pleasure that makes me want to cry tears of happiness. The grip he has around my waist isn't tight enough; firm enough, strong enough, and I want more. "I want more." Harder and heavier, his body pounds against mine, my insides swelling with warmth and a mind numbing pleasurable ache. Moans sing from my throat and my body moves on its own accord, keeping in rhythm with his steady movements.

"I want to feel your body tighten around mine. I want to make you feel everything you've dreamed of feeling," he utters into my ear. But my dreams were never eccentric enough to imagine this. The pain of a first time leads to the pleasure of the second. There is no pain here, wherever here may be. There's flowers blooming, waves of an ocean crashing, and a warm sun melting into my cold skin. There's warm butter melting over a warm dish of food and that is what I feel inside. "I want to make you scream louder. Scream my name."

As if I have lost all control, I shout his name over and over until my body jerks against his with uncontrolled reflexes. Warmth fills me and makes me feel as though I'm melting into this bed. I let out a long breath and allow the smile to stretch my lips into an arch across my cheeks. One by one, blades of grass tickle my back and the dew droplets I had forgotten about reappear

along with the cool breeze. And when I open my eyes, I see Sin, naked...lying over me...smiling a smile I believe is only for me. "The thought of a bed in a warm room was nice, but as long as I'm experiencing you, I don't care where I am," he says.

He slides over to the side of me and wraps his t-shirt around me. "My head and stomach are actually feeling better this morning." It's a relief I've needed to hear. "No more raw birds."

"What's happening to me? The hallucinations. Why?"

"It's both of us. We've been starving for too long and our neurological capabilities are weak. We need to find a steady income of food. We're running out of time."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SIN

#### THREE DAYS LATER

**Her limp body feels heavy** in my arms, regardless of knowing she weighs no more than ninety pounds. Explaining that we're almost there means nothing when she can't hear me. But I tell her anyway. "We're so close, Reese. We're so close." I don't know how I'm running. I don't know how I'm breathing or standing. Surviving the odds doesn't explain my luck. I knew she would be the first to drop. She is skin and bones and her body has nothing to feed off of.

I don't know how many of them had been following us since we left, or why they had chosen to leave us alone until yesterday, but I've had to outrun them three times now. They must be the ones who win the food battles every week because they have far more energy than I have ever had while living here. Although, that doesn't explain their insatiable hunger for their own species—nothing can explain that.

"There it is. The rumor was true," I tell her. A condemned stone house with no windows or doors, covered in overgrown ferns and weeds. I run in through the opening, circling around for a minute before setting Reese down in the corner. I press my fingers against the artery on her neck, double-checking to make sure she's still alive.

Barely. "Hang in there, babe."

I start tearing up floorboards, looking for this entrance. This urban legend spread as a rumor across the camp of sheds. They—whoever they are—made this place far enough away that most of the starved inmates would never have the means to make it here. Yet, we did. Barely. I get most of the floor torn up before I find a metal door with a latch and a lock.

"Reese, I found it." I crawl over to her, removing her right boot where she has kept the key I gave her. The key Mom left me for a just in case. She left me a just-in-case form of survival but didn't tell me where it would work or how I could escape. This key has been the only form of hope I've had since the day Mom left.

As I retrieve the key, Reese stirs slightly, her eyelids fluttering. "I found a door." I don't know if she can hear me or understand me, but in case she can, I want to give her the hope she's needed for so long. I promised her I'd get us out of here. Alive.

Crawling back over to the door, my heart pounds against my chest and sweat beads over my forehead. My stomach churns into knots as I slip the key into the lock, and I'm shocked to see that it fits smoothly inside. I twist to the right, hearing a click. Confirmation that the key works. Dear God, this is it. The lever is rusted, making me work to release the door from its hinges, but after a short moment, it opens up into a dark hole. A dark hole I will blindly jump into without fear of what is on the other end because it sure as hell can't be worse than what is on this side. I run and grab Reese, seeing more of those assholes out the window. They're walking toward the house and I know I led them here, but they don't have the key. I've got to get her down there before they come in. As I'm lifting Reese from the ground, I see one of the guys outside, the larger and stronger of the bunch, now running up the path.

I slide down into the hole with Reese held tightly under my arm. There's a ladder I'm clinging to as I pull the door down over my head, twisting the latch to lock in place. The banging on the door echoes around us, vibrating the walls closely surrounding our heads. I descend the ladder, wishing I had a free hand to grab my flashlight. Claustrophobia sets in after several minutes of descending into what feels like a bottomless pit. I can't see the end or the beginning now. I just know I'm stuck and it feels like the walls are caving in around me and the air is becoming thick and hard to breathe through. What if I'm just imagining this? That thought has entered my head too many times in the past couple of days.

My feet finally reach solid ground and there is no more light surrounding me than there was when I was climbing down here. I feel around, my hand finding walls on both sides, telling me I'm in some kind of hall. Walking blindly, sounds begin to grow in volume—whispers. "Who's there?" I shout. Quiet laughter echoes between the walls and I swallow hard, trying my best to ignore the fear running through me.

"Sinon, go back," I hear. *Sinon. Mom?*

"Mom?" I shout. "Where are you?"

"Sinon, don't come any further. Please, listen to me. You don't understand." Screw that. I'm not going back there to die. If I die finding my way out of this hell, I'll die with some pride at least. I continue forward until I hit a wall. A metal wall. I feel around from top to bottom and side to side until my hand sweeps over another latch handle. Expecting it to be locked, I'm shocked when the latch unhinges the door. I slide it open, finding light beaming from a stark white room.

As my eyes adjust to the brightness, I see a wall lined with computers. Lots of them. And there are people sitting at each computer. All of them are now staring at me holding Reese.

Mom is one of them.

She jumps from her seat, throwing her arms around me. Pressing away slightly, she grips her hands around my face, looking into my eyes as tears fall from hers. "They're going to kill you," she whispers through a silent cry. "They want you dead, Sinon."

"I was going to die out there," I grunt.

"I know," she responds. "I should have known better. This is all my fault. You have to know I had no control over any of this or over the fact that I left you there. That was not what I wanted. You know this, right?"

"I have hated you for a long time," I tell her honestly. "But I believe you."

"This poor girl," she says. "Someone help me with her."

"Uh, they'll kill us too," one of the men says from his seat at a computer.

"We're going to die down here anyway. For God's sake, Peter. Help me." The man stands up from his chair and runs to Mom's side, taking Reese from my hands.

"She needs food."

"So do you," she says, running her fingertips over my exposed cheek bones.

"Where the hell are we?" I ask her.

She laughs quietly, breaking eye contact. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Tell me."

"I can't," she says.

"You can't ever tell me a thing, and you left me to die," I remind her. I'd take a bullet for her. I came with her to Chipley to protect her from Dad, and this is how I'm thanked. I'm not the parent, and yet, I had acted like one for so long to her, always needed to protect her, taking care of parts of our life that fell behind when her work took priority. Her research was her child. She was a good mother, but she let too much get in the way of the life she once wanted. It was like she got tired of having a family and needed something new to give her the thrill she wasn't feeling anymore. Dad didn't help this, but God, what about me? I didn't ask for this shit.

"I didn't choose this," she says again.

"Where the hell are we?" I ask again, demand seething through my words.

"She's waking up!" Peter shouts from the other side of the room.

Mom runs to one of the walls across the room and pulls a hidden drawer out, lined with metal. It looks like a damn morgue hole. It probably is. She pulls out two sandwiches and two bottles of water. She tosses a sandwich and a drink at me and runs to Reese's side, unwrapping the sandwich on the way. "Honey, I need you to eat this."

"Who are you?" Reese groans. She attempts to claw herself away, against the floor, moving away from Mom, so I rush to her side and move Mom out of the way, hoping to ease some of the fear I can assume she feels.

"It's okay," I tell her, running my hand down the side of her face. "Eat the sandwich."

"Where are we, Sin? What is this?"

"I don't know. We're in some underground bunker below Chipley. And that's my mother." Reese's eyes are larger than I've ever seen them. Her thoughts are scattered as is. Between the hallucinations and her memory loss over the past few days, she could hardly make heads or tails out of what was going on before she started passing out.

Reese begins to scream, swatting at Mom's outstretched hand and me. "Get away from me,"

she shrieks.

"Phase seven," Mom says to the controllers behind her. "Cell three."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, anger raging through me.

"She needs to be contained."

"No, you aren't doing anything with her. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Peter, John. Please," she says.

"Why are you acting like you're the goddamn leader here?" I seethe.

"Because I am."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REESE

**Darkness. Four black walls** with no lights, no windows and a door I can't see. Darkness. My shrieks are going unheard. Muted. I'm mute in the dark.

A sandwich rests in my hand and a bottle of water sits beside me. With my eyes closed, I slowly nibble on the sandwich, taking only a couple of bites at a time as I was instructed. They said my body would reject food if I eat more than a few bites. They said the light would destroy me. They said this is the last phase and this is their only option. The only option is darkness.

How did I get here? Who brought me here? I just wanted to bring Mom her lunch, and now I'm here in the dark. I don't like the darkness. I need light. Please. Please. Please. Why is this happening to me?

I pull myself up to my feet—my cold feet, feeling the iciness of the cement. I place the sandwich down next to the water and hold my hands up against the wall. Circling the room, I search for a way out, but everything is sealed tight, leaving me in this large coffin to die. I don't want to die in the dark.

Circle, circle, circle. Walking until my knees tremble. Walking until I fall heavily to the ground. I rest my face against the floor, feeling a soothing against what feels like a burn. I close my eyes, trying to imagine light, but I fail. I don't think I can remember what light looks like or feels like. How long has it been since I've seen light? My mind feels blank, like someone has stripped away all of my memories. I don't know how someone could do that.

And if there is no light, how I could see a man standing in front of me wearing a military uniform?

*Want more? Make sure you check out, **Unlocked**, the last installment in the No Way Out Series.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shari J. Ryan is an International Bestselling Author of heartbreakers and mind-benders. Shari was once told she tends to exaggerate often and sometimes talks too much, which would make a great foundation for fictional books.

Four years later, Shari has written over twenty novels that often leave readers either in tears from laughing, or crying.

With her loud Boston girl attitude, Shari isn't shy about her love for writing or the publishing industry. Along with writing several International bestsellers, Shari has split her time between writing and her longstanding passion for graphic design. In 2014, she started an indie-publishing resource company, MadHat Books, to help fellow authors with their book cover designs, as well as assistance in the self-publishing process.

While Shari may not find many hours to sleep, she still manages to make time for her family. She is a devoted wife to a great guy, and a mother to two little boys who remind her daily why she was put on this earth.

Make sure you join her Twisted Drifters Reader Group at: <http://bit.ly/2e17FsX>

*For more information:*

[www.sharijryan.com](http://www.sharijryan.com)

[authorshariryan@gmail.com](mailto:authorshariryan@gmail.com)



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