



MICHELLE LYNN

DAWN OF
REBELLION

DAWN OF REBELLION SERIES BOOK ONE

Dawn of Rebellion

Book 1 of
The Dawn of Rebellion Series

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For my sisters

Chapter 1

Dawn

History is going to be the death of me. My chin tilts down as my mind wanders off in an attempt to stay awake. Mr. Giles has been wittering on for the past half hour and I can't remember anything he's said. My eyes droop as weariness washes over me. I'm so tired. Tired of this class. Tired of this school. This entire life.

It used to be easier for me, but I don't like to dwell on the past – hence my disdain for history.

England sucks. It has sucked for a long time. That is our history. But don't say it or they'll come for you. A sigh escaped my lips and the boy in the row next to me gives me a curious look. I shake my head and look down at my desk.

"The Colonies," Mr. Giles says. "Represent the worst that can happen to a modern society."

My slowly closing eyes snap open. Year ten is the first chance we get to learn about the mythical colonies. Suddenly wide awake, I lean forward and rest my elbows on my desk. We've all heard the stories since we were kids. The truth is hidden in those tales somewhere. But now we get the whole picture.

Mr. Giles continues. "They are proof that in the midst of disaster, the strong countries will survive and the weak will perish. An entire nation was destroyed. Let us never forget the mistakes that led to their demise."

I am listening so intently that the bell signaling the end of the day makes me jump out of my chair. "Your homework for tonight is to choose one of the many reasons the colonies were destroyed and write a one-page paper. Use your textbooks. You're dismissed. We'll pick this up on Monday."

I look around in a daze and barely notice my classmates packing their books. Everyone is chatting and smiling as they leave the room, no doubt excited for the weekend. I slowly move around my desk, grab my rucksack, and head for the door. Everything I pass is a blur as I make my way to the exit. Excited chatter fills the hall as students hurry by.

In the distance, I hear my name. This snaps me out of my stupor and I almost trip on my own two feet as someone taps me on the shoulder.

"Dawn." My older sister Gabby is annoyed as usual. "I've been calling you from the other end of the hall."

"Sorry, I'm just really tired." I scrub a hand across my face.

Gabby plants her hands on her hips, looking me over in that scrutinizing way of hers. If they didn't already know, no one would ever guess we're sisters. Gabby is tall and fit, with long strawberry blonde hair that falls over her shoulders in waves. Her eyes are emerald green and stand out against her tanned skin. Gabby has the kind of smile that gets what she wants and she knows how to use it. I, on the other hand, am built differently, short and thin. My hair is dishwater brown and cropped short, because why bother? My appearance suits me. It lets me go unnoticed and I'm okay with that, really. I swear. Okay, sometimes I'm okay with it.

"Dawn. Dawn." Gabby is snapping her fingers in front of my face. I hate when she does that. "What is wrong with you today? You're acting like a proper nutter. It's like you're here, but you're not."

"Yeah, cuz that makes a lot of sense, sis."

She scowls at me and I look away.

"Sorry, s'been a long day," I finally say. "Let's just go home, OK?"

"That's what I came to tell you. Drew is taking me for a ride in his new car. I'll find a way home later."

"Can't he just drive you home?" Before I even finish that sentence, I know the answer.

"No way, do you want me to blow it? I need to go find him." I can see Gabby's mood turning sour so I just say goodbye and continue on my way. I think about turning back to remind her not to miss curfew, but she knows when that is so I keep moving. Since I

was a kid there has been a strict curfew enforced by the government. No one is supposed to leave their houses after nine at night. Gabby doesn't always make it back in time, but she hasn't been caught - yet.

As I'm walking towards the end of the hall, I hear something coming from a classroom on my left and freeze. Turning towards the sound, I suddenly wish I'd minded my own business.

A girl I recognize from my sister's track team is pressed up against the chalkboard by a boy I don't remember ever seeing before. She giggles but it's cut off as he attaches himself to her lips. I'm such a creeper, but I can't look away. He must be a senior. His shirt is stretched tight across his back across well-defined muscles.

She pushes her hands into his dark hair and a blush creeps up my neck. I have to get out of here. I break away from the scene unfolding before me and hoof it down the hall. Pushing through the double doors to the outside, I groan as I watch my bus pulling away from the curb.

I run towards it, but I'm too late. Perfect. "Shite." I look around considering my options. Most people have already left the school grounds. We're not allowed to hang around once school lets out. As soon as the bell rings, rankers start showing up. The military uses the area for training. Actually, they use pretty much all of London for training. I need to get out of here so I guess I'll have to take the tube. Sighing, I set off towards the station.

I walk slowly, in no hurry to get home. People go around me as they rush on their seemingly important tasks.

The streets are teeming with squaddies carrying large guns as if they would ever have to use them here. This part of London is where the rich people live. Their streets are lined with department stores that most people could never hope to shop in. I don't belong here and I'm not the only one who seems to notice. Men and women in suits cast suspicious glances my way as they push past me.

I've only had to take the tube home from school a few times before and I wouldn't even have to come into the city for school if they hadn't shut down the East End Academy. They called it a

breeding ground for the rebel movement. I can't say they were wrong. Rebels are dangerous. A society works better when all citizens follow the law. That's how England still prospers in a world that saw many fall. At least, that's what we've always been taught.

Sometimes I question it. I question them, our government. I'm not blind. I see what they do to us. But no good can come of rebellion so I shut it down when it enters my mind. It isn't in me to fight.

It takes me the better part of an hour to reach the tube station. I take the escalator down to the platform and swipe my card. I don't know how Gabs managed to nick these tube cards for us, but I learned to stop asking questions of her a long time ago.

I'm always amazed at how beautiful this platform is. There is a large mural painted in bright colors on one wall and adverts everywhere. I don't think there is a cleaner platform in all of London.

I watch the people around me, instantly categorizing them into the three categories in society based on their dress: The upper class, middle-class, and the rest of us. The government decides where you belong. During your senior year of high school, you get a placement. If you're really smart or really rich, you go to university and eventually end up assigned to a great job making a lot of money. If you have an ounce of athletic ability, you'll be a ranker. Gabby already has her military assignment. The military makes up pretty much all of the middle-class. The third possibility is for people with no smarts and limited skill. They work for little pay in public service jobs. I'm hoping to be sent to uni, but I still have a few years.

I squeeze through the crowd to get to the front. The tube pulls up and I board the nearest car. It's packed with people so I stand and hold onto one of the railings along the walls. It is about ten stops before we reach the east end of London and by the time we do, there are only a few people left. Not many people live out here in the dodgy parts of the city; well, not many people that can afford to take the tube.

I exit the car and the contrast to this station would be shocking if I wasn't used to it already. The paint on the walls is peeling and trash litters the ground from the upended dustbins. The only art

present here is graffiti. I barely notice the state of things around here anymore.

And, of course, the escalator is broken. Once I climb the stairs from the platform - did I mention Gabby is the athlete in the family? - I've got about 10 streets to go until I reach my flat. As I walk, my mind drifts and I'm back in history class. The mythical colonies. Before my father died, he would tell us stories that were meant to scare us into being good. Today, the colonies are home to England's prisons. Criminals are sent off and never come back. Our government is saved the cost of courts and our society gets rid of its troublemakers. I always wanted to know more but never had the courage to ask. I want to learn about the people that lived there before the prisons were built, but some things are forbidden.

There are so many things I could choose to write my paper about. We haven't gone over much in class yet, but I've read my course book cover to cover. I think I'll choose the disease. It was the final nail in the coffin that wiped out much of the population. I'm sure most of my mates will write on the war, but that was only a result of everything else so I don't think it's as important.

"Out of my way." I'm stunned as someone pushes me aside and legs it down the street. My shoulder slams into the brick front of a building and I start to regain my footing on the sidewalk when five, no six, soldiers rush past. They don't give me a second glance as they chase the gaffer down and tackle him to the ground. I don't dare move as a squaddie pulls out his gun and shoots the man in the head. He collapses and is left there, in the middle of the road. As soon as the soldiers are out of sight I start walking again, not looking at the dead man as I go by. Things like this happen around here all the time. The rest of us just have to keep our heads down and our mouths shut.

Even so, my hands shake at my sides. Some things you never get used to.

The rebels operate out of East End and sometimes it seems like a war zone. I keep my eyes trained on the ground and keep moving.

By the time I reach my flat, the light begins to fade. I'm zonked. I don't like nights when Gabby is out late. You don't want to be

caught up in the nighttime events of this neighborhood. I enter my building and climb the stairs, careful not to touch any railings or walls. This place can be pretty grotty. I pass many other flats, each with their worn doors standing wide open. As I walk by, people wave to me or just smile. We all know each other here and look after one another. Technically, our building is abandoned and scheduled for demolition, so we're all just squatting here, but we do have rooms all to ourselves, even if they have been deemed unsafe.

As soon as I get to my room, I pull out the tattered course book Mr. Giles has given me and start on my homework, waiting for Gabby to get home.

Chapter 2

Gabby

The wind whips through my hair as we speed down the road in Drew's brand-new convertible.

"Drew, baby this is brilliant". I can't remember the last time I felt so free. Pushing my sunglasses up my nose, I look sideways at him. Exhilaration shoots through my veins. The air has a biting chill, but it's not enough to make us stop.

"I'm glad you like it." Drew smiles as he ramps up the speed.

"Now you're just showing off." I have to shout to be heard over the wind.

"Yep. I can stop if you want."

"Well, you should pull over, but that doesn't mean it's not working for me." I reach over and start running my hands through his hair the way I know he likes it. I smile when a small groan escapes him. He slows down the car and pulls to the side of the road.

As soon as we're stopped, Drew reaches over and pulls me towards him. His mouth slams against mine like a starving man at a feast. A car honks at us as it passes our spot.

I break away with a laugh. "Probably our cue to get moving. I need to be getting home soon."

"But things are just getting started here," Drew says in his low sexy voice, trying to draw me back in. Any normal day that may have worked, but not today.

"I have to go find a present for my little sister's birthday. It's tomorrow. Then my parents want me home early." I cringe as I mention my parents. It's a lie that hurts every time I speak it, but he can't know the truth. I watch his face and see how easy it is for him to accept. Proper teenagers do have rules and parents that enforce

them. I was ten when my father was killed and my mother couldn't handle it so she abandoned us. Most people will never have to live with that kind of pain.

"Well, where do you want to go? I'll take you."

"I'm just going over to Fenwick's. I can get there myself." My defenses start to come up. I don't need anyone's help. I can take care of myself. I've sure been doing it long enough. "Just take me to the tube station." He shrugs and starts the car.

I got lucky with this one. He doesn't ask many questions. Plus, there's the whole sexy as hell angle. As he drives, I reach over and push my fingers into his dark hair. He flashes me a smoldering wink with his deep blue eyes. I melt right there in his car. God, I'm a sucker for a man with a footballers build. So what if he's the district commander's son, and so what if he's a player. I think I can hold onto him; as long as he never learns that my life is rubbish.

I look up and notice we're nowhere near the station. This git just doesn't listen. As we pull up outside the department store, my anger is seething. "What do you think you're doing? I told you I don't need anyone's help. I wish you'd just listen to me." I get out of the car and slam the door without giving Drew a chance to respond.

Entering Fenwick's reminds me of everything I could never afford; Designer clothing, purses, jewelry, and accessories of incredible colors and styles. I'm usually able to get by on what I can lift but I've never tried that here. It's a dangerous hobby and most people would think I'm a right nutter for even trying. It carries the same sentence as any other crime. You're shipped off to the colonies and I don't even know what happens there. I don't worry about the consequences though. I know I'm good. I have to believe it'll work. Nerves are usually what get people caught.

I pass by a heavily armed guard near the doorway. That's something the usual east end stores do not have. But, then again, they don't have much merchandise either. I can still do this.

Dawn deserves something special for her birthday. She hates it when I pick out her clothes, so that's out. A purse is only practical if you have money or are borrowing things from stores like I do. Dawn would never do anything she considers "wrong". Incredibly annoying

how good she is. I go to the jewelry counter. This is the perfect gift. It'll be much harder to take, but it's for my sister. Sitting directly on the counter, as if they are calling out to me, are the most beautiful charms I have ever seen. Dawn would love these. I pick up a silver bracelet and slip it discretely into my purse. Then I pick out a charm for sister.

"Can I help you with something?" I don't know how long the saleslady has been hovering, but I'm sure if she's seen me pinching the bracelet, the guard would already have me in cuffs.

"I'm alright, thank you." She doesn't take the cue to leave. Instead, she continues to watch me as I head for the door and slowly make my way out of the store. As I pass the guard he reaches out and grabs my arm.

"Ma'am, I need you to empty your purse," he says. I rip my arm free of his grasp and sprint out the door before he can catch up. Once outside, I look around frantically for the easiest escape and am relieved and surprised to see Drew sitting there in his car, waiting for me. I run forward, but a hand clamps onto my wrist before I make it too far. A soldier who'd been in the store shopping holds me in place.

I twist my arm and jerk my head back to collide with his. Pain shoots through me, but the soldier lets go with a curse.

I sprint the rest of the way to the car and scramble into the passenger's seat.

"Drive. Now!"

It takes him a moment to comprehend what I'm saying. "Gabs? What's going on? You just assaulted a soldier." He eyes me with something akin to fear.

"Get out of here now, you stupid prat!"

With that, he starts the engine and the car lurches forward. We're heading down Bond Street at getaway speed.

"Shite," I yell, letting the energy flow from me in a rush of adrenaline. My body sags back against the seat as I breathe heavily. A laugh rips from my throat. I've never been so close to being caught. We're not in the clear yet, but wow, that was kind of fun.

Damn the consequences. I'll worry about those tomorrow. How likely were they to even find me?

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Well, my sister's going to love her present." I hold up the bracelet to take a closer look. It really is something.

"Did you nick that?" Drew is finally catching on.

Just then we hear the sirens. The police are actually catching up with us. I didn't think they had it in them. "Gabby, I'm pulling over."

"What! Are you daft? I just headbutted that guy. You know what that means for me? We can totally outrun them."

"It's OK, I got this. They'll listen to me."

He pulls the car to the side of the road and we wait. It takes a few moments for the cop to open his door. He must be running Drew's plates. We hear a car door and footsteps.

"Mr. Crawford, I'm Officer Sutton. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

I roll my eyes. Even after being in a car chase, Drew is treated like royalty. He can thank his well-connected father for that. It's as if I'm not even a part of this, even though I'm the one who committed the felony. Drew speaks in his smooth, future diplomat voice. "You as well officer. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Err...well, we have reason to believe that you have stolen merchandise in your car, sir." I let out a laugh because this cop is trying to be as polite as possible while making accusations.

"I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding. We can fix this right up. How much is this item worth?" Drew pulls out his wallet and I just groan. He should not be paying for this.

"I'm sorry sir, but it isn't as simple as that. We have this young lady on vid assaulting a soldier." He looks over at me for the first time and the polite reverence he has shown Drew is gone. "I'm afraid she's going to have to come with me."

Drew plays his last card, "Let me call my father and get this all cleared up."

"He has already been alerted to the situation, sir, and has requested that we proceed with the arrest." I can see where this is

going so I slip the bracelet into Drew's center console and step out of his car.

Drew looks at me and tries to reassure me that everything will be OK, "Let me talk to my father. I'll head to the station as soon as I suss it out." I just nod and get into the back of the police car. He has such faith.

But I don't. I know what happens to girls like me. Girls with no parents and no status. We're the forgotten. We're the punished.

A tear rolls down my cheek because I'm not like Drew. I can't afford optimism. I know what assault on a soldier means.

A shudder rolls through me as I think of my sister sitting at home waiting for me. Sitting in the back of the police car, something inside of me breaks as my future begins to disappear before my very eyes.

Chapter 3

Drew

"Sorry mate," I give a little wave as I yell out my window and pull out in front of another car. In my rear-view mirror, I can see the man behind me cursing and shaking his head. Chuckling to myself, I keep going. I weave in and out of cars on the motorway, paying no attention to speed limits, as I try to get home as fast as I can. My girlfriend was just arrested and there's only one thing I can do about it. Being the district commander's son has major drawbacks, but it can have its benefits. The policeman said my father was notified, but I refuse to believe he won't do anything. As much as the man acts uncaring, will he really have someone I care about sent to the colonies for a minor offense? To be fair, she didn't just break the law. If she'd only stolen a bracelet, that would be an easy fix. But soldiers are sacred in England and they have a recording of her attacking one.

I get off the motorway and head further into town. We live smack dab in the center of London with all the other exceedingly rich folk. I fly over speed bumps and through traffic lights until I finally reach my street. It doesn't escape my worry that I'm about to ask for him to help a girl he believed to be below my station, whatever the hell that means.

I hope he'll make sure she's released and sent home to her family. I'll probably just have to promise I won't see her again. We'll make a deal and then eventually I'll break it. It's a never-ending dance my father and I do. He tries to control my life, but in the end, I win.

I've lived in the same house my entire life and I still laugh every time I see it. It's a monstrosity. For starters, it's huge. I don't mean huge as in good sized, it's huge as in a giant could live here. The

front gates are made of steel and manned by two guards round the clock. I always thought that was excessive since there is no way you could get past the gates in the first place. Why do we need guards?

"Alright, Willie? How's it going?" I ask as I pull up to the gatehouse.

"Fine sir." He doesn't even look at me as he opens the gate and I drive past. It was probably the Willie crack. He hates when I call him that. He says William is so much more respectable and dignified. So I never call him William. In this house, you've got to find some way to have fun or you'll go crazy.

I park in my spot on the drive and head for the door to my fortress. Dad doesn't want me calling it a fortress, but when all the windows are bullet proof and there are about eight ways in and out of the house, there is no way I'm calling it a home.

I ring the bell as usual. Apparently, Crawford's aren't supposed to open the door for themselves. We have some poor chap that got put into civil service after grade school and is now our butler. We also have two maids and a cook. All of this just for three people.

The door swings open and I step inside. "Welcome home, Mr. Crawford."

"Thanks, Carl." I wipe my feet on the mat and hand Carl my coat before asking, "Is my father here?"

"Yes, sir. He's in his study. Is there anything else?"

"No. I think I'll go and find him."

"Very well, sir."

As Carl heads back towards the kitchen, I begin climbing the spiral staircase to the upstairs rooms. I drop my school bag in my bedroom before knocking on the door to the study. My father spends a good deal of time in here. I can remember sneaking in when I was little and going through father's books, fascinated. Now, it's just a place where we hold most of our better rows. There've been a lot of them.

"Yes? Who is it?" says a voice from inside the room. I push open the door and step through, bracing myself.

"Hello," I say in the formal, tense tone that is always reserved for this man. He looks up from his desk.

"Oh, it's you." The callous nature of my father no longer stings. I've grown used to disappointing him.

"Yeah. Can I talk to you?" In response to my question, he lowers his eyes back down to his papers.

"If it's about that girl, there's nothing you can do now. Best forget about her." He doesn't even bother to look up again.

"Forget about her? Nothing I can do?" I go from zero to rage in a matter of seconds.

"Yes, son. She was just another slag, trying to rise above her station. She assaulted one of our countries dedicated soldiers, not to mention the stealing. Now, I have important work to do. There is a climate meeting later this week."

My arms are shaking as I slam my hands on his desk. Startled, he scoots his chair back and regards me with hard eyes.

"Now you listen to me dad, Gabby does not deserve this."

My father lets out a harsh laugh. "She broke the law and now will pay for it half a world away from you."

"Are you going to send her to the colonies?"

"That is where criminals belong."

"She barely touched the soldier and only pinched one tiny bracelet," I yell. It takes all my strength not to reach across the desk and clock him.

"There are many reasons why she is there." His voice is eerily calm. "You're only a small part of the much larger picture. The bracelet is an even smaller part. My son, why don't you call up one of your other women to cheer you up?" Once again, he resumes his work.

Bile builds in the pit of my stomach as I watch my father so easily send someone to such a fate. My hands turn white as I grip the edge of his desk trying not to completely lose my cool. I imagine myself doing and saying so many things in this moment, but only one thing escapes my lips.

"I know James is over there. He isn't dead."

This grabs his attention and he searches my face to determine how much of the truth I know. The next few minutes pass without words as we stare at each other as strangers.

"You know nothing," he spits.

"I know I need to find him. I know I need to get away from you." I say the last part almost in a whisper, but I can see that he heard it. He rises to his feet and I take a step back.

Pointing one finger towards the door, he says in a low, menacing voice, "There's the door. Get out of my house."

I turn as I reach the exit, "Mom," I begin to say.

He cuts me off. "I'll figure out something to tell her." I nod and run into the hall and down the stairs. I don't bother to grab anything other than my keys as I book it out the door and into my car. I lean my head back on the seat and close my eyes, feeling utterly screwed. What now? I have to find my brother and do what I can for Gabby. I have nowhere else to go, nothing keeping me in England.

I can't help but wonder if I'm making some colossal mistake as I think on how to get to the colonies. I wish my brother James was here to help me, but if he was I probably wouldn't be going at all. I grab my phone and punch in the number of someone I know can help me. He works at the airport.

Once that is figured out, I turn in the direction of the east end and set out to find Gabby's family. They need to know what's happened and that I'm going to do something about it.

Chapter 4

Dawn

Panic sets in when I wake to realize Gabby never came home last night. She's never done this and I can't help the nagging feeling that something is wrong. Happy birthday to me, right?

I stand at our broken window watching the angry sky. It's been raining since the early hours of the morning and the sun has yet to make an appearance. If I went looking for Gabby now, I'd never find her.

I jump at the flash of lightning and brace myself for the waves of thunder. Thunderstorms have always freaked me out, making me feel vulnerable. Gabby and I usually just grab our blankets and go curl up together in the corner farthest from the window. Having Gabby around makes me feel safe, but she's not here and I'm alone.

I sit in our corner by myself and huddle under a blanket, trying to calm the shaking in my bones. My head jerks up when a soft knocking sounds against the door.

"Gabby?" I call. "That you?"

The door is pushed open to reveal a beautiful man with dark hair and wild eyes. He steps into the room and stops as his eyes take in his surroundings. His curious gaze burns into me. What the hell did he expect? This is East End, not freaking central London. I pull the blanket to my chin and wait.

"Are you Dawn?" It doesn't look like he slept at all last night and he could be on some sort of drugs. Water drips from his hair and his shoes leave wet prints as he steps closer. I watch his face. There is something very familiar about him.

My mouth clams up as I try to talk and all I can manage is a simple nod.

"I'm Drew. I know your sister." That's when it hits me. This is the boy from the classroom yesterday, but that girl wasn't my sister. My fear turns to anger. What makes him think he can run around on my sister? She's too good for the likes of this asshat. When I find her, she's going to be crushed. Slag.

As I think about her, I push what I saw to the back of my mind because I just want to know that she's okay.

Despite my desire to spit in Drew's face and walk away, I find my voice, "Is she OK? Where is she?"

Drew nervously runs his hands through his hair and sits near me without an invitation. Too close for comfort. "She was stupid, so stupid. I didn't know what she was going to do or I would've stopped her. There was a chase, and I couldn't help. And now..." He trails off and his hands start to shake.

I let him sit in silence for a minute trying to understand his jumbled explanation. I finally ask, "Drew, what are you saying? Where is she?"

He looks straight at me, his eyes pained, "She's on her way to the colonies."

I can't speak. This can't be true. What has Gabby done?

Words clog in my throat as tears threaten at my eyes. My whole life, she's taken care of me. Now she's off to have who knows what done to her. This can't be happening. I shake my head furiously.

Drew is talking, trying to explain to me the events of the night before, but I haven't been listening. His words come rapidly as if he wants to get it all out there and never have to speak of it again.

"...that's when the police took her and I went home to talk to my dad. He wouldn't help me. I tried to explain it to him and he said he was just happy to have her out of my life. He had her sent on the first air shuttle to the colonies this morning. I couldn't stop him. I left home and came looking for you."

"How did you find me?"

"Well, Gabby never told me where you lived; only that it was in the east end. So, I've been driving around for hours, asking anyone that would talk to me where to find you. I knew her family would be worried."

"I'm Gabby's family."

"Wait, what? Where are your parents?" Both of us start to calm down as everything sinks in.

"Gone." I look away; acting as if that word doesn't kill me every day. The last thing I'm going to do is explain to this boy my family's sordid history.

Drew blinks rapidly, taking in the new information. "We have to help her."

"We?" I don't want anything to do with the git who is cheating on my sister. I don't trust him. "Why would you want to help?" The question comes out harsher than I intend, but he deserves it.

"It's my fault." He breathes out a long breath. "She never had a chance because of my father."

"Your father?"

"The district commander."

"Shite." I bury my face in my hands. "Get out."

"What?"

"I don't trust you. I don't like you. Your father just ripped apart my family." A sob tears from my throat. "My sister is gone. So get out of my house."

"You can't do this by yourself. You need me," he protests.

"Do what?"

"If you're at all like your sister, you already have a plan and, if you don't, I do."

"We're nothing alike," I snap. "There is no plan. People go to the colonies and they don't come back. Ever." As I curl back up on the floor he pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket and writes something on it.

"Here, in case you change your mind." And then he is gone.

I reach for the piece of paper and unfold it.

Tomorrow

11 PM

Airport

Hanger 18

Out on the street below, a car engine roars and thunder rolls.

Chapter 5

Gabby

I'm screwed.

"Gabriella Nolan, you're hereby accused of thieving behavior, taking place at the Fenwick's department store. You assaulted a dedicated soldier. You have been seen on vid and fled the scene of the crime. These are very serious charges and will be met with a very serious punishment. Here in England, we do not indulge reckless persons."

I look up as my accuser finishes reading my crimes and am surprised to find that I am face to face with the district commander himself. I have been sitting here for hours, unsure of what was going to happen, but now I know I'm in some serious shite. All I did was take one measly bracelet, but apparently, this is about more than a crime. The commander doesn't get involved in petty theft.

I shake with anger as I look at this man with his cropped hair and pressed uniform. He's handsome, just like Drew, his son. They have the same dark hair and smooth skin. Unlike Drew, however, as this man smiles down at me, it gives me no comfort, only dread, as if he takes great pleasure in my situation.

I finally unclench my jaw enough to speak, "What about my trial?"

"My dear girl," This isn't a term of endearment, but of superiority. "This is your trial. I am your judge. I am your jury. I have already found you guilty."

"You can't do that." I stare defiantly into his eyes, full of wickedness and glee. He's so pleased with himself that he actually winks at me and says;

"On the contrary, I can and I have. Enjoy your stay in the colonies."

A thunderstorm shakes the plane and I jolt awake. For a moment, I think maybe it was a dream, but no. It was no dream. Surely my own country wouldn't do this to me. I see his face in my mind and am disgusted with the way he looked at me. He considered me trash, not worthy of dating a district commander's son and so he threw me away. Would it have made a difference to tell him that Drew and I weren't even that serious? I liked him, sure, but we were just having fun. It's not like I was truly a threat to the commander.

I shake my head to clear it of those thoughts. Drew has no place in my mind as I head into the unknown. The plane lurches. As I try to brace myself, the shackles around my wrists tug at my skin. My feet are chained to the seat awkwardly and I let out a grunt as I try to get some semblance of comfort.

I have never been on a plane before, much less one going to my doom. Trying to get my bearings, I realize I'm not alone. I count nine others, all drugged, unaware that they too are heading chain in place.

There are rankers here too; two at the front and two at the back of the plane. Seems overkill to guard a bunch of drugged prisoners. I watch the two at the front, waiting for them to move. Their backs are ram-rod straight and they're still as statues. Their eyes stare ahead at nothing in particular. Good little soldiers. They make me want to scream. I might if it wasn't for the nasty looking guns at their feet. Don't they know what they're doing to us? Don't they care? I turn away in disgust but, out of the corner of my eye, I see one of the guards actually move. He knocks on the door to the cockpit. A woman in a gray suit walks out and immediately looks at me. Our eyes lock for a moment before she frowns and calls to someone on the other side of that door. "I got a live one back here. Requesting assistance."

A man opens the door and walks toward me, holding what looks like an enormous needle. "Hold still," he tells me. I would've liked to tell him to try holding still when someone is about to stab you with a needle and inject who knows what into your body.

The last words I remember saying are, "You son of a bitch."

Chapter 6

Gabby

My skin is on fire. Is this hell? Did I die? I can see the flames dancing around me. Sweat pours down my face. Water, I need water. "Somebody please help me." There's no one here to hear me. I'm alone, I'm on fire; what else can possibly go wrong? The heat has finally gone to my head and I faint right there, with the flames still refusing to go out.

"No. Please. Put me out." I wake and there is no fire. The heat persists, but I'm not burning to death. I can't think of a worse way to die. But where am I, if not dead?

I can't control my breathing as I start to panic. It's too hot; I don't know how long I can stand it. I'd give anything for a drop of water, just one drop that isn't my own sweat. I'm alone in what seems like a small box. It's too small for me to stretch out my cramped legs, but the pain is the least of my worries.

My head pounds from the heat. I know enough to realize that if I keep sweating like this, I won't survive long unless I get some water.

I don't know if it's because of the heat, the thirst, or simply a left-over effect from whatever they drugged me with, but I can't stay awake. I just need a little kip. At least, that's what I tell myself before I pass out.

How long does this go on? A day? A week? I pass in and out of consciousness. I wake up to a hand reaching through a small door at the bottom of my prison. The mysterious hand places a small cup of water and a piece of bread on the floor and then pulls back. I want to cry out to whoever is out there, but I can't find my voice. I reach for the cup and could swear that the water sizzles as it hits my tongue. That may just be the delirium talking. My thirst is worse than ever as I suck the last dribble of water from the cup. When it's

empty, I throw it to the ground and attempt to eat the bread. I can barely choke it down my swollen throat. I curl back up and sink into the darkness once again.

In rare coherent moments, I can't believe this is happening to me. It's not like I'm a danger to anyone. I'm a teenage girl! And I'm all that my sister Dawn has.

I just wanted my sister to have a nice birthday in the middle of this shite world. She deserved it. What will happen to her now? Oh, Dawn, I'm so sorry. The tears fight to come, but they lack the water so I end up dry heaving instead.

I have nothing left to give.

Chapter 7

Dawn

I don't have another choice. At least that's the mantra I repeat to myself as I run through the dark.

I stayed up all last night trying to figure out how to help my sister and came up with nothing. I don't know what Drew has planned, but I have to go along with it.

By the time I reach hanger 18, Drew is nowhere to be found, but neither is anyone else. A plane sits on the tarmac, waiting to take off.

I don't know what to do so I wait, hoping Drew actually shows. I'm crouched down low, hiding behind a truck when I hear footsteps behind me. I flatten myself against the side of the truck and listen intently.

"Dawn?" A whisper comes from the dark. The footsteps have stopped by the time he whispers again. "Dawn are you out here?"

"I'm here." I step out from behind the truck. He walks up and grins.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," he says.

"Well, I had no other choice."

"I know." At any other time, his cockiness would make me mad, but I just shake my head and let it slide.

"Is it strange that no one is guarding the plane?" I ask.

"Yes and no. Come on, we don't have much time." He takes off running across the pavement. I follow him, looking around constantly to make sure we won't be caught. We reach the plane and Drew immediately gets to work on some sort of latch. He manages to get it open and the door swings upwards. Without hesitation, Drew hauls himself up through the opening and then reaches down to give me a hand. I take his outstretched hand and

grab the bottom of the door frame as well. It takes some effort but I manage to pull myself into the plane. Drew closes the door behind us and I let out a sigh of relief.

My breath comes fast as I lie on the ground and look around. We're surrounded by boxes. Most of them are unmarked, but I recognize the Red Cross that symbolizes medical supplies. This must be a supply plane headed for the colonies. Good, Drew was right.

I sit up and look at Drew. He's been watching me. "What?" I ask.

"I'm glad you decided to trust me," he says.

"I never said I trusted you."

"But you're here."

I sigh. "Because being there for my sister overrides everything. Basically, I'm just using you."

His intense stare doesn't waver. "Don't judge me on who my father is. You can trust me."

"Who said your father is the reason I don't like you?"

He presses his lips together. "I got us a plane and now we'll get to Gabby. I won't let her be trapped there like ..."

His voice trails off and I don't press him.

I know what it's like to have secrets and I won't begrudge him them. Gabby isn't the first person in his life to be sent away. I file away that information. Even the district commanders son has tragedy in his life.

I shift my gaze away and move a few things around to get more comfortable. "We have a long flight, I'm going to try to get some sleep."

Chapter 8

Dawn

We're trapped. In this cargo bay. In this mission. Our choices have been stolen from us. Now there is only purpose.

The flight seems never ending. My whole life, I've always been looking for escape routes. I don't confront things like my sister does, I run, but there is nowhere left to run to. I don't know what kind of dangers wait for me when this plane touches down. For the first time in my life, I am heading straight for the fight, straight for trouble. No more avoiding, no more hiding behind Gabby. It's my turn to be there for her and I won't fail, I can't. Even though I have no plan and my only ally is this boy I only know by his bad reputation, I will do this. I may be daft for trying, but I will try.

"Dawn?" Drew interrupts my thinking. "Are you hungry?"

I lift my head and turn to look at him. He is sitting on his knees, leaning towards me, and holding out something in his hand. In it is a long, thin, red and yellow package. "What is it?" I ask.

"Jerky."

"Huh?"

"Seriously? You've never had jerky? These things are the best." His face-splitting grin is enough to lift my mood and I take the food, opening it slowly. It's tough and hard to bite in to, but as soon as I do the delicious juice fills my mouth. It only gets better as I chew and soon I have my own smile to match Drew's. I wouldn't have admitted this to Drew, but I was famished.

In between bites, I try to explain, "We could never afford stuff like this. Food was in short supply in our flat."

At this Drew is silent. I look up from my food and catch him watching me again. Sensing I don't want to elaborate on my money

issues, he says, "Well, it looks like it's a popular food in the colonies. They have whole crates of this stuff here."

"Yeah, must be a treat for the officers or something." Drew hands me another piece of jerky and as we're eating, I think of something. "How did you do it?" I ask.

"Do what?"

"Get us on this plane," I answer.

"I had help," he says. "The officer in charge at the airport is a friend and a sympathizer."

"Seriously? You made a deal with a sympathizer? They're dangerous."

He shrugs. "Not as bad as the rebels."

An image of the gaffer I saw gunned down in the middle of the street flashed across my mind. "I guess you could say that, but at least rebels don't hide their views. Sympathizers in the government and military believe in the same things - independence from military rule, freedom – but they don't actually fight for it. Is it worse to push disobedience and disorder or to have those ideals and choose to turn your back on them instead?"

Surprise twists his features, his smile slowly growing. "You sure you weren't a rebel?"

"I'm not sure what I believe."

"I don't know." He scratches the side of his face. "Sounds like you chose a side."

One of my shoulders lifts in a shrug. "My sister is the fighter. She'd probably ended up a rebel at some point." Then I stopped, realizing who I was talking to. "I mean ... shite. The rebels are fighting your father. I didn't mean ..."

"Dawn. Chill. To be honest, I support a lot of the things the rebels say."

"So, you're a sympathizer?"

"I was." He looks around. "But I guess this is my coming out party." Lifting a hand, he gestures to the plane surrounding them. "Hate to break it to you, but we're rebels now. There's no going back."

His words echo through my skull. No going back. Rebel.

For Gabby, I'll be anything she needs me to be.

Chapter 9

Dawn

I'm jolted from sleep when Drew shakes my shoulder.

"Hey Dawn, I think we're landing." Drew shakes my shoulder lightly.

After our conversation about the rebels, my walls started to crumble. Drew and I are in this together now. We both gave up everything. I don't know his full reasons, but he's here.

For that, I'm glad.

He gives me a warm smile. A smile that seems foreign in this place, but it puts me at ease all the same. How is this the same boy who cheated on my sister?

Everything that happened in London feels like another world. His boyfriend skills aren't important at this time. In this place. All that matters is my sister – not her heart, but her life.

I stand up as straight as I can, which still means I'm hunched over a little bit in this tight space. "I've got a plan. First, though, let's fill our bags with some of this food."

"You got it, boss." Drew gives me a mock salute and I can't help the smile that comes to my lips as I roll my eyes.

I immediately go for the Jerky. I look over and see Drew going for the sweets. Laughing and shaking my head I say, "Uh...I think we should get food that will actually keep us alive, not send us into a sugar coma." I see him put all the sweets back and then slip a couple pieces into the side pocket of his rucksack.

As soon as we feel the plane touch down, we hide and wait for the door to open. It feels like an eternity goes by before someone finally comes to unload the plane. The door creaks loudly as it opens and then a man is standing within arm's length of our hiding place. He's a tall, imposing figure and needs to bend almost all the way

over in order to get through the door. As soon as he does, he begins looking around inspecting the boxes. His eyes sweep right past us without stopping and I inhale sharply, sure that he will see us any second now.

The colonies man steps closer into the cargo bay to count the boxes. Another man calls out to him. "Sir, you have a call on the sat phone." He turns and exits the door without a second glance. I exhale the breath I'd been holding.

"Drew, he left the door open. We need to go now." He goes to the open door and sticks his head out, checking to see if the coast is clear. He motions me forward and I see that there's only one man on the runway and he's busy pumping petrol from a truck into the plane.

I crouch by the edge of the door, watching the man, waiting for my opening. He walks behind the truck and I immediately jump out. I stumble when I hit the ground, but pop right back up. Drew is right behind me. I've never legged it this fast in my life. My legs throb and my chest starts to burn, but I don't stop, I can't.

We reach the nearest tree cover and allow ourselves to slow down. Silence follows as we listen for any sign of a pursuit. There is none.

I bend over, resting my hands on my knees, exhausted and panting.

"We made it," I whisper to myself. Drew hears me and tries to pull me into a hug. Immediately, I stiffen and pull away. Unbothered, he releases me, still grinning like a prat.

"We can do this, Dawn."

We move a little further into the woods to find a place to rest until the sun comes up. The darkness provides, cover, but in an unknown wilderness, we wait for morning to travel. We decide on a small clearing where we find a patch of grass to lie down on. We settle in and pull out our packs. I choose a very small nosh, just enough to hold us over because we don't know how long this food has to last us.

Even in the night, the warm air feels good. England never gets this warm anymore and I revel in the unfamiliar sensations.

Over dinner, we get down to planning our next move. "Where do you think we are?" Drew knows more about the colonies than I do – which really isn't hard being I know very little. I didn't have a high ranking father to eavesdrop on.

"I think we're in the Northern part of the colonies." He raises his eyes to look around. "We need to head south."

"And you know which way that is?" I ask skeptically.

"Sort of."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"One that has to be good enough," he answers. "The sun rises in the East, okay? I think I can figure it out from that. Plus, my father had all sorts of charts of the colonies in his office."

"Fine," I grumble. "You better be right. I don't want to be lost in a foreign country."

"How did you think you'd find your sister?" he asks.

"I didn't really think past the getting here part."

"Exactly," he says smugly, throwing an arm over my shoulders. "It's a good thing I'm here."

I pushed his arm away. "Whatever."

"You'll realize it eventually." With that, he walks off into the dark to take a piss, leaving me completely and utterly alone.

Chapter 10

Dawn

Is defreshed a word? Because that's how I feel when I wake. What's the opposite of refreshed? Just freaking exhausted I guess. Batteries not charged. Bone-weary.

Source of mental depletion? Defeat. I already feel defeated. It only takes me a moment after I open my eyes to realize I'm not in London. Then a moment longer to remember the plane ride. The colonies. Shite. We're in the colonies. And they have my sister.

But what am I supposed to do about it? I guess we'll figure that out.

I groan as I roll over and try to sit up, stiffness invading my limbs. I've spent years sleeping on hard surfaces. I can handle the aches and pains. Especially when I think of what Gabby must be going through. She's been a prisoner in the colonies for six days. She's the strongest person I know, but what if that isn't enough?

It has to be. I'm coming big sis, don't worry, I got you covered. I hope.

Drew's presence nearby is an instant comfort. The woods stretch around us and the thought of being alone strikes a terror in me.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I kneel in the dirt beside him. He's cleared pine needles from a patch of dirt on the ground and is drawing with a stick.

"Oh hey." I've startled him, "Morning, Dawn. Sleep well?"

"Yep," I lie, "You?"

"Kinda. Sleeping on the ground isn't fun, but I guess I'll get used to it."

I nod as I kneel down next to him. "What are you doing?" I ask again.

"This is what I know about the colonies. We're somewhere here." He points the stick to an area on the ground. "There are only two airfields in the colonies. One is for supplies and the other is where the prisoners are taken. Our supply plane landed at the northern one. From here, supplies are trucked to the various camps." He turns to me. "I think I know where she is."

"How?"

"Prisoners from London are only taken to one of the camps. It's the farthest one south, in a place called Floridaland."

"Drew! I can't believe you remember all of this." I scanned his drawing of the colonies in awe, knowing that with him, I may actually have a chance. "This is brilliant."

He flashed me a million-dollar grin, but as soon as it appears, it's gone again and the intensity returns to his eyes. "We should get moving. It's going to be a long walk."

He walks by me to grab his pack and I tie my hair back away from my face. I pull out two pieces of jerky and toss one to Drew. He catches it mid-air.

Hiking my bag onto my shoulder, I take a bite of the tough meat and follow Drew further into the woods, each step taking me closer to my sister.

Chapter 11

Gabby

When I was really little, my dad would take care of me when I got sick. He'd take the day off from work and sit by my bed telling me stories that he was making up on the spot. I used to get these really high fevers where my face would feel like it was on fire. My dad would wipe my forehead with an ice-cold washcloth. He'd tell me that I was his little angel and that he loved me. That's the best memory I have of him.

"Who is she?"

"I'm not sure yet. They had her in the hot box almost all week."

"Wow, someone musta not liked her very much."

I wake up to the whispers, not knowing where I am. I don't want to open my eyes yet because I'm not sure where I'll be. Someone is wiping my forehead like my father used to, but the water isn't cold enough to ease the pounding in my skull. I know I heard two people whispering, both women. Slowly, I open my eyes.

A small room surrounds me with a thatched roof and shoddy walls. They've put me on a makeshift bed of cloths. Leaning over me is a thin blonde-haired lady. She looks maybe forty or so, but how would I know? She's wearing the most grotty clothes I've ever seen. Cutoff jeans with patches that I assume are covering the many holes. Her shirt is no better. It's faded green and just kinda hangs off her bony shoulders like a sack.

"Hello there. Do you know where you are?" Her voice is surprisingly sweet.

"Ummm ... the colonies. Who are you people?" My voice comes out hoarse and scratchy.

"Oh my dear, let's get you some water, yeah?"

I nod, thankful for this woman's kindness. I've never really appreciated the wonder that is water before. It's the most amazing substance in our world. You would never realize that, though, until you're without it.

"Thank you," I manage, in between greedy gulps.

"After what they've put you through, it's the least I can do. My name is Amanda, and this is Claire." Amanda turns so that I can see behind her. For the first time, I see the source of that second whispering voice I'd heard. She's just a child. Her long red hair dances around her shoulders like the flames I'd been engulfed in for the past days.

"Hi." Claire's voice is as tiny as she is. I smile at her and she blushes. There's something sweet in that rosy face that reminds me of Dawn when she was little.

"Hi." I can't manage anything more.

"Claire, honey, if we don't get back to work, there will be trouble." With that, Amanda and Claire head out of the room. That was strange. They were taking care of me and didn't even ask me my name. I can figure it out later – perhaps when I can keep my heavy eyelids open.

When I wake again it's dark. I don't know how long I've been asleep, but it takes me a few minutes for the grogginess to wear off. I have to orient myself to my surroundings. I'm stiff and every muscle aches. The room spins as I try to sit and I fall back. A sharp pain throbs in my head. I try to sit again. Still dizzy, I manage to get one foot on the ground to stop the spinning. It helps.

My eyes begin to adjust to the darkness and they dart around the room. It's hard to see much, but I can tell that the cup of water is still by my bed. I reach for it and take a long drink. It's warm and tastes kinda funny, metallic-like, but I'm not in any position to care about that.

Slowly, I swing my other leg around so that I have both feet planted firmly on the ground. Using my arms, I try pushing myself up so that I can stand. Every muscle screams in rebellion, but I don't stop. It takes a few attempts, but I'm finally able to stay on my feet. I take a few tentative steps forward until I'm outside my door.

The only light is coming from the stars in the sky. In England, we rarely see the stars, with all the light pollution and whatnot. It would almost be pretty if I could forget for a moment where I was. That's not going to happen. I inch my way forward, wanting to get a look at where I am. It's hard to get your bearings at night, but the air out here feels so good, I don't want to go back yet.

I look off in the distance and notice a small glow that must be a fire. I walk towards it. In the dark, I trip over sticks and uneven patches of ground. When I'm only a short distance away, figures around the fire begin to emerge. Excitement rushes through me, but also nervousness. I've heard about the dodgy people that are sent to the colonies. Then again, I was sent here, wasn't I?

As I get close, my entrance into this little powwow does not go unnoticed. They've all turned to see who the intruder is. The conversation has grown silent. A few are still staring at me, but most have found something much more interesting to stare at on the ground. Just then, someone stands up from the group and walks towards me. When she gets close I see it's the woman who helped me earlier. I think her name was Amanda.

"Hello dear. You look awful; let's get you back to bed." Amanda keeps her distance as she moves past me, expecting me to follow. I do.

"Sorry if I interrupted something." I'm not really sorry, just confused.

"No no, we were just wanting some light." I can tell when someone is lying to me, but she's trying to be kind so I don't call her on it. Amanda doesn't say anything else as she leads me to my little hut, for lack of a better word. We reach the door and I step inside, but as soon as I turn to say goodnight, she's gone. Something about this place doesn't seem right.

Oh yeah, maybe it's because we're all freaking prisoners. If I ever make it home, they're going to regret the day they sent me here.

Chapter 12

Gabby

The next morning is an improvement. My headache has turned to a dull beat against my temples and I can deal with that. It seems that my little walk last night did me some good because my whole body seems to want to work with me today.

Someone must have been in here recently because beside my bed is a new cup of water, a piece of bread, and a bowl of something kind of like oatmeal. In England, oatmeal was a food for the lower classes. Some days, we lived on the stuff. Others, we couldn't even afford that. It's pretty tasteless, but in my world, food wasn't for enjoyment, only nourishment.

I eat quickly and step outside. As soon as I do I'm in the midst of a stream of people all headed in the same direction. I decide to follow the group and we end up walking for what seems like the better part of an hour. People are chatting and acting like this day is just like any other. Once again, no one talks to me or even looks at me. It's strange and frankly only adds to my hatred of the place.

By the time everyone has stopped walking, we're in the middle of a forest. Rows and rows of trees stretch in every direction. The trees are covered with oranges. When we were little, Dad bought us oranges every chance he got.

Since then, they were another luxury that only the rich could afford.

And now I was here to pick them for the very people who sent me to this place. Wonderful.

Before even my parent's generation was born, fruit wasn't all imported into England like it is now. England had a warmer climate for parts of the year. But the world is forever changing. As the

icecaps melted, the ocean stream that warmed that part of the world was diverted.

I don't know much more than that. Dawn was always the geek who actually listened to her lessons. I didn't need to study much since I always knew they'd put me in the military.

All I know is that it means England can't grow oranges. Now I also know their slaves do it for them. Bastards.

We're all standing in the middle of a clearing waiting for something; I'm not really sure what. A car drives up and beeps three times so that everyone scrambles to get out of the way. As soon as it stops, the door on the left opens and the driver steps out.

The driver is a large man in some sort of uniform. He's tall and tanned from the sun. With black hair and dark eyes, he's intimidating. He steps in front of the group and starts barking orders.

"Today isn't going to be fun, but then, you weren't sent here for fun." He lets out a harsh laugh. "You will be here until dark and I expect every bin full by the time you leave." As he says this, he points behind him at a stack of massive crates. "Now get to work."

I seem to be the only one dismayed by what we were just told. People start moving and it's almost like a synchronized dance. Everyone knows what their job is; well, everyone except me. Groups of workers move to different areas. I suspect they're assigned. The men have begun climbing trees while the women are down below putting oranges into their baskets. I'm not really sure where I should go, so I just choose a group nearby that looks like they could use my help. The three men and five women in this area don't say anything to me as I walk up to the nearest tree.

The work is much harder than it looks. I have to use all of my strength to pull each orange. At this rate, I'm scared I won't last very long in my weakened state. One of the young women from my group must have seen me struggling. "You're doing it wrong." She walks over and reaches towards the tree. "Don't pull. Twist the fruit and it'll be much easier." She demonstrates as she explains.

"Thanks." I try to be as nice as possible so that maybe she'll stay and talk to me.

"We don't want you to get tired. Then you'd be useless to us. There's no room for that here." After her blunt admission, she shrugs and walks back to the rest of the group.

The remaining part of the day passes without incident. I'm left alone, but I work hard. We're able to fill up the crates and more. By the time the sun finally disappears, I'm knackered. We walk back to camp, or whatever they call it. Just as I'm reaching my door, I get the feeling that I'm being followed. I look around and don't see anyone. I walk around to the side of my hut to check it out and there she is. The little girl I met the other day is trying to hide the best she can.

"Claire, right?" She just nods. "Why are you following me?"

Claire stays silent and just looks up at me with those big eyes.

I bend down to meet her eyes. "Claire, where's your mom? Isn't she going to worry when she can't find you?"

At this Claire finally looks away and speaks, "Mommy is gone, and Amanda is at the fires. Jer's at our place."

I'd just assumed Amanda was Claire's mom. She's a young girl so she must have been born here. I can't imagine anyone imprisoning her. "Who's Jer?" I ask.

"Brother." My heart melts for this girl.

"Come on," I offer her my hand, "Lead the way, and I'll walk you to your brother's." Claire takes my hand and we walk in silence for a few minutes before Claire speaks up.

"Why can't we talk to you?"

Her question surprises me. So, it's not just newcomer hazing. "I don't know, kid. I wish I did."

"I don't think you're bad. The hot box must have been a mistake." I don't say anything to this because she's actually made me speechless. Well, that's one question answered. Everyone here must think I'm some murderer or something. The District Commander must've really hated me. But was it bad enough to deserve this fate? What kind of horrible person does that?

Without even realizing it, we've reached Claire's place. It looks identical to mine in every way. Well, every way except for the tall, scowling boy standing out front.

"Claire," he yells. "Get inside. Where have you been?" He glances at me standing there holding his sister's hand.

"You must be Jer. I found Claire near my place and was just bringing her home." I tread carefully.

His scowl deepens. "Name's Jeremy. Only friends call me Jer. Stay away from my sister." With that, Jeremy turns on his heel and goes inside.

I'm dumbstruck. What a prat. What the hell is his problem? I don't care that his intense gaze made my hair stand on end or that his strong, stubble coated jaw is just about the hottest thing I've ever seen.

The guy is a dick.

This place is going to kill me. I walk back to my hut, and collapse in exhaustion on my bed, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

My life hasn't been easy in a long time, but this is different. I can't help thinking that now my life is just ... gone.

Chapter 13

Dawn

Weeks? Days? My feet scream at me. It's only been a few days and I feel like we've been walking for weeks. I'm not used to this; it's exhausting. Drew seems tireless. He just keeps going at a pace that I can't really keep up with. At times, I get pretty far behind him. We think we're moving south. Neither of us really has any survival skills, so the most we can do is guess. We keep walking, through dense forests and valleys.

A lot of what we see is really sad; ruins of a culture and a people. Destroyed buildings, large forests, and roads gone to waste. Yesterday we skirted the edges of an old and abandoned city. The land is broken and the people are gone. This place is in shambles. In England, we're taught that the colonies had it coming. They destroyed themselves. They'd been warned about a possible drought, but they didn't heed the warnings. Everyone saw global warming coming, but some countries did nothing to forestall the effects. There was corruption and greed. It was just the tipping point. Everything got worse from there. Famine, war, disease, and a nation was gone.

Just ... gone.

Once the darkness comes, we stop to rest for the night at one of the ruined buildings we come across. Only one of the walls stands more than a meter tall. Most of them have fallen completely. It looks as if the entire structure was made of concrete. As I walk through what used to be the doorway, I steady myself on a partially fallen wall and it crumbles beneath my hand.

Drew follows behind and, for once, he doesn't have anything to say. I'm grateful for his silence as I grieve for those who once lived here. He puts a hand on my shoulder and I don't brush him off.

I stop moving as my eyes find a freshly painted image on the floor. It's a large bird surrounded by blue and red stars. It's majestic and for some reason I don't understand, I'm careful not to step on it. I turn to leave the place behind, but Drew stops me.

"Do you hear that?" he asks. I strain my ears to listen until I hear a stick snap.

"What do you think it is?" I whisper.

"Someone's coming," he says.

"Or something." As I say this, a light appears in the darkness. A flame moves towards us.

"Stay here. I'm going to find out who that is," Drew says and walks out the door.

"Drew," I hiss, "don't leave me here." But he's gone. I inch back towards the wall and slide to the ground to wait.

A foot scuffs against the ground and I look up right into the eyes of a ripped, shirtless man. The light from his torch illuminates his wild eyes as he focuses them on me.

"Drew," I scream as the man steps forward, closing the gap between us.

His lip twitches and he snarls, "You stupid Brits."

I scramble to my feet and try to sprint by him, out the door. He grabs the back of my shirt and pulls me back towards the wall, slamming me into it. A dust cloud surrounds me, sending me into a fit of coughing. The man closes a hand around my throat, pinning me against the wall.

"You shouldn't have come in this room, little girl. Long live the USA," he growls.

I try to scream again, but his hand closes tighter around my throat, cutting off any words. My breath is bottled in my throat, screaming to get out. I kick and tear at the man to no avail. My head starts spinning as I feel the oncoming blackness. I close my eyes, waiting for it to come. It doesn't. In an instant, the pressure on my throat is gone and I'm gasping for air. There's a thud as the man's body hits the ground and I collapse next to him.

Drew stands nearby with a bloody rock in his hand. He doesn't look at me. I move away from the body on the ground and scramble

to my feet. I turn to Drew, who still wears a blank expression.

"I killed him," he whispers. I put my hand on Drew's shoulder and urge him out the door and away from the scene behind us. Taking the bloody rock from the strong grip Drew has on it, I throw it as far as I can into the woods. I grab Drew's hand and lead him away. When I think we're far enough, I stop. Drew still doesn't say anything more, but the horror on his face tells me what he's thinking. Guilt rises in his eyes.

Sitting Drew on the ground, I grab a bottle of water and make him drink. Taking his blood-spattered hands, I pour water over them. Once they're clean, I set aside our packs and wrap my arm around his shoulders.

A shudder runs through him and he leans his head on my shoulder as silent tears make their way down his face.

"We should move from here," I whisper. "He may not have been alone."

"I killed him," he responds.

"I know." I run a hand over his hair. "I know, but you saved my life."

He tilts his head to look at me. "Of course I'd save you. We're in this together, right?" He holds out a hand palm up.

I smile. "Yeah Drew. We're in this together."

I place my palm against his and he curls our fingers together. Gabby was the only person I'd had in my corner for a long time, but I don't have her now.

I have Drew. And in this moment, it feels good just to not be alone.

I know what he thought of his father, so I begin to wonder how alone he'd been in London. We may've struggled to survive, but at least I had my sister. Who did he have?

Me. At least for the time being. Now he has me.

The tortured look doesn't leave his face as I stand and pull him with me, but he holds on tighter, not letting go of my hand as we leave the horrors of the night behind.

Chapter 14

Dawn

Outrunning demons is a funny thing. It can't be done. They stay with you no matter where you roam. Doesn't mean you don't try. We walk through the night, only stopping the sun is just beginning to rise. Somehow, everything seems safer in the light of day.

I only manage a few hours rest and when I wake, I'm surprised to see that Drew is already up and digging in his pack. I assume it's to get out some breakfast for the two of us. Something has changed between us. The trust. It's beginning to grow. Or it has grown. I don't know, but I'm not so wary of him before. I've almost forgotten about the cheating on my sister thing. It's almost as if we're becoming friends. But the look in his eyes after killing that man will stay with me as long as I live.

He's not just the rich git I thought he was.

When he walks towards me, I'm surprised to see something other than food in his hand. He sits down before speaking.

"Dawn, I have something for you." He holds out a bracelet with a single charm in the shape of a heart.

"Drew..." I begin. And then I stop. On the heart is a single word. *Sisters*. Nobody has ever given me anything so beautiful.

"I'd forgotten I had this," Drew explains. "Gabby hid it in my car when she was arrested."

"I don't know what to say." Words stick in my throat as tears well up in my eyes. This is why Gabby was sent to the colonies. And that whole assault thing. I slip it onto my wrist and it fits perfectly.

"She thought you deserved a great birthday."

"Thank you, Drew. You have no idea how much this means to me." I wipe my face and smile at him as he helps me to my feet. For

a moment, we're face to face. Close. But it's time to get moving again. My sister needs me. *Us.*

Chapter 15

Dawn

Another abandoned road greets us. Surprise. Everything in this damn country looks the same. I'm tired of walking through woods and fields. I can't ever tell how far we're moving. Sometimes it feels like we're getting no closer at all. Hell, we may not be.

I stop walking when I see something shining from the grass off to the side of the road. Walking over, I bend down to uncover it. "Drew, come here." He turns, walks back, and crouches down next to me.

"What is that?" he asks as I try lifting it to get a better look. It's heavier than it looks, so I have to lay it back down. "Looks kind of like a door. To a car or something."

He's right, it does. I brush away more of the grass and dirt that's covering it and find the handle. That's when I notice the writing on the door. I scrape my nails against the metal to remove as much of the mud as possible. I don't know why, but I just have to know what this says.

United States Postal Service

"Long live the USA," I whisper.

"What?" Drew asks.

"That's what that man yesterday said to me."

"So, you think he was actually an American?" he asks the same question I have on my mind.

"There aren't supposed to be any of them left," I say.

"Who else could he have been?"

"I don't know," I mutter, almost to myself.

Just then, there's a noise coming from a little ways down the road. We frantically look around, at once both realizing how exposed we are. We begin moving slowly, so as not to attract the attention of

whoever is out there. It doesn't work, because it's not a who that's out here with us, it's a what.

I'm paralyzed, unable to make myself run as I stare at the largest bear I have ever seen. "Dawn! Dawn! Come on, we need to get out of here." Drew pulls my arm, but I'm frozen to the spot. It's huge, with brown fur and dark menacing eyes. It isn't until it's coming straight for me that I'm able to start running. Drew is just steps ahead of me and we're going as fast as our tired legs will take us.

The uneven road is littered with rocks that slide under our feet and slow our escape. Suddenly, pain shoots up my leg and I tumble forward. By the time Drew realizes I'm no longer behind him, the giant animal is standing over me. I try to get up and move, but the pain in my ankle is too much to bear. I fist rocks in both my hands and pelt the bear, but to no effect. I faintly hear Drew calling my name as he runs back for me, but I know that there's no way he'll reach me in time.

The animal rears up on its back legs and lets out a long roar. I close my eyes as a whimper escapes and tears roll down my trembling face.

I'm waiting and nothing happens. The roaring abruptly stops, but I'm still too scared to open my eyes. "Now, that is one hell of a bear." This unfamiliar voice breaks me out of my trance and I open my eyes. The animal is lying near where I sit, with an arrow through its head.

The newcomer looks down on it, grinning from ear to ear. I don't say anything because my mind is still reeling. Drew has reached us out of breath and looks at the man with an odd combination of relief and distrust. "Who are you?" he asks. After yesterday's attack, we can't trust anyone. Who knows what kind of people live here?

"Well, I could ask the same thing of you folks." There's a strange quality to his voice; some kind of weird accent, but not one that I've heard before. "Name's Anderson, Samuel Anderson. Call me Sam. This here is Beth." He taps the bear with his foot. "Been tracking her for days, till y'all led her right out here in the open. Thanks for that. Now, let's get under some cover and we can take a look at that leg of yours, miss." He walks towards me, grabs an arm, and looks back

at Drew. "Don't just stand there, help a lady out." In spite of the circumstances, I can't help but smile.

With help from the two of them, I'm able to hobble my way into the patch of trees to the side of the road. "Where are you taking us?" Drew asks.

"Well, sir, this little lady needs to see Ma. She'll get that leg right taken care of. It's not much farther."

With me leaning on both men for support, we make it a few kilometers before reaching a small, ramshackle house that looks like it was cobbled together with random materials. It's shelter, something we have been without since we touched down in the colonies.

As soon as we're close, a woman appears out front, hands on her hips, looking narked.

"Samuel Anderson! Where have you been? We have been worried sick." We? I wonder how many people there are out here. Nerves flutter in the pit of my stomach.

"Ma, I got her! I found Beth. Get Lee and Jesse to go get her. She's just a few miles away, out on the road."

"What's a mile?" I whisper to Drew. He shrugs.

The woman called Ma finally notices us next to Sam. "Oh no no no. Who are these people? We don't take in escapees. You're going to get us all killed one day, Sam."

Sam turns to us and asks, "Are you slaves?"

Drew responds with a quick "No."

"See Ma, it'll be OK. This lady needs your help. Beth was trying to gut her good when I found 'em."

Ma sighs and gestures us in. She doesn't say anything, just points to a table. Drew lifts me onto it and hikes up my right pant leg so that Ma can get a better look at my ankle. She walks over and begins putting pressure on various spots.

"Tell me where it hurts." She says quietly.

"Right there." I wince as she finds the spot. She then begins turning my foot left and right and then rotates it in a circle. The pain is intense, but not unbearable.

“Well, it's not broken. It's probably just a sprain. There's nothing we can do about the pain, you just need to give it a rest for a few days.” She walks away without saying anything more.

Drew walks up and grabs my hand. Sam comes to the other side of the table and says,

“I guess you're staying here for a few days. Might help if I got your names.”

Drew looks at me before he speaks and I nod. “I'm Drew and this is Dawn.”

Sam smiles, “Well good, now that we got that cleared up, let's eat.”

Chapter 16

Gabby

I don't know how much longer I can take this. It's not the work. No, I can handle that. It's not even these grotty living conditions. I'm pretty used to living in dodgy places. What gets to me are these people. You would think that everyone would welcome the newcomer and even help me out. I mean, we're all in the same boat here. It's not like I'm going anywhere, so they will have to get used to me eventually.

I wake up with food next to my bed again. Strange. I don't know who's bringing this to me, but I know there's no room service here. I sit up and eat what's been left for me; same thing as yesterday, but whatever.

As I'm eating, I see a flash of red hair outside my door and then Claire is standing right in front of me. She doesn't say anything, she just watches.

"Morning Claire," I say between mouthfuls.

"It's time to go. I didn't want to leave you." As she says this, I think back to last night. According to Claire's brother, I'm not supposed to be around her. What can I do, though, if she's the one showing up in my room? Plus, I'm grateful for the company. I finish eating quickly and head out to meet the others.

Today is just like yesterday. We walk for a while until we reach the trees. Then we're told to get to work picking the oranges. Today, we have an extra bin to fill. The only reason we're given is that a storm is coming. I'm from England; I can handle a little rain.

Towards the end of the day, everyone has slowed down. It's been extremely hot all day and people are exhausted. Claire and I work together to finish up our last tree. I stand down near the bottom,

gathering the oranges that have fallen on the ground. Claire has decided to climb up into the tree and fetch the last few at the top.

All of a sudden, I hear screaming coming from farther up the tree. I run around to a spot where I can see Claire. Everyone else has stopped what they're doing and come to see what the kerfuffle is all about.

"Claire! You OK?" I yell up the tree.

"My foot is stuck. It hurts, Gabby." Her voice wobbles in fear. As I try to get a better look at where her foot is, I notice something hanging from the tree to her right.

"What's going on? Is she OK?" Amanda has run over, looking worried.

"She's fine now, just scared. But we need to get her out of there without disturbing that wasp's nest." Amanda's eyes widen as she notices what I'm seeing. "I'm going up."

"There's got to be some other way." As she takes in the determination on my face she changes that to, "Be careful."

"Claire, I'm coming to get you." I can't even be sure she's heard me through her sobs. I've always been a pretty good climber so it doesn't take me long to reach her. Her eyes are wide and shining with tears. As she sees me she points to the wasp's nest. I was hoping she hadn't seen that. I grab her foot and rock it back and forth trying to pry it out of the tight spot it is stuck in. The tree shakes as I get it loose.

"Claire, come on. We need to get down from here now!" Claire goes ahead of me and I follow. I always found climbing down from a tree to be a little more difficult than climbing up one. Claire touches the ground first and I'm close behind. As I'm almost down, I hear a noise coming from behind me.

I slap my arm as I feel the first wasp land there. Its stinger digs into my skin before my hand smashes down. Another one gets my leg. I've never felt so much pain as my knee buckles and I tumble out of the tree and pass out.

Chapter 17

Gabby

I feel silly, having people take care of me. Once again, I wake to someone putting water on my forehead. Once again, it's Amanda.

"Claire, honey, she's waking up." Amanda's voice is directed at the door as Claire pokes her head in. She runs to the bed and hugs me.

"You saved me. I'm so glad you're OK."

"Shite, how long have I been out?" I ask.

It's Amanda who answers, "Only about an hour or so. We're about to go to dinner. If you're feeling up to it that is?"

I laugh at that, "I was beginning to think this was a hotel. What with the room service and all."

Amanda just smiles as she helps me to my feet. We get outside and Amanda leads the way. Claire is clinging to my hand as we join the group of people heading in the same direction. I don't know what I expected after the events of today, but it sure wasn't this. Nothing has changed. Amanda must have thought it would be different too or she wouldn't have brought me here. After I saved Claire, I thought people would at least be more accepting. That is definitely not the case. Once again, no one talks to me and those who actually look at me do so with as much distrust as ever.

We reach the place where everyone eats and I realize it's the place where I intruded on that fire a few nights ago. There are a few makeshift platters covered in food. No silverware, only crude looking plates and cups. I grab a plate and some food and find a place on the ground to sit. The meat is some kind of salted fish. It doesn't have much flavor, but I'm so famished that I don't care. Along with it is that stale bread that we've had with every meal since I got here.

There is little talk as we eat and I can tell that I'm the reason. People stare, their eyes burning into me, sending my anger to new levels. I can't take this anymore. I stand up and wave Claire down as she tries to stand as well, thinking I'm leaving. I will leave, but not before I say my peace.

"Hey," I yell to get everyone's attention. "What is the matter with you people? Look at me!" I say that last bit so that people turn to me. "I don't know what I've done to deserve the leper status, but I've had enough. I know it has something to do with that damn hot box, but I don't even know why I was in there. I only nicked a bracelet." I pause. "And possibly assaulted a soldier. But for fuck's sake, I didn't kill anybody. But you people don't care, do you? Hello? We're all in the same situation here! In case you haven't noticed, we're all bugged. I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you. I risked my neck today to help Claire, and you know why? Because she and Amanda are the only people here with an ounce of compassion. You all should be ashamed of yourselves. My name is Gabby by the way, if anyone cares." With that, I walk away. I don't let Claire come because, for the first time since I got here, I actually want to be alone.

I walk around the camp for a while before heading back to my room. Everyone must be finishing dinner soon so I want to get inside before they do. I lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling, daydreaming about London, my sister, and even my father. What I wouldn't give to be with Dawn right now. I left her all alone. We were all each other had left. The tears start to flow and I try to stop them, but I can't. I'm not a crier, but then again, I've never been this desperate before.

When I hear a drumming on the roof of my hut that drowns out my tears, I get to my feet and walk to the door to look out at the rain. It's as if the skies have just opened up. I jump when I hear the first clap of thunder even though I should've expected it because of the lightning that came before. I love thunderstorms. They're beautiful. When the skies are pitch black until that one flash lights up the whole world only for a second. Storms always scare Dawn. She usually hides in the corner of the room and I hold her hand.

Without even realizing it, I've walked outside into the pouring rain. Soon everything around here will be mud. I wonder how our huts will hold up. At the moment, I don't really care. I look up to the sky and spin around. Nothing has ever felt as good as this water running through my hair and down my face. Back home, the rain is cold, sometimes it freezes. Here, it's wonderful. I want this feeling to last as long as it can. I lay down. The mud sticks to my clothes, but it doesn't matter. I close my eyes and am at peace for the first time since I arrived. I don't know how long I've been laying there when I hear my name.

"Gabby?"

I open my eyes to find Claire's brother, Jeremy, looking down at me. The water runs through his hair and clings to his shirt, pressing it up against his defined muscles.

"What?" I have to yell to be heard over the rain.

"What are you doing? Don't you know this is a hurricane? You need to get inside."

"I want to stay right here." As soon as I say that, Jeremy bends down and actually picks me up. "Hey! Put me down!" I try to wiggle out of his arms, but he doesn't budge. "What are you, daft? Let go of me."

He finally puts me down once we're inside of his hut. I turn on him, seething. "What do you think you're doing? You can't just do that, you stupid git."

"I was saving your life."

"Yeah right, how?" How am I going to die from a little rain?

"This is a hurricane, not some little English storm. If, by some miracle, you didn't get crushed by one of the many things flying around out there, then you'd probably get pneumonia from being in the rain too long; we have no medicine for your stupidity."

His words deflate me, but I stay quiet.

He looks at me for a long moment. "Now, take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?" I cross my arms over my chest.

"Relax. This isn't for my own enjoyment. You're sopping wet. Wrap yourself in this blanket so you don't get sick. I'll start a fire."

Jeremy has a fire pit dug right in the middle of his room. I snatch the blanket from his grasp, "fine". After making sure Jeremy has his back turned, I undress and wrap myself in the blanket, making sure it won't fall off. I turn around and take a seat next to the fire that is struggling to start. Jeremy sits on the other side, wrapped in his own blanket.

I watch the light from the flames dance off Jeremy's prominent cheekbones. The light reflects off his golden eyes. He's not pretty or refined like Drew. His looks are rougher, rugged. But they're intriguing. What's his story? Why is he here?

I decide to breach the uncomfortable silence. "So," I start, "I've never been in a hurricane."

He looks up at me with amusement in his eyes. What a stupid thing to say. My stomach twists into all sorts of knots.

"Well, now you won't be able to say that, will you?" He smirks. I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders. I have resigned myself to the silence when Jeremy speaks again.

"That was some speech." I can't tell if Jeremy is making fun of me or not.

"I meant it," I snap, "Every word."

"I know you did. But you don't understand."

"Understand what?" I'm not in the mood to be scolded like a child.

"The types of people that come in sometimes...well, it breeds a lot of distrust, especially when they come in the way you did. Only the true criminals, killers and such, get put in that box." He gets quiet for a minute, "they're usually the ones who turn on us."

"Turn?" I ask.

"First they become snitches; telling the bosses everything that goes on here. Then, eventually, they become the bosses. We call them collaborators. They're always watching."

"Oh. I didn't know." I still don't feel guilty about my speech. I'm not like those criminals. I don't even know why I was in the hot box.

"Yeah." After that, we're silent for what seems like an eternity. I'm very aware of the fact that I'm only wearing this blanket. I'm not a shy person but something about this boy unsettles me.

"So," he says, "You stole a bracelet?"

"Yeah, for my sister's birthday."

If most of these people aren't hardened criminals, then what are they? Some are probably thieves like me, but surely not little Claire. I work up the nerve and ask, "What about you? Why are you here?"

"I was born here. So was Claire. Our mother was sent here for having an affair with some high-ranking official. She was pregnant with me." His words stun me into silence, but I'm saved a response by Claire as she walks in and sits by the fire.

"Hey, guys." She's soaking wet from the rain, but doesn't seem to notice.

"Claire, where have you been?" Jeremy asks.

"Around. I wasn't feeling good though so I came home." Jeremy sighs and makes Claire sit close to the fire. I stand to retrieve the other blanket from the bed, but Jeremy has the same idea. We knock heads.

"Ouch. Sorry. You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah." He must not believe me because he places two fingers on my forehead and leans forward to take a look. His breath is hot on my face. A chill runs up my spine and my grip on the blanket loosens briefly. It slips from my shoulder, but I catch it from falling any further. Jeremy slowly pushes the blanket back up, his hand brushing my skin lightly. In the dim light of the fire, I can barely see his face as he looks down at me. As if making a decision, he takes a step backwards, grabs the blanket from the bed, and sits next to Claire.

"You may have a small bruise tomorrow," he says. I don't respond. I let out the breath I'd been holding and return to my spot on the floor. Claire starts telling us some story Amanda told her and I do my best to listen because it takes my mind off of the butterflies roaming around in my stomach.

The three of us end up talking for hours as the storm builds outside. I try to leave on a number of occasions so that I don't overstay my welcome, but they don't let me. I'm secretly glad for this because I have finally gotten warm and comfortable. I doze off to the sounds of the fire crackling and the steady sounds of the rain.

Chapter 18

Dawn

I haven't eaten this well in years. They gave us venison, bread, and even fresh berries. I'm even drinking a cuppa. I still don't know who these people are or why they've taken us in, but at the moment I don't care. I'm content to just sit here and enjoy the fact that my stomach is full for the first time in as long as I can remember.

So far, we've only met two people that live here, but I know there are more. We heard Sam mention a few others. The room we're in is very small, though, so if there are more people living here there has to be someplace else. I'm guessing there is a lot more that they aren't showing us. I don't blame them. They're living in this hostile land; they can't afford to trust us.

Ma clears our plates and heads out the door. Before getting too far she yells back to Sam, "They're back." Sam jumps up and rushes out.

"Should we follow him?" Drew looks at me and I shrug.

"Well, I can't because of my ankle, but you go and see what's up." He follows Sam out the door. I try to hear what's going on out there, but they're too far from the door for me to catch anything. I'd expected Drew to come back right away, but instead, Sam rushes in.

"Up you go. We need you out there." Unable to stand on my own, Sam bends down and picks me up, taking me by surprise. I don't say anything though because his face tells me not to. He looks unsure of himself. In that instant, it hits me. He has no idea how the others are going to react to us being here. He took a major risk bringing us back here. This scares me. I'm just hoping these people are more civilized than the man that attacked me.

We head outside and a crowd of people has gathered. I don't know where they all came from. Surely if they'd been here the whole

time we have we would've seen them. Once we reach the group, Sam puts me down so that I'm sitting on a log. I notice there are many more logs around the open space and some of the people make their way to them and sit down. The majority of people, however, are still standing and staring at us. Most of them look uncertain of what to say or do, but as I look around I pick out the ones that look angry; the distrust evident in their eyes.

Finally, one of these angry looking people steps forward and speaks. "Sam, what have you done?"

"It's OK, Lee, they're not slaves. They don't work for any of the governments. They're just people, like us."

"Like us?" someone scoffs, this time it's a woman, "They're English. I heard that one speak." I look to see where she's pointing and my eyes land on Drew. For whatever reason, he doesn't even seem worried. He just shrugs, all nonchalant. Doesn't anything ever get to him?

"Jesse, come on. They're not all the same and you know it. These aren't the people that shot Aaron." Immediately Jesse lunges. Sam doesn't even have a chance to get out of the way before she's on him. Her first punch connects to Sam's Jaw. I can tell he was trying not to have to fight her, but he can't control himself any longer as he throws her to the ground. He pins her there, not letting her move, despite her best efforts. She's still yelling at him, but the fight is pretty much over when Ma walks into the middle of the group.

"That's enough." Her words cut straight through the tension and bring everyone to attention. Sam lets Jesse up off the ground and even she is no longer yelling. "Now, I don't agree with Sam bringing these two here today, but," she holds up her hand, one finger extended as if she is scolding each and every person, "now that they are here, they are guests and will be treated as such." Ma turns to me and says, "You have until your ankle is better, then you will be on your way." With that she turns and heads back inside, leaving the entire group speechless.

Everyone starts to disperse quietly. I watch them go. No one has to go far; most disappear down a stairwell that I hadn't seen before.

There must be something underground here. Sam and Drew walk over to me. Drew takes a seat, but Sam stays on his feet.

“Hey man, thanks for that. We really appreciate everything.” For once, I can tell Drew is being sincere and not just pulling out the charm.

“If you two are gonna be here a few days then you're gonna earn your keep. We need firewood.” Sam marches off without another word. Sensing he should follow, Drew gets up and does just that.

Chapter 19

Dawn

Long day doesn't begin to describe what today has been. I'm completely zonked.

The heat from the fire feels nice against my skin. A log bench isn't a comfortable bed. I noticed that we haven't been offered any other lodgings, so I'm just going to have to make do with it. I guess I've had worse.

It's a beautiful night. Even through the trees, I can see the sky is dazzling. The stars continue to amaze me out here. If I could forget for just a moment where I was and why I was here, I might not want to go back. These are my last thoughts as I drift off to sleep.

I wake to the soft pounding of drums. The rhythm is soothing. I open my eyes and see that the world is still dark.

It must be the early hours of the morning; too early for the sun to have risen.

"Hey, sleepyhead. They wake you up too?" Drew is sitting on the opposite side of the fire from me. When he sees that I'm awake he gets up and comes over to me. I have to sit up to make room for him.

"What are they doing?" I rub the last bit of sleep from my eyes to catch a better glimpse. A group of people is standing in a circle around the fallen bear that I'd totally forgotten about until now. They are holding hands and saying something. We're only close enough to catch occasional words that can slip through the sound of the drums. "We pray to you? What does that mean?"

At that moment, Lee walks up behind us. "They're praying for the soul of the bear and thanking the Lord for bringing it to us. Useless if you ask me. Sam brought us that bear, not some almighty tool."

He leaves without letting either of us get a word in. I'm still confused. Who's their Lord? And what is a soul?

"Did you understand any of that Drew?" He looks over at me as if trying to decide what to say. It takes him a minute to say anything at all.

"Dawn, do you believe in God?" I'm at a loss. This is the last thing I expected to come out of this boy's mouth.

"Shite, Drew. Of course not. It's forbidden." I don't know why, but I'm whispering. It's silly really, it's not like we'll be overheard and thrown in prison.

"I know it's forbidden. I didn't ask that. Believing isn't something you do just because you're allowed to."

That's when it hits me. "Do you?" I accuse.

He doesn't even hesitate before simply stating, "Yes."

I don't know what to say. His father is the district commander. I've seen what happens to religious rebels in London. Religious people aren't to be trusted, only feared. That's common sense. Most of history's wars were started because of these nutters. Is this boy that I have come to know and possibly trust one of them? I need some time to think.

I struggle until I'm standing on my one good leg and try to hobble away.

"Dawn please stay here and talk to me," Drew pleads.

"I was starting to trust you, but this is too much. I never thought you were this daft." I say.

"You can't believe everything we have been told about God and his followers. You already know what our government is capable of. Can't you imagine, just for one second, that they lied to us about this too?"

"I just need to go. Don't follow me," I stammer before hopping over to the cabin.

I sit down, lean my back against the side of the building, and think. How could I have been so stupid? Ever since my dad died, I have only ever let myself trust one person, Gabby. I should've kept to that. Sure, I probably never would've made it this far without Drew; and sure, he isn't bad company to have, but to trust him like I

have? What am I going to do? Is it possible that he's right about our government? I close my eyes and rub my temples, hoping for some clarity. Drew rounds the corner and sits next to me. I thought I told him not to follow me. I don't look at him as he wraps an arm around my shoulders.

"I know it's a lot to think about," he says.

"Then why don't you just let me think," I snap. I instantly feel bad for my attitude. "Sorry."

Realizing how close we are, I'm suddenly very uncomfortable. I pull away so that we're sitting farther apart. He lets his arm drop without saying anything or trying to stop me. I can't look at him so I fix my eyes firmly on the ground.

"It's because of my brother, why I believe." His voice is no more than a whisper. He sounds so vulnerable in this moment that I can't help but raise my eyes to his and keep them there.

"Brother?" I ask softly. "I didn't think you had any siblings." Now I feel like a proper bitch.

"Nobody did. Best kept secret in London." His attempt at a smile fails. "My father had an affair soon after he married my mother. My older brother was the product of that. When we were young, my father would have James, that was his name, spend summers with us. We grew really close. As we got older, James became less welcome in my father's house. Eventually, I had to sneak out just to go see him."

"Are you still close?"

"We were. He was everything to me, kind of like Gabby is to you. He taught me to trust in God and in the knowledge that he is always there. My father never understood that. He tried to tell me that James wasn't who he seemed. I didn't believe him."

"Where is he now?" I think I know the answer because I know what the punishment for religion is, but I'm hoping I'm wrong. I'm hoping that the district commander wouldn't do that to his own son.

Drew doesn't speak right away. I can see the pain in his face at what he is about to say. "He sent him here. I was caught sneaking out of my father's house to visit him. My father knew about James' belief in God, but he didn't do anything about it until he feared that I

might be influenced. It was my fault." Drew lowers his eyes and thinks before continuing. "A few months ago, I found a letter in my father's office saying that James had escaped over here, his whereabouts unknown. I have to know what happened. After we help Gabby, I'm hoping we can find out." I grab Drew's hand and we sit in silence.

Maybe I wasn't wrong to trust Drew. There's a depth to him that I've never seen before. In England, we're also taught that the colonies are a place filled with barbarians and criminals. We already know that is partially untrue. What else am I wrong about?

I interlock my fingers with Drew's and look down upon them. It's time for me to trust him the way he just trusted me. "My father was killed in an accident. Just a freak car thing. My mother might still be alive, but we wouldn't know. The day dad died, she left us. She just started walking and never looked back. We were little and now all of a sudden, we were on our own. We spent a long time moving from place to place so that no one could find us and separate us into different homes. Gabby always took care of me."

I always feared telling anyone the truth because of that one look they would give me; pity. They would tell me how sorry they were for everything my sister and I had been through. That's why Gabby and I made a pact never to tell anyone. *Sorry, Gabs*. I look up and Drew has no pity in his eyes. There's something else that I can't place.

As I'm about to turn away despite everything I'm feeling, Drew removes his hand from mine. He lightly brushes one hand down my cheek and tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. Then, ever so slowly, he leans towards me and our lips meet. Something stirs deep inside of me as his warm lips move over mine. I want more. I need more.

But Drew isn't mine to have, so I pull away, instantly missing that connection.

"Drew, we can't."

"You're right. I know you are, it's just, Dawn..." I watch him search for the words, but don't let him finish.

"Don't say it."

"Hey, guys." Sam has found us and seems to be unaware that he's interrupting anything. I use this as an escape.

"Sam, can you help me to a place where I can sleep?"

"Yep!" He offers me his arm to get up, "Little lady?"

Sam helps me limp back to the fire and a place to sleep, leaving Drew sitting on the ground looking lost.

Chapter 20

Drew

What was I going to say to Dawn? I have no idea. I couldn't think of it then and I'm damn glad for that. I could've ruined everything if I went on acting like some daft git. Of course I don't have feelings for Dawn. I barely know the girl. I can't believe I kissed her. I can't believe she pushed me away! That's never happened to me before.

But damn did it feel right.

I've never told anyone about my brother, but I wanted her to know. I want her to see me. To know the real guy, not the district commander's son.

By the time I rise in the morning, the place is teeming with people going about their daily tasks. There are men hauling water, children washing berries, women cooking breakfast, and a whole lot of other things that make this place a normal home. I guess it is normal to these people since they've never known anything different. It makes me wonder if this is how my brother is living now. I have no idea where he might have gone after escaping from the slave camps. I asked a few people around here about him, but no one knew who I was talking about. If he's living in a community like this, it's probably better than London for him. He was living in the east end, pretty close to where I found Dawn.

When James was a kid, my dad would send money to his mom. I wasn't supposed to know, but my mom let it slip in one of her drug-induced rants. The money stopped when James got a mind of his own. Dad was under the impression that children exist to do the bidding of their parents. He saw James' independence as a rebellion against him as if everything is about the great commander Crawford. The whole religion thing was the final straw. Along with all the other leaders of England, father saw religious people as the only people

they can't control. Well, James found God and then he helped me find him as well. So here we are.

I get to my feet and walk through the middle of the camp. People wave and say hello as I pass, but I keep moving without saying a word. I really don't have it in me for pleasantries this morning. I want to be alone. This doesn't work out too well because, as I'm putting some distance between me and the others, a girl runs up beside me and matches my stride.

"Where you going? S'almost breakfast," she says. When I don't say anything, she should get the hint, but she doesn't. "Okay, we don't have to talk. Let's just walk." And we do. The silence that stretches between us is comfortable until she breaks it.

"I'm Shay, by the way," she says.

"And I thought you weren't going to talk," I grunt. She is quiet once again as I stop and take a seat on the ground.

"I thought you wanted to walk?" she says.

I sigh. "Just sit down, will you?"

"So, where's your girlfriend?" she asks as she sits next to me.

"She's not my girlfriend." This girl is giving me a headache.

"Oh, well, okay then." I don't know why, but I end up spilling my guts to this unknown girl about last night's unfortunate events. She listens quietly until I've finished. She gets to her feet and turns towards me before walking away. "I would never push you away if you kissed me." And then she is gone.

Over the next few days, I steer clear of most everyone but Shay. She has a crush on me, I know she does. I've seen it a thousand times before. I don't feel the same way, but after Dawn's rejection, it sure feels good. I wish she wouldn't follow me around so much, but we should be leaving this place pretty soon so I can deal. I laugh every time I see the death stares Shay sends Dawn's way, but I don't think Dawn even notices. She is too wrapped up in the rest of these people to even give me the time of day. Hopefully, we can return to normal once we're back on the road; just the two of us.

Chapter 21

Gabby

The wind howls as it rips through camp, sending the pelting rain slanting sideways. Throughout the night, it keeps us awake. It must be really late by the time I fall asleep.

In the morning, I wake disoriented. Where am I? I'm in a bed, but not alone. I'd been dreaming of home. Not the abandoned building in the east end; no, home was a little house with blue trim and a red front door. There was a fireplace we'd curl up in front of on cold days. The kitchen always smelled like freshly baked bread and whatever mom was making for dinner; she was a great cook. Maybe that's where I am. Maybe it wasn't a dream. Maybe mom and dad are making breakfast, just like any other morning. I'm smiling when I finally open my eyes.

Reality comes rushing in at an alarming speed. Mom and Dad are gone, the little girl sleeping next to me is not Dawn, and I'm far from home with no hope of returning. What a world.

The events from the night before race through my mind. Even after last night, I still don't know where I stand with Jeremy or anyone else in this grotty place. Claire stirs beside me, but as I look around the room, Jeremy isn't here. He must have moved me to the bed and then slept on the floor last night. I feel kind of guilty for that.

"Gabby?" Claire's sweet voice breaks my heart every day, reminding me of my sister.

"Go back to sleep, Claire. I'm going outside for a bit."

She lets out a little cough and falls back to sleep.

I climb over Claire, looking for my clothes. I still have the blanket tied tightly under my arms. I find my clothes stretched out near the fire pit. To my surprise, they're actually dry. They're cleaner than

they've been since I got here, but then, so am I; must've been the rain. I quickly dress and head out the door.

I'm not prepared for what I see. It turns out that we were lucky to still be under a roof when we woke. Last night's storm has tossed the place. The ground is littered with thatching that has blown off some of the huts. One or two have been destroyed altogether.

People are moving about, trying to make sense of everything, picking up. Some have already started repairs. I make my way over to my section of the camp. It is slow going because the ground has turned to mud. My shoes act like suction cups. With every step, I have to use all my strength to take the next one.

I find Jeremy helping clear some of the trees that have fallen in the middle of camp. As I walk up he doesn't smile or acknowledge me. Maybe last night's conversation was a one-time thing and now he's back to hating me. I refuse to let that be the case so I continue walking towards him as if nothing is wrong. I reach him when he is in the middle of trying to move a fallen tree. It's not too big and under normal circumstances, Jeremy could handle it without a problem. The mud, however, is making his job very difficult. I don't know what to say when I'm within earshot so I just stand there for a minute.

"Hey Gabby, I could use a little help if you would be so inclined." I choose not to be bothered by his rudeness. Instead, I'm just happy he said anything at all. With my help, we're able to get the tree over to where they're piling the rest of them. We walk back towards the center of camp side by side to get the next one.

We work like this for most of the day. Neither of us saying much, but working as a team.

"Jeremy, don't we have to go pick oranges or something today?"

"Not after a big storm. We have to rebuild the camp."

"Oh."

"We probably can't even get to the grove right now anyways; Not with all this mud and such. Come on." He gestures for me to follow him, "Let's get some food."

I still don't know how everyone else will react to me today, so I'm a little reluctant. Jeremy just keeps walking without looking back. I

decide to brave it because I'm hungry. I have to run to catch up with him. Daft move. If the mud makes walking hard, then running in it is impossible. I end up face down, covered from head to toe. Jeremy stops and turns around to see what the noise was. He is grinning as he looks down at me; the first smile I have seen on his face.

"Not funny," I say through gritted teeth. He begins to chuckle as he extends his hand to help me up.

"Come, I'll show you where you can clean up."

Letting go of my pride, I grab his hand and pull myself to my feet. He starts walking off and I follow him, exasperated.

We reach a patch of trees that are surrounding a small pond. I tell him to turn his back and I strip off my grotty clothes. They are heavy from the weight of the mud. I sink down into the water and sigh. It feels great. Once I'm clean, I scrub my clothing between my hands and reluctantly climb out of the pond.

I wring my clothes out the best I can, but I know they'll still be wet most of the day. Oh well, I guess I can live with it. I put them on and go find Jeremy. He's leaning on a tree nearby, singing in a low voice. I don't know the song, but his voice surprises me. He doesn't hear me coming until I'm right next to him. He stops his singing abruptly and starts walking back to camp.

"That was beautiful. You shouldn't have stopped." He turns to look at me for a second then turns back to keep walking.

"You don't know what you're talking about." I can't tell if he's angry or being defensive for some reason. I said beautiful, right?

"I never would've guessed you could sing like that."

"Drop it, OK?" I do as he asks, but only because we've reached the others and my stomach is growling. What I find here surprises me. No one is staring and the conversation does not stop just because I'm there. They're still not making an effort to talk to me, but this is a huge improvement.

I grab my food and find a place to sit. I'm alone until Amanda walks up.

"Can I join you?" she asks.

"Sure, if you can find a place to sit that is." She smiles at my joke and sits across from me. Jeremy joins us as well.

As I'm eating, I look around, trying to find Claire. She isn't here. That's odd. Mealtime isn't really optional. Everyone needs to eat and food is only available twice a day. I glance at Jeremy and find him searching the crowd as well.

"Where do you think she is?" he asks me.

"I don't know. She was still asleep when I left her this morning."

"I'm going to find her. She needs to eat." He gets up and goes to grab some food for his sister.

"Wait," I yell after him. "I'm coming with you." I don't run this time, but I do speed up a bit.

We reach the door to the hut Jeremy shares with Claire and stop. Before we enter he calls in to his sister.

"Claire? You in there?" At first, there's no response. We're both listening intently when I hear the faintest sound of a cough. I look over to Jeremy, but he's already darted inside.

I go in slowly, very aware that this isn't my place. I stay by the door, not wanting to intrude on the scene that is playing out before me. Claire is in the same spot that I left her in hours ago. Her eyes are closed and she is curled up in a little ball. I would almost think she was sleeping peacefully if it wasn't for the constant shivering. Jeremy is kneeling beside her trying to wake her up. I turn as someone else enters the room and see that Amanda has followed us. She doesn't seem to mind intruding as she walks past me and crouches down next to Jeremy.

"She isn't waking up Mandy. What's wrong with her?" His voice is no more than a whisper and there's a quiver in it. I wish I could help him but, despite last night, we're practically strangers.

"Jeremy, I need you to back away and let me try to help her." First me, and now Claire, I'm guessing Amanda is the unofficial doc.

"But..."

"Jeremy, go. I need you to build a fire in here. Go try to find some dry wood, and tell someone to bring me a bowl of water and a dry blanket. She's already sweat through this one."

Jeremy finally gives in and walks out. I go to follow him because I need to do something useful.

"Gabby, you stay here. I need your help. Jeremy would've just gotten in my way." I don't really know how I can help, but I listen to her anyway. I get the feeling in situations like these, everyone just does what Amanda tells them to.

A few moments later, a girl that I don't remember ever seeing comes in with a bowl of water.

"Thank you, Kait." Amanda takes the bowl and the girl leaves.

Amanda hands me a rag and I immediately dip it in the water and start cooling down Claire's face. She is burning up. I know there isn't much more we can do here. Living in the east end, you learn very quickly to accept limitations.

My sister, Dawn, used to get sick all the time. Usually, she'd get over it fairly quickly, but there was one time when Dawn was so sick that she couldn't even get out of bed. I waited and waited for her to get better, but she just kept getting worse. I was fifteen at the time and I've never been more scared. I ended up breaking into one of the medical buildings nearby and stealing the medicine. I never told Dawn how I got it; she wouldn't approve, but I couldn't lose my sister.

I can't lose Claire. She is the one bright spot since I've gotten here, but there is no medical building this time. Jeremy hurries back in and builds the fire. It's a hot day, but Claire is soaked in sweat and freezing cold.

"Jer." It's quiet, but we all hear it.

"I'm here." He comes over, sits next to me, and grabs her hand. Claire reaches with her other hand and grabs mine. We sit her up just enough so that we can help her drink some water, but that's almost too much for her. She falls back asleep soon after.

Amanda leaves the room, saying that sleep is probably the best thing for Claire. Jeremy and I are both still holding her hands, even though her grip has loosened.

"I should never have let her outside before a storm," he mumbles.

I vaguely remember Claire coming in a while after me, soaking wet. Without even thinking, I reach over with my free hand and grab Jeremy's. "You can't blame yourself. It'll drive you nuts."

He doesn't respond, and he doesn't remove his hand from mine. With neither one of us wanting to leave Claire's side, we sit in silence.

Chapter 22

Dawn

We've been here for four days now and I worry about overstaying our welcome, not like we were ever really welcome in the first place. My ankle feels a heck of a lot better, but I'm not there yet. I need to be able to cover long distances and run to get away from any other bears or crazy Americans who want our heads. You never know what's going to happen.

People here are warming up to us, well, to me anyways. Even Lee helps me hop around if there is no one else nearby. Drew, on the other hand, is another story altogether. We haven't spoken since the incident; that's what I'm calling it. I don't know how he got the hair brained idea to kiss me. Everything was going perfectly. We were actually getting along pretty well, even becoming friends. I know what his reputation was back home. I even saw first-hand how he earned that reputation. He thinks that just because he looks my way, I'm gonna swoon and go all weak at the knees. Well, guess again buddy.

Okay, so maybe I did. Am. I don't know! Ugh. That kiss. I want to do it again. I want him to want to do it again.

Then I give myself a mental slap. Not. Going. To. Happen.

I can't help but wonder if I mislead him; giving off the impression that I was the kind of girl that would go after her sister's boyfriend. I'm not, or at least I'm trying not to be. Underneath my anger towards Drew, I'm feeling a little guilty.

I'd never been kissed before. And I didn't hate it. Actually, I can't stop thinking about how much I enjoyed it and that's why I'm so damn narked at Drew for doing it. We were sharing our deepest secrets and it was very intimate, but now I need to stay away from him for a while. I don't care that he's mad at me for avoiding him,

but does he have to be so moody? If he was just rude to me that would be one thing, but I'm afraid his brooding is making Ma and Sam and everyone regret letting us stay. He's being a proper prat.

It's hard to think of Drew as my ally now. In a strange way, we were in this together, just the two of us, but now I feel more alone than ever. I don't even know why he came. OK, his brother, I get that.

I spend most of my time with Sam. He's been teaching me a lot about the colonies. There are all sorts of people living hidden lives all over the country. Sam has even met some of them. Aaron, for example, lived about a day's walk from here and he used to hang around. He was even considering moving in so he could be with Jesse. Before he could, though, he was killed on a raiding mission. Raiding colony outposts is the only way to get a lot of the supplies that keep these people alive.

The Americans have all sorts of stories about what happened to this country. Sam says that he thinks most of them are true, but there's no way to know because they aren't written down. A lot of the tales are similar to what I learned in school, but some of them are different. I don't know whether to believe what I've been taught in my lessons or Sam's stories. I tend to think mine might be more accurate since the facts come out of books rather than oral history, but I can imagine my government altering certain things and hiding others.

Sam and I both know that the drought started everything. It affected most countries around the world, but the strong governments were able to adapt and survive. The American government would've been one of those to survive had it not been for a terrorist attack.

"It was the British, right?" Sam asks.

"No," I pause. "They called it domestic terrorism."

"What does that mean?" He scrunches his face in confusion.

"Sam, it means it was your own people that destroyed your government. At least I think that's what happened. I can't really trust much of what I've been taught."

Sam looks away. "That can't be true." He says this more to himself than to me.

Over the next few days, Sam answers all my questions about religion, but there is no more mention of the colonies history. It's as if it hurts too much for him to talk about.

These people believe in all this stuff that they've never even seen. If I hadn't gotten to know them, I might think they're just a bunch of nutters or something. They pray to a God, whom they've never seen, thanking him for all this stuff that he doesn't really deserve the credit for. Food? I see Lee and Jesse and the rest go out hunting every day. They're the ones who bring the food. They talk about some guy who did all this crazy stuff thousands of years ago; as if he can really heal people or walk on water. I totally get why all this crap was outlawed in England. I don't understand how Drew believes any of it, but I can't ask him because that would require him to talk to me.

On the second day of our stay, Sam brought me to a clearing in the woods to see the pond that they use for all their water needs. It's in a beautiful spot, surrounded by large, majestic looking trees, oaks I think. The sunlight breaks through the leaves and illuminates the water. The pond is clothed in lily pads and blue and yellow water lilies. I've never been in a more peaceful place. I've spent much of my time here over the past few days. If it wasn't for my sister, I could stay here forever.

I'm sitting alone when I hear someone say, "Hey Dawn, you busy?" Sam, Lee, and a girl, I think her name is Shay, come into view. I don't answer right away.

"Earth to Dawn." Sam is still trying to get my attention.

"Oh hey." I snap out of my daydream.

"What's wrong with you?" Lee is ever so kind. Shay just stares at me. She never says anything, instead preferring to give me these odd looks. It's kind of weird but, hey, to each her own, right?

"Nothing," I mumble. "What's up?" I look at the baskets of berries the three of them are carrying and my mouth begins to water. "Berry Paradise," that would be a great name for this place.

"We're heading back to the caves. There's rain in the air, must be coming soon."

"The sun is still out." I'm confused. When it rains in England, everything is dark and gray. The world becomes an ugly, scary place.

"Trust me, it's coming."

I shrug and stand up, favoring my good ankle. My legs are stiff from sitting for the past few hours. I guess I hadn't realized how long I was here. Sam hands his basket to Lee and moves to help me, but I wave him off. If I'm ever going to be able to get back on the road to save my sister, I need to start trying to get back to normal. Sam doesn't back away from me, but he doesn't reach for my arm either. He's just there if I need him.

I tentatively put weight on my other ankle and take a step forward. I wince from the pain, but it isn't enough to make me stop. I'm moving slowly, but at least I'm doing it on my own. Lee and Shay have gone on ahead, but Sam stays back to ensure that I make it to the caves.

When we first met Sam, I didn't know what to think about him. Our encounter with the bear left me shaken. He saved us and brought us here no questions asked. I still found him strange though. The way he talked made him sound kind of daft. Not that I have any room to talk. I'm from London's east end and that fact alone makes people assume I'm low class. I was also skeptical that anyone could be as happy as he seemed to be, especially in a place like this. In the short time we've been here, Sam has treated me as well as any male ever has. All my first impressions of him were dead wrong and I feel guilty for even thinking those things about him. I've always wanted an older brother and I would want him to be exactly like Sam. Maybe I'll adopt him.

It's only a small accomplishment, but I'm proud of myself when we arrive. To my utter amazement, there's a door sticking up from the ground, and people walking down into it.

"Welcome to the caves," Sam says. I knew there was more to this place. I knew there was something they were hiding. I look to Sam, unsure of myself, as I step down through the doorway. I reach out to stabilize myself on the stairs and find Sam ready to help me.

"Come one, I'll take you on a tour." he says.

At the bottom of the stairs, there are three narrow doorways. Sam leads me into the first one and it's wall to wall beds. They all look sort of homemade, but it beats the ground. There are various blankets and other belongings strewn across the beds. I'm guessing most of this came from those raids I was told about.

The walls of the room are stone and I shiver as a chill creeps up my spine. It's much colder down here. It's also much darker. There are lights along the walls but they're dim. The only sound is the hum of a generator. Sam leads me into the next room and it's much like the first.

The last room serves as the living space. It's much wider than the previous two and has a large cooker at one end. There's a mixture of furniture throughout the room.

"The spoils of war," Sam whispers as if he could guess the question forming in my mind. All of this must've come from the colonial outposts.

Sam finds me a seat and goes to help Ma. When they finally have the cooker started, he sits next to me.

My eyes find Drew in the corner talking to Shay. I'd noticed them spending some time together over the past few days. He catches me staring at him and quickly looks away. I wish I knew what his problem was.

I feel like we're waiting for something to start, but I'm not sure what it could be. Ma chooses a spot near the fire to sit and then looks around at the rest of us before speaking.

"I've been asked to tell a story," she begins. "This story has been passed down from generation to generation."

I look sideways at Sam. "This is something you'll want to hear," he whispers.

Ma must have heard him because, in a voice to be feared, she says, "Samuel Anderson, if you want me to tell this story, I expect you to shut the hell up."

Sam winks at me.

"Now, this story is only one of many that have been passed down. Some things were lost throughout the years. The colonies, as

you Brits call it, were once a great nation. The United States of America it was called." The image of the metal door we found on the road comes back to me. I catch Drew's eye and he doesn't look away this time. We have learned about all of this in school but, somehow, it seems more meaningful now.

"Some say it was an act of God, like the people weren't praying enough or something. He dried up farms all across the country and people began to starve. We've all been hungry before so we know what it does to people. Then the Brits got involved. They blew up our government." She stops when Sam intercedes.

"Uh, Ma. I don't think it was the British."

So, he did believe me. He doesn't mention that an American was involved, but it's a step.

"Son, are you saying our most precious stories are wrong?" She speaks with a soft tone and I can't tell if she's angry or not.

"Well, they're not written," he says.

"No matter. Whoever it was, the government was gone. Some people tried to lead but no one succeeded. People was fightin' all over the place. Farm states against everyone else. It turned into an all-out war. Greed versus Greed. Then the scourge came. Some say it was loosed by the losing side but most say it was divine intervention. The rest of the world took note as our population dwindled over the next hundred years until it was almost gone completely.

The story is taking a toll on Ma. She has tears running down her face as she looks at all of us.

"Do you need to stop, Ma?" Lee asks; eyes full of concern. In the short time I've been here, I haven't seen him actually be kind until now.

"I'm almost done, dear," she responds. "And when it was over, when the cities of the east and south were destroyed, and the people were gone from the sickness, and God had lifted his hand, the nations moved in to pick over the carcass. Only a few of us remained, hidden. Then the British came across the sea and settled in the south so that they could feed their people. And the land came

to life once more on the backs of the slaves they sent here. Those damn camps!”

My ears perk up when she mentions the camps, hoping she'll tell us more.

“Can I ask you about the English slave camps?” I ask.

“Most of them camps are down in old Floridaland. It's as far south as you can go. Surrounded by ocean. They emptied out their prisons and slums to send people down there.”

“What happens to them?”

“They probably be picking fruit and vegetables. Hard work that is. Hot in Floridaland. You go there and you don't come back.” I can tell she's finished talking when she leans her head back on her chair and shuts her eyes.

Sam whispers to me, “So why are you so curious about those slave camps in Floridaland?” Up until now, I hadn't felt comfortable telling Sam or anyone else the truth about why we're here. I don't have a lie handy so I just go ahead and tell him.

“My sister is in one, and I'm going to get her out.”

Chapter 23

Gabby

Claire has been drifting in and out of consciousness for days now. She's strong and is holding on. There are times when we think she might even beat this. There's a problem with too much hope, though. It's so much harder to live when that hope fails than if you never had it to begin with. Hope prolongs pain. It torments the soul.

Life has returned to normal in the aftermath of the storm. We're back to work in the groves. Well, most people are. Apparently, they've found a foolproof way to cover for me and Jeremy. I don't know what it is though, and I really don't care as long as it lets me stay here with Claire. Jeremy and I only leave her side to go to the lav. People have been bringing us our meals, but it's hard to eat. Claire can barely choke anything down and is wasting away in front of us. She has trouble getting the water down her throat and can barely talk because her mouth is so dry. She shivers in the 90-degree heat. Helplessness overcomes me. There is nothing I can do to help her. This sweet girl does not deserve to go like this.

I've taken up root in Claire and Jeremy's hut, but neither seems to mind. I think Jeremy appreciates the company. We take turns sleeping so that someone is always awake with Claire. I'm sure both of us smell pretty grotty in this heat because we haven't been to the pond, but we don't notice. Jeremy doesn't say much, but occasionally he'll grab my hand, making sure I'm still there. I feel for him. He feels like Claire is the last good thing he has in the world. Claire represents a better life. I know this because it's exactly how I've always felt about Dawn. The worst part about this place is losing her. Family never means as much as it does when times are hard. In the short time I've been here, Claire has become like family to me. She's been the only bright spot in an otherwise dark place. As I look

into her angelic face, tears begin rolling down my face. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stop them.

I feel a light pressure on my hand and Claire's eyelids flutter open slowly. "Gabby?" she whispers.

"I'm here," I respond.

"Am I going to die?"

The tears are flowing freely now. "Oh honey, you're going to be just fine." It's almost as if I'm willing myself to believe it instead of Claire.

"Gabby?" Even quieter this time.

"Yeah?" I'm trying not to let her hear the break in my voice.

"I'm scared."

It's like a stab to the heart. Not knowing what to say, I just tell her the truth.

"Me too, Claire." Claire's eyelids slide shut once again and she falls back into unconsciousness. "Me too," I whisper once more. I sit staring into her face and reach up and brush the hair out of her eyes. Unable to control myself any longer, my chest heaves with sobs.

Jeremy wakes and takes up his spot next to me, his arm around my shoulders. I lean into him and bury my face in his shoulder.

"You should get some sleep," he says. I don't want to close my eyes for fear that Claire will be gone when I wake, but I know he's right.

"Maybe just a short kip. Wake me if anything changes?" I ask.

"Yeah." He removes his arm from my shoulders and takes his sister's hands in his. Wanting to give him his time with her, I move to the other side of the room and try to get some shut eye.

"Gabby ... Gabby." I wake up and look around. Jeremy is bent over me trying to get my attention. His face looks urgent. Oh no, did something happen while I was asleep? I knew I shouldn't have closed my eyes.

"Claire?" Panic builds in my chest.

"She's still hanging on."

I let out a heavy breath and look at Jeremy, confused.

"Amanda brought us some food." I don't know why he seems excited by this. It's not like the two of us have really been eating the past few days. I think he can tell that I still don't get it because he explains, "They caught a gator." That doesn't help my confusion.

"Gator? What's that?" I ask.

"It's meat for one thing." We don't get meat around here; well, besides fish. Eating the same thing every day gets really old, so I'm all up for trying something new. My lips crack as I smile for the first time in days and I move over to sit by Claire's bed with Jeremy. I pick up the piece of meat to examine it. It smells pretty much like fish. It's thick and charred from the grill our cooks have rigged up. I take a bite and it's heaven. It still has that fishy quality to it, but it's different enough that the flavors explode in my mouth. When you eat the same food every day it becomes practically flavorless. The gator is chewy and tough, but I manage to scarf it down quickly, still wanting more.

"So, what's a gator look like?" I ask Jeremy.

"It's basically a giant lizard."

I almost gag as soon as he says this. I've never had the luxury of being picky with my food, but I've never eaten lizard. He chuckles at the look on my face and I forget all about what we've just eaten. We've had our brief bit of joy at new food, but it's time to get back to the reality of what's going on here.

Claire is getting worse. She's waking up less and less and can barely speak when she does. This time it's a coughing fit that wakes her. She smiles slightly when she sees the two of us and we each take a hand. She tries to say something, but it doesn't come out so she stops. We both lean down to try to catch what she wants to say so she tries again.

"Guys I have to go now." It's barely audible, but we hear every word.

"Claire, it's OK, just go back to sleep." Jeremy's voice is pleading.

"Did you have gator? I love gator." She smiles lazily.

"I'll go get you some, you should eat something." I move to get up and leave, but Claire squeezes my hand.

"No no, none for me." She looks sideways at her brother, "I love you, Jer."

"And I love you, sis, let's get you some water." I'm starting to realize what's going on here. Claire is saying goodbye. She looks at me and says,

"Don't you let him die in here. You need to get out. Escape." If I wasn't a sobbing mess, I would almost laugh at the stubbornness in her voice. Not letting Jeremy hear me, I lean down and whisper in Claire's ear.

"I will." Once she has my agreement, Claire leans her head back on her pillow with a smile on her lips. She breathes in once more and then lets out a long sigh and her whole body relaxes. I feel her little hand slide out of mine and I set it on her chest. Jeremy does the same. Without saying anything to me, he stands and walks out of the room. I follow him.

"Someone find me Mandy," he barks out.

"I'm right here, Jeremy." Amanda steps forward and walks towards us.

"It's done." With that, he walks away. I think about going after him. He shouldn't be alone, but everyone grieves in their own way. I'm left standing in front of the hut Claire and Jeremy shared, completely unsure of what I should do. My tears have finally dried up, but I can't take any more of this heartache. The camp is busy with everyone returning from a day in the Groves, but I don't want to be around anyone else right now.

I walk away, unable to look back.

Chapter 24

Dawn

*You are? Cool! I can't believe you came all this way for your sister!
You got a plan?*

Sam's response last night confounded me. Most people who learn of our intentions would think we're nutters or something. Nope, not crazy, at least I don't think so. He asked about a plan. I hadn't even gotten that far. My main focus so far has been actually getting there. I have no idea what we'll do once we're far enough south. To be honest, I'm afraid I've gotten a little too comfortable over the past week or so. I haven't really been thinking about Gabby as much as I should. I know I should've pushed myself harder to get back on the road. We shouldn't be here; not while my sister needs our help.

I also feel kind of guilty about the state of things between Drew and me. This trip isn't about us. We shouldn't be blocking each other out. We need to talk and plan and work together. That's the only way this is ever going to work; we need to trust each other. Gabby needs us. It's time to go get her.

I get up and decide to see what the world looks like today, after that storm. It's still early so everyone else is sleeping as I silently make my way to the stairs. I reach the door and push it open. A blast of fresh morning air rushes in at me and I have never been more thankful to be outside. I don't think I could live down in those caves. Most of the people here only sleep there when the weather turns bad, choosing instead to sleep under the stars. The temperature this morning is perfect; warm, but not hot, with a cool breeze. I love mornings - when the world is just waking up. The sun streams through the trees, illuminating the leaves. The birds are all up and singing to welcome the new day. It really is beautiful here.

We must have been wrong about the storm last night. It doesn't look like there was anything more than a light rain shower. The ground is damp, but not soaked through, all of the trees are still intact, and not a single piece of the cabin's thatched roof seems to have fallen off. I walk the short distance to sit in my favorite spot one more time. The pond looks as inviting as ever. There are even a few turtles today.

I take a seat and enjoy a few minutes of silence. No one knows we're leaving today. Not even Drew. It's something I decided last night after Ma's story. We've been here long enough and my ankle feels a lot better. It's still a little stiff, but that's nothing that a few days on the road won't cure. I don't think Drew will mind leaving, but it's bittersweet for me.

Back in London, life was hard. Every day was a fight to survive. Since we've been in the colonies we've had to deal with a lot of hardships as well, until we came here to stay with these people. If I didn't believe that Gabby was off fighting for her life, I could even be happy here. It's peaceful and simple. I have grown attached to many of the people as well. I've never had a friend like Sam before. I don't want to leave him, but family comes first, forever and always.

I hear a twig snap behind me and turn to see Lee walking towards me.

"Morning, Lee," I say, still partially trapped in my own thoughts. He doesn't say anything as he lowers himself to sit beside me. The silence between us is slightly uncomfortable, but I don't know what to say. Lee will be glad to see us go. He didn't want us here in the first place and has made no effort since.

"I heard about your sister," he says, taking me by surprise. I don't respond so he keeps going. "Must be hard, not knowing what's happening to her." I still don't know what to say. I just nod. "I loved a girl once." At this, I tilt my head up to look at him. "She was beautiful and so full of joy. Kind too." His voice is wistful as he looks off in the distance.

"What happened to her?" I suddenly feel for this man that has been nothing but an arse to me.

"She was caught and taken to one of your camps." I wince as he still refers to the captors as my people. "I went after her." He stops for a moment, thinking.

"Where is she now?" I ask.

"Dead." His voice is no longer wistful. It has turned to venom. "They put her in this small box, in the hot Floridaland sun. She died before I was able to get there. That's where I met Sam. He was down there on a scouting mission. He forced me to come back here with him, rather than try to kill every last one of those bastards." I'm openly staring at Lee now and, for the first time since he began speaking, his eyes meet mine.

"I'm sorry." That's all I can manage. He breaks his eyes away from mine and says,

"Yeah, well everyone is sorry, aren't they? The point is that everyone in this saga has lost people they love. We need to prevent it when we can and get over it when we can't. Let me ask you this. Is your sister strong? Is she a survivor?"

"She's the strongest person I know."

"Well okay then. Let's go and get her." He gives me the first smile I've seen from him.

I answer his grin with one of my own. "Let's do it." I never expected this from Lee of all people. He stands and reaches his hand down to me. I grab it and pull myself up.

By the time we've returned to the cabin, everyone has come out of the caves to enjoy the beautiful morning. I spot Drew and walk towards him. He looks at me, confused. I realize I'm still wearing my grin and that's a little strange being that Drew and I aren't speaking at the moment. I'd totally forgotten about it. That needs to be fixed. I open my mouth to speak, but the words don't come. The only thing I can think to say is "We're leaving today." With that, I walk away to go find Ma.

I find her outside the cabin, at the fire, preparing breakfast. She doesn't look up as I approach. "They're good boys," she says, "don't let them do anything stupid."

"I won't let Lee risk his life for my sister. I just need him to get me there."

"Sam's going too." At my startled expression, she continues. "You don't think he'd let Lee go without him, do you? He doesn't know it yet, but he'll be there Like I said, they're good boys. They may not be my own, but I love 'em like sons." She stops talking, ending the conversation the way she does; always having the final word. I grab a plate of the food she has prepared and go off to distribute it.

After breakfast, I look around and realized that it's time to hit the road. Ma must've decided the same thing because she walks up to me and drops four rucksacks in front of me. She eyes me as I open one. It's filled with supplies; Meats, berries, bread, and first-aid supplies. Just by being here, I know that these are valuable commodities, especially the first-aid supplies. Tears well up in my eyes as I look up at this tough as nails woman who has kept a community of people alive when the odds were stacked against them. I stand and reach my hand out to shake Ma's, but she pulls me into a hug instead.

"God speed," she says. I keep my mouth shut because I feel that if I told her God doesn't exist so he has nothing to do with this, it would ruin the moment. To my surprise, Ma moves along to give Drew a hug. He responds to her saying,

"God Bless."

Drew then shakes a few hands, picks up a pack and stands at the ready, waiting for me. I get hugs from most of the people before joining Drew. I'm stunned when Shay walks up and plants a kiss right on Drew's lips. She walks away laughing and I realize Drew wasn't expecting that either. He looks at me and shrugs and I want to slap that smirk right off his face. He's way too pleased with himself. Drew turns to leave, but I hold him back whispering,

"Wait."

Shockwaves are sent throughout the group when Lee steps forwards to retrieve his pack. He says his goodbyes to Ma, but no one else.

"What the hell, Lee?" Sam has caught Lee's arm and is holding him back from joining us.

"You can't stop me this time." Lee yanks his arm out of Sam's grasp and heads towards us.

“Well, then, I guess I'm coming too.” The way Sam makes such a huge decision in a matter of seconds amazes me.

“I know you are,” Ma says as she grabs the last pack and hands it to Sam. “Go with God my son, and please come back to me. Both of you.”

“We got this Ma.” Sam winks at her and then we're on our way.

Chapter 25

Dawn

We walk all day without saying much. Well, besides Sam that is. He won't stop his yakking. He's ventured through this part of the country many times and has stories for each. There was the time he had to outrun soldiers, then the time he was followed by a dog, and the time he came across another group of Americans moving west. This brings up all the stories he has about the Western peoples. On and on he goes until none of us are really listening to him. The constant chatter does give me a brief respite from my own thoughts. I have more time to figure out how to fix things with Drew.

When the sun begins to set, we're walking along some old railroad tracks. We're in a part of the country that Sam tells us was once called Appalachia. Walking through the mountains, trees are everywhere. I guess when a country stops developing most of their land this is what happens. It becomes overgrown. The only places where vegetation has not taken over are where the train tracks still sit. Sam says these used to be used for coal mining. I don't know how he knows all of this, but it's terribly sad to think about. The people whose lives took place right here are gone.

"Let's set up for the night. I want to get a fire started before dark." Lee's voice is startling in the silence. It's very warm out so I suspect the fire is just for light. We don't know what's hiding in these woods. Lee and Drew get a fire going while I take an inventory of what we have for dinner. I decided on some of the bear meat and berries. I bring it over to the guys and take a seat. Sam must be too tired from talking all day because we eat in silence. This is going to be a fun group. No one even wants to talk to one another. I lean back, head on my pack, and close my eyes.

Chapter 26

Gabby

I don't know how to reach him. Jeremy works hard to shut everyone out. We'd bonded over Claire's death, but that doesn't mean anything anymore as we work in the groves. No one will go anywhere near him, afraid of his temper. He's been lashing out at everyone. There's an intensity about him that's frightening. His face seems to be permanently set in a grimace and I don't know what to do. We had a ceremony for Claire, but he refused to come. To survive in a place like this, you need to be able to come back from heartache rather quickly. I don't want to belittle what he's feeling because Claire's death hit me hard as well, but he can't shut down. I think I've made up my mind. I need to make him talk to me. I know I can help him whether he wants me to or not.

Lately, every day when we get back from the groves, Jeremy has been going straight to the pond in the woods.

That's where I find him. He is sitting with his back against a tree, singing. This is only the second time I've ever heard him sing and I'm pretty sure it's only because he hasn't realized yet that he's not alone. I walk up beside him quietly and kneel down. The leaves crunch under my weight, but that's the only sound that break the silence between us. Jeremy has stopped singing and is staring intently at the ground. I place my hand on his shoulder and he flinches away.

"Jeremy," I start, "Look at me." It's as if he doesn't hear a word I'm saying. I put a hand on each side of his face and force him to look at me. There's pain in his eyes. I understand his pain because I feel it every time I wonder if I'll ever see my sister again. I don't say anything else. There are no words that can ease his suffering. I release his face and wrap my arms around his body. At first, he

stiffens, not wanting to be hugged. Gradually he relaxes and lets me hold him. He doesn't hug me back, but after a while, he buries his face in my shoulder and I feel his silent tears soaking my shirt.

We stay like this for a while before, Jeremy straightens up. I release him and he rubs his eyes.

"Will you go somewhere with me?" he asks quietly.

"Of course. Where?"

"A place Claire and I found. It's beyond the camp though, so we have to be careful." As Jeremy speaks, he rises and brushes off his pants. I get to my feet as well and we start off in the direction of the main camp. As we walk, Jeremy begins to talk a little more.

"Have you ever been to a beach before?" he asks.

"No." I don't know what else to say. A thrill of excitement and fear rushes through me at the thought of a beach. We were always taught that the ocean held unknown horrors. I've never wanted to get close enough to find out for myself. We pass through the main section of the camp. People stare as we walk by. I assume this is because of the state Jeremy has been in lately. People were beginning to wonder if his sister's death would scar him for life. We reach the outside of the camp.

"We're not far from the fence now," Jeremy states.

"Fence?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's how they make sure no slaves can get too far away from camp. It's electrified, but Claire found a dead spot last year." His voice cracks every time he says her name.

"How'd she find a dead spot without getting electrocuted herself?" I figure talking about Claire is good for him.

"She saw a rabbit slip underneath the bottom wire. The rabbit got away safely so Claire, stupidly, tried it herself. I was so mad at her for that." Jeremy shakes his head, grinning. "In the end though, it allowed us to keep coming out here." We've reached the fence. "There it is." Jeremy is pointing to a section of the fence that's marked by a strip of cloth, probably from Claire's own outfit.

"You're sure we'll be fine?" I hesitate at the fence.

"Yes, just go." I do as he says and slip underneath the bottom wire. I try not to touch it, for fear that Jeremy is wrong, but I end up

needing to push the wire up in order to slide underneath. Once Jeremy is through, we move into the overgrown trees. Most of this part of the trek is uphill so I tire quickly. Just when I'm wondering if I can go any further, we reach the edge of the trees and the hill plateaus.

I step out from the woods to find that I'm no longer on solid footing. I reach down to touch the ground and come up with a handful of what I'm guessing is sand. I've heard about sand before. I examine it in my hand, like tiny crushed rocks; so light in color that it's almost white and soft to the touch. I let the sand grains flow through my fingers and then scoop up some more to do it again. Looking up, I realize the sand has distracted me from the real wonder here; water. There's so much water, stretching as far as the eye can see. It's night so the water is very dark, but I can imagine the sunlight dancing on the top and creating magical colors.

Jeremy is much farther up the beach than I am when he calls back.

"Do you like it?" He stands at the waterline, ankle deep, with his arms spread wide.

"Do I like it?" I repeat. "Jeremy, I've never seen anything so brilliant."

He answers with a grin and then moves closer to me before sitting down. I take a place next to him.

"I thought coming here would help me let go. This was Claire's favorite place in the world." He reaches into his pocket and produces a necklace. "This was hers. My mother gave it to her before she died." He hands me the necklace to examine. It's a locket. I open it and there's a picture of a woman inside.

"Your mother?" I ask. He nods. "She's beautiful."

"That she was." He takes the necklace from me and stands up. Suddenly, he runs to the edge of the water and throws the necklace as far as he can. When he turns back to me, I realize he's laughing. "Claire always said she wanted to live in the ocean where people's hatred couldn't reach her. She said that animals were worthier than any of us could hope to be."

"Smart kid." It's only a whisper, but I know Jeremy heard me. "Can I ask you something?" When he doesn't respond I continue. "The singing. Why don't you want to be heard?"

"My mother used to sing." He pauses. "She told me never to stop making music. So I only do it for her." As he grows quiet I reach over and take his hand in mine. He lowers his head and a small sob escapes him. "She also asked me to take care of my sister." He doesn't elaborate. He doesn't need to. I scoot closer and put my arm around his waist. His body shakes briefly as he tried to hold back more sobs. A single tear runs down his face. I reach over and brush it away with my thumb as he raises his eyes to look at me. Our gazes lock and, before I know it, so do our lips. Soft at first, the kiss grows ever more urgent as if Jeremy is pouring all of his sadness into this one fleeting moment.

Both of us broken, desperate to be whole again. He lifts a hand to my face and kisses me deeper. I've never needed anyone's touch so much.

This place. It does that to you. Jeremy understands. And in that understanding is everything. For just a moment, we are everything. We are OK. We aren't prisoners, trapped into a life of hardship. We're two people who want to feel connected to something, anything.

Because in that connection, we can find the hope we'd lost.

Jeremy turns his entire body towards me and I mold myself against his firm chest, running my hands down his thick arms.

I rip myself away when I hear something above the sound of the crashing waves.

"Jeremy, you hear that?" I whisper into his ear, my breath coming in short pants.

"Dogs," he says, "come on, time to go."

They're getting closer and this time I can definitely tell Jeremy is right. Dogs. Mixed in with the barks there are yells of "faster" and "get a move on". We take off running back the way we had come. It's hard to tell which way the sounds are coming from so we're hoping they're farther up the beach. We're very wrong. It sounds like we're getting closer to them with every step. Jeremy must have

noticed this too because he veers off to the left. I follow him, hoping that he has an idea of where we're going.

Back in high school, I was a runner. The difference was, though, I ran on a track. This run is much harder than any I've ever had to face. Since we turned off the path, the ground has become uneven. Running downhill is hard enough and now there are rocks and branches to leap over every few meters and, on top of that, it's dark out. My lungs burn as I jump over a tree root sticking out of the ground. My foot catches and I almost go flying forward. The landscape has gotten steep, making it harder to catch myself. I tumble to the ground and do one full somersault before regaining my footing.

Jeremy is getting farther ahead of me. I get tripped up, by a large rock this time, but manage to right myself before falling. I don't know how much longer I can run at this speed. I'm a sprinter so my long distance was usually pretty slow. Shows how much further you can push your body when your life depends on it.

"I think I see someone!" I hear from behind me. Oh no! They've spotted me. My mind is racing almost as fast as my legs. I don't know what to do. My first thought is to hide, but the dogs would surely find me. Even if I can keep running like this, they're sure to catch up. I can't believe this is it. I'm about to be bested by this place. I'm not a good loser. It's decided then. If I'm going down, I'm taking one of these scum bags with me. I just hope Jeremy can make it back to camp. I'm sorry Claire, I couldn't get him out.

I slow down, about to turn and face my fate when Jeremy runs by me in the opposite direction. "Get back to camp before they do a count," he says, "They don't know there are two of us out here."

For a moment, I'm stunned. I hear the captors behind me yelling to each other that they got him. I shake my head to clear my thoughts and start running again. Jeremy said to get back before a count. I don't know what that is, but I can guess. I need to be there. I need to forget about Jeremy just long enough to get back. The dogs sound much more distant now so I find my way back to the path, hoping it's the right one, and turn towards the camp.

I'm relieved when I find the cloth on the section of the fence that will let me back into camp. I duck underneath it and scramble to my feet. My legs are too exhausted to run anymore so I walk the rest of the way, hoping I still have a little time. I immediately go in search of Amanda. Even now, after everything that has happened, Amanda is the only person here besides Jeremy I trust.

I find her at the fire pit with a few others, enjoying the clear night. As I get close enough to the fire for my face to be seen, the people seated nearby move to let me enter the circle. I guess that tonight I don't look like someone they want to mess with. As soon as she sees me, Amanda jumps to her feet and walks over. She places a hand on my back and steers me away from the curious onlookers.

"What happened to you?" she asks in a hushed tone. My face must be red from all the exertion and I'm panting, trying to regain control of my breathing.

"Beach...Jeremy...Dogs." I'm still unable to form a coherent sentence. Amanda looks concerned as she leads me to a seat and procures a cup of water.

"Gabby, calm down. Slowly now, can you tell me what happened?" Amanda's mothering tone helps me to relax and regain my composure.

"We were at the beach." I begin. "I don't know how they found us, but they did. We were chased by dogs and people also. They were almost on top of us when Jeremy gave himself up." There's something in her eyes that I can't quite grasp. Maybe it's just the light of the fire on her face. I know she cares deeply for Jeremy, but it's almost as if she knows something I don't.

"Oh dear. Poor Jeremy." There it is again; that look. She must know what they're going to do to him. "Well, we need to get ready for a count."

"Jeremy said that too. What's a count?" I ask.

"It's how they learn if anyone else got out or if it was just Jeremy. They'll be here any minute." Amanda walks away to inform people of what's coming. She doesn't get far, however, before we see two large trucks pull into camp.

Chapter 27

Gabby

Everyone near the fire is holding their breaths as grim-looking soldiers pile out of their vehicles. They form up around their trucks waiting for something, probably orders. The last person to step out does so slowly. He walks to the front of the formation. I'm assuming this is the head guy, I'm not really up on military terms. He is a large man, tall and imposing. His shoulders are so broad that I wonder how they got his uniform to fit him. He has short cropped hair, as do all of his soldiers. His eyes are large and seem to be black, but it's hard to tell in the darkness. The glow of the fire helps me see that the leader's uniform is different from his soldiers in that it is black with three brass buttons near the collar and a column of brass buttons down the front. His soldiers have on black pants with red jackets. The buttons on their uniforms are silver.

The leader nods to his men and they span out. Up until now, it's been completely silent, but as the soldiers begin entering huts, they start barking orders. They're going into every hut and pulling people out of their beds. Once outside, people are made to stand in three straight lines. There's so much yelling going on at this point that I can't even make out the words. I rush over to the nearest line and stand completely still. I'm still not sure if anyone got a glimpse of me in the woods so I don't look at any of the soldiers directly. I'm just glad that I had enough time to calm down and erase all indicators that I'd recently been running for my life.

Once everyone is awake and lined up, the soldiers begin walking between the lines.

"Do you realize what has taken place this night?" It's the leader this time. "One of you has been outside of camp lines, beyond the fence. This is forbidden. We have reason to believe he wasn't alone."

I'm so nervous that I can't even think. There are about a dozen people who saw me come in tonight. Will one of them give me up?

"They're all here commander," one of the soldiers announces from across the group.

"Thank you, Captain." He doesn't look pleased.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement near the back of the first truck. One of the soldiers has opened the back door and is removing something. The commander motions him forward and Jeremy is dragged forward. I want to run to him, but Amanda puts her hand on my shoulder to keep me in place. I hadn't even realized she was behind me.

He looks terrible. His left eye is swollen shut and blood trickles down his right cheek. They've removed his shirt and there are lacerations striped across his back. They're red and raised and some of them are bleeding. I let out an audible gasp. It hasn't been long since I left Jeremy in the woods. I can't imagine what they'll do to him in the coming days.

"This is what happens when you disobey." The Commander grabs Jeremy's blood-soaked hair and pulls his head up from its sagging position so that we can all see his face more clearly. He releases his hair and Jeremy's head drops to his chest. I can't keep my eyes off of this man. His face is cruel, with a sharply pointed nose and a scar stretching down his right cheek.

One of the other soldiers circles Jeremy once and pulls his rifle out of its holster. Everyone is holding their breaths. I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to watch if they shoot him. I hear no gunshot only a loud crack. I open my eyes and Jeremy is face down in the dirt. The soldier has used the butt of his gun to smack Jeremy upside the head and knock him out. Two other men step forward and grab Jeremy's arms. They drag him back to the truck and load him into the same door he had come out of. Then, after a signal from their commander, the soldiers pack up and drive away without a second thought.

No one moves from the lines until we can no longer hear the trucks on the gravel road. Once we're sure they are gone, people start roaming about. I look around at everyone's faces. People are

dispersing back to their beds. No one glances back and no one cries. I'm the only one who seems to be traumatized. I guess if you're here long enough and see enough people get taken away, it hurts less each time. Amanda is still behind me, trying to comfort me, but I don't listen. I just head off to Jeremy's hut to be alone.

Chapter 28

Dawn

Leaves crunch nearby as footsteps move about our camp. Has someone found us? All my senses are instantly on high alert. I sit up and position myself into a crouch. I look around for signs of someone. When I don't see anyone close by, I get to my feet. Slowly, I make my way towards where I think the sound was coming from. My footsteps obviously aren't silent either so I try to walk on my toes. I realize that I have no idea what I'm going to do once I find the person; I have no weapons. I search the ground and find a large stick with a pretty sharp end. I guess this will have to do.

I hear the leaves crunching behind me so I spin around and bring my arm down quickly.

"Dammit! Ow! What the hell?" Oh no.

"Drew?" I ask.

"Who else? Why'd you hit me?" Now that he's closer, I can just make out his face.

"I didn't know it was you, the dark and all. Sorry, you OK?" This is the most we've talked in days.

"No, I'm not OK. You hit me. I think I'm bleeding."

Now I feel really bad. "Come back to the fire and let me look at it," I say, trying to be nice.

"Fine." He shrugs and follows me back. We take a seat near the fire. Sam and Lee are still fast asleep as I search Drew's head for the source of the blood. There is a small gash near his hairline. I grab the antiseptic ointment out of my pack and dab it on his cut. He winces despite his best efforts to cover it up; always the tough guy. Once I have it all cleaned I have to stitch him up. I've never done this before, but Ma packed us some needles and thread. I'm sure that in a hospital they use some special kind of thread for this, but

here we just have to use what we can get. I taught myself how to sew a few years ago so this can't be much different, right?

"This is going to hurt," I tell him.

"Just get it over with," he says. It only takes a few stitches. He's hiding it well, but I can tell it's excruciating. After about the second one, Drew has grabbed hold of my knee and is squeezing hard. I finish closing up the wound, but Drew has still not released me. His eyes are closed and his teeth clenched. I examine my handy work. The stitches are crooked, but I guess it'll have to do.

"I'm done," I say softly. He opens his eyes and looks at me.

"Sorry," he mumbles when he realizes he's still holding onto me. He immediately loosens his grip and pulls his hand away.

"You good?" I ask.

"Yeah." Once again, the silence stretches between us and makes us both uncomfortable.

"Are you ever going to talk to me or are you going to keep being a stupid git?" I blurt out, a little louder than I'd planned. At this statement, it's like a huge weight is lifted off both of us and we start to laugh. Quietly at first, but then we're rolling.

"Blunt much?" Drew asks.

"Sorry. But seriously, why are you freezing me out. I don't like it and I don't understand it. I mean, yeah we kissed, so what. I feel guilty about Gabby, but I still don't want to lose you. I need someone to talk to. I need you on my side and if I can't count on that, then I don't know if we can save my sister. I think you just need to get over yourself." Everything I've been feeling spills out of my mouth. I can't stop it.

He's no longer grinning by the time I'm finished. His eyes find mine. "Dawn," he says, "I'm always on your side. We're going to get Gabby back." He pauses for a few moments then grabs my hand. "I've never been very good at getting close to people. I always revert to charm and seduction. That's all I have. When you rejected me I didn't know what to do. I don't know how to do the friend thing."

This is a boy that lives and breathes confidence. He makes life seem so easy and yet here he is in front of me, vulnerability oozing

out of him. In that instant, there's something I just have to know.

"Drew?" I ask. "Why did you come with me? I don't think you're in love with Gabby. I mean, I know you want to find out what happened to your brother, but you could've ditched me when we got over here. Why didn't you?"

He considers the question before saying, "It was that look in your eye when I first met you. When I came to tell you your sister had been sent away." At my puzzled expression, he continues. "You looked lost. As if your entire world had just come crumbling down. But not only that, you also looked determined, as if you would move mountains to get your sister back. It was the same look I had when my brother was taken. I had nothing left that I cared about in London. Maybe we can save Gabby and find out what happened to James."

"Thank you," I whisper, unable to put words to the emotions running through my head, "for everything."

He shrugs and says, "I was ready for an adventure anyways. England is boring. Never thought we'd make it this far though, well, I never thought you'd make it this far. Me, on the other hand..." Drew winks and I can tell that he's had as much seriousness as he can handle. I lightly punch him in the arm. "Hey!" he says, "you gonna cut me there too? You're brutal." He's trying to lighten the mood and succeeds. "What were you going to do anyway? You know, if I had been an intruder? Hit them with your stick?"

"I got you pretty good."

He laughs and bumps my shoulder. "That's because I'd never want to hurt you."

I smile, believing every word he says. We can do this. I know we can. I push myself to my knees and scoot towards Drew to hug him. He pulls me closer into his arms. He releases me and leans back. I lie down next to him and sleep comes quickly. By the time I wake up, the sun has started to rise.

I'm lying with my head on Drew's chest. His left arm is around my waist and he's holding my hand in his. Our legs are tangled together, making it hard to move. He's still fast asleep so I try to free myself without waking him. Managing to get to my feet and walk

away, I find that Sam and Lee are already wide awake and getting some food out for a quick bite before we head out.

“Sleep well?” Sam asks with a laugh.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” I’m trying hard not to show him the embarrassment I’m feeling. At least Drew was asleep when I woke.

“Well, go wake up lover boy. We need to get on the road.”

I grab some dried meat and head back to wake Drew. We eat breakfast and then head out, one day closer to my sister.

Chapter 29

Gabby

Everything has gone back to normal since the count two nights ago. Well, as normal as they can be after that. My days are filled with work, both in the groves and back at camp. I've wanted to keep myself busy so I've been helping prepare meals. In the evenings, people work on rebuilding parts of the camp that were destroyed in the storm. I've started helping with some of this as well. It's difficult because we don't have the materials we need. We have to use whatever we can find in the forest. Mud is used to hold everything together. It has only been a little over a week since the hurricane, but it seems like that was worlds away. Spending the night talking with Jeremy and Claire seems like a dream; the night on the beach, a fantasy. I touch my lips, remembering. What I wouldn't give to have the two of them around again.

They say that these camps are meant to break you. To make you into sheep; obeying everything they say. That's the purpose of instilling fear and making examples of those who think for themselves. It causes despair, and that's a person's worst enemy in a place like this. Despair is the complete loss of hope. Hope is what keeps us going, keeps us fighting. When I first arrived in the colonies, I was full of hope. I thought of my situation as temporary; I was going to get out. Ever since Claire's death, though, despair is beginning to take root in my soul. I hate to think of myself becoming more like the people here; accepting loss and moving on. They act like pain and suffering and loss are just an acceptable part of life.

Every single day here is the same. We wake up, work all day in the hot sun picking fruit, return to camp, go to sleep, and then wake up the next day and do it all over again. When nothing changes and

there is nothing new to look forward to, it's easy to become a zombie; devoid of feeling and emotion. It's a way to survive.

Ever since the count, we've had rankers stationed all around our camp. They don't speak to us, but I've caught them watching us, although glaring at us may be more accurate. There are men scouring the fence every day, probably trying to find the spot that allowed Jeremy and me to get out. I don't know how they're going to find it. The night of the count, I went back out to the fence and removed the torn cloth that Claire had tied on the fence to mark the spot. I don't know why, but I didn't want to completely lose that way out so I found some rocks and piled them near the fence. The soldiers won't look twice at the rocks and hopefully won't find the place at all. Every few days I venture out to the fence to check and make sure the rocks are still there. Nothing has changed yet, but I can't keep doing this. We're constantly watched and someone is bound to notice me sneaking off and suss out what's going on.

I miss Jeremy. With him gone, I have no one else to talk to. Amanda is great, but she's more like a mother than anything. I can tell she's worried about me. I wish she'd stop hovering. I don't say much to anyone else, I'd rather stick to myself. More than ever, the people here think I'm trouble. Everyone knows I was with Jeremy on the night he was caught and they probably think it was my fault. Maybe I am trouble. Maybe I shouldn't blame them for wanting to stay away from me.

I'm angry at the world right now and it scares me. I've never felt this way. I'm angry at my captors, but also at myself because I'm starting to give in to this feeling of hopelessness and I'm not strong enough to resist it. Even though I don't really think I'll actually succeed, I need to try to get out of here. It gives me something to focus on rather than the likely reality that I will die here.

I don't know how to swim, but it can't be too hard, can it? If I made it back to the beach I could try to swim somewhere, I don't know where. The dogs couldn't follow me in the water, could they? No, that's a stupid idea. I'd probably drown, or worse, get eaten by one of the sea creatures I've heard about. What if I made it back to the woods and took a new path? It has to lead somewhere, right? I

could die out there wandering the woods forever, but I guess it's better than dying in here. What about Jeremy? I don't know if he's still alive, but what if he is? Well, I can't help him from in here so my first priority needs to be getting out. Once I'm free, I can figure out what to do next. I made Claire a promise and I'm going to try my hardest to keep it. I just hope it's not too late for him.

This is going to be difficult with all the soldiers around, but they have to leave their posts to sleep and eat, right? The next night, I leave the hut and make my way to the fence. Tonight, I'm just watching. Luckily, the spot of the fence that I need to keep an eye on is near a rather large patch of trees. I duck behind a big oak and settle in to watch. I feel like one of those secret agents I see in the movies but it's a lot less cool in real life. There are two soldiers walking this length of the fence. There's no way I can get past both of them.

"How much longer do we have to do this?" the first one asks. The second one looks at his wrist. I assume he's looking at a watch, but it's too dark to tell.

"A few more hours," he responds.

"No, I mean how many more days at this post?"

"Are you complaining, Private?" The second soldier must have a higher rank than the first.

"No, it's just these slaves. Have you looked at them? There is no way any of them are going to try anything. They're pathetic. Criminals. The lot of 'em." The hatred in his voice is strong.

"I don't like being around them any more than you, but we don't question our orders. That's a surefire way to end up here yourself. Just be glad you got posted here. This is an important post. All of this food gets sent to London. The cities across the pond couldn't function without us." They stop talking for a while and walk in silence.

I'm about to give up my plan and head back for the night when one of the soldiers begins talking into his radio. I can't make out his muffled words but then he raises his head to look at his comrade. He raises one finger in the air and rotates it around three times. They both turn and walk away, leaving this part of the fence unguarded. It

must be a change in shift. I begin counting in my head. Two new soldiers arrive about the time my counting reaches five minutes. Okay, so, assuming the timing is the same every night, I have just a few minutes to make it through the fence and leg it far enough away so that they can't see me. This isn't going to be easy. I need to try, though.

I can't waste any time. Tomorrow night is my chance.

Chapter 30

Gabby

I go through the day just like any other. I work hard in the groves and back at camp. At each meal, I only eat a portion of my food and tuck the rest away for my journey. I feel nervous around Amanda. I'm afraid she'll notice something is different. If she found out, she would try to talk me out of it. If anyone else found out, they might turn me in, hoping for some reward.

That night, I wait until all the fires are out and people have gone to bed. I slip out of my hut and sneak through camp, hoping not to wake anyone. I reach the patch of trees that shielded me so well last night and take a seat. Waiting for what seems like hours, I listen to the endless chatter of the soldiers. It is the same two from last night but they are much more talkative tonight. Just when I'm thinking that tonight may be a bust because the shift change hasn't happened yet, the radio buzzes. The soldier talks into it for a moment and then makes the same one-fingered gesture as last night. Just like that, the fence is unguarded. This is my chance. It's a dodgy plan but it's better than staying here.

I make a break for it, running at top speed towards the fence. I search the ground for the rocks I'd placed, relieved to find that they are still there. I grab the bottom wire of the fence and stretch it up so that I can squeeze through. Just as I'm about to slide underneath, I hear someone yell.

"Hey! Escapee!" There are three soldiers running in my direction. I'm not even through the fence yet so I know there is no way I'm going to make it. I had to try. I let go of the fence and stand up facing the soldiers. My hands are raised to signal surrender and the last thing I remember is a sharp blow to my head and then blackness.

Chapter 31

Dawn

Lee and Sam tell us that we're almost to Floridaland, but I don't get how they know that. The scenery hasn't changed much. I guess they've been here enough times to know. I have no idea what Drew and I would've done without them. We'd be completely lost. What were we thinking? There is no doubt in my mind that we would've failed if it were not for those two Americans. Now, though, everything has changed.

Every day seems to blend into the next. I can't even tell how many have passed. From sun up to sun down we walk. Most of the time, we're in overgrown forests, but occasionally we choose the easier route of a nearby road. I'm shocked at the lack of any sort of civilization here. Sam tells us some of the old stories of the people that once lived here.

"These people were free," he says one day. "They were able to make their own choices and do what they wanted to with their lives."

"Yeah, they taught us that in our lessons," I pipe in. "But we also learned that freedom comes with a price. In England, people have fewer freedoms and the country is better off." I look sharply over at Drew when I hear him let out a harsh laugh.

"Do you really believe that Dawn?" he asks "I'd hate to think you're that daft."

"You've heard the stories of all the religious fanatics that caused so many problems," I respond.

"Yes, but I've also seen what our supposedly superior country does to its own citizens. So have you," Drew says. I stay silent, but not because I don't have anything to say. I'm questioning the words that almost come out of my mouth. I need to stop thinking that

everything I've been taught is the truth. Everything I think I know is now tainted by uncertainty.

Lee tries to change the subject. "The stories all say that there were cities with buildings reaching to the sky and towns full of American people. Now there are very few of them left." His voice drops off and the rest of the conversation goes with it. No one speaks until we come across a set of ruins around midday.

What a sad sight. The ruins are rather small, but all four walls and the roof are still standing. The structure is made of stone and covered in moss. Needing to stop anyways for lunch, we decide to explore. I drop my rucksack on the ground and walk towards the doorway. Drew blocks my path.

"That roof looks like it could cave in at any moment. Don't go in there," he says. I shove him out of my way and keep walking.

"I just want to take a peek," I holler back. Everything about this country fascinates me and I need to see more. I step through the doorway and scan the room. There are weeds growing through the floor and the air is stale.

Every time we come across these condemned places, I hope to find something that will tell me about the people who lived here. It's silly, but they deserve to be remembered. I never find anything, though.

I run my hand along the wall as I circle the room. It's surprisingly sturdy being that it really shouldn't be standing at all. As I touch each surface, my hand comes away covered in dirt. I'm almost all the way around the room when I notice something on the wall where my hand had just been. I take a few steps back to where I was and brush some more of the dirt off of the wall. Color is beginning to show through the final layers of mud. I see red and blue and even some white.

"Guys! Get in here!" I'm now scraping the wall frantically with my fingernails to remove the last bits of mud and moss. There are two images.

"Holy shit!" Lee is the first through the door. "Do you know what that is?" Sam drops to his knees in front of the images. He slowly reaches one hand up to touch the wall.

"It's the eagle and the flag, it must be." His voice is no more than a whisper. I look to Drew and our eyes lock. The image of the man lying unmoving on the ground over an image just like this is stuck in my head forever. We haven't mentioned that man to Sam or Lee. Drew is still conflicted about killing him, which is why I'm surprised when he speaks up.

"We've seen the eagle before," Drew says. Both Lee and Sam turn quickly to look at him.

"What are you talking about?" Lee asks. "Where?"

Drew doesn't say anything so I tell the story. No one speaks until I'm finished and even then, there are a few minutes of quiet. Drew is the first one to find his voice.

"What does it mean?" he asks.

Lee is the one who answers the question. "Ma told us about this, but we've never seen a picture of one. The bald eagle used to be the national bird. During the war, it represented freedom. It's still used by some groups, I guess."

"What's it doing here? We're deep in British territory." Sam asks to no one in particular. None of us have any answers. We stand there staring at the images for a few more minutes and then sit and silently eat our lunch.

As we're eating, it begins to rain outside. For the past few days, it has rained at around the same time every afternoon. It's just a light rain but it does slow us down a bit. I ask Sam about the daily showers and he says that in the south this always happens this time of year. Usually we just keep walking. If we're in some kind of woods, we have some cover, but if not, we get soaked.

After lunch, it is still raining so we decide to wait it out, expecting it to let up pretty soon. I lean back on my elbows to relax a little and feel something sharp poke at my arm.

"Guys, I think I found something else." I rock onto my knees and turn around to get a better look. I brush through some of the debris on the ground trying to find what was poking me. I'm so excited I can hardly contain it. I may have found some kind of artifact these people had. I feel around with my fingers until I'm gripping something made of incredibly hard material. I have to use all my

strength to yank it from the ground and as soon as I do I start screaming. I throw it into the corner and run out of the room into the rain. Drew follows me; completely unaware that now he too is sopping wet.

"Shite! Drew that was a bone. People died here." I start sobbing as Drew folds me into his arms. I feel another hand on my shoulder and turn to see that Sam and Lee have joined us outside.

"When you ran out, we found more," Sam says.

"Yeah, place is a graveyard." Lee has that same sadness in his eyes that he had when he was telling me the story of his lost love. I break free of Drew and wrap my arms around Lee's neck. The hug takes him completely by surprise, but he doesn't push me away. After the shock has worn off, he even hugs me back. I give Sam a hug as well. As much as I'm affected by this, they were not my people, or Drew's.

By an unspoken agreement, we don't spend another minute in this place. We pick up our packs and get moving. The rain is letting up as we walk across a stretch of farmland, careful to stay out of sight of any of the workers. I wonder if the people working the farms are slaves like Gabby. Is she working on a farm?

We cover a lot of ground during the day. I feel like we're moving faster than normal, trying to get as far away from that place as possible. We settle in for the night under a patch of trees as usual. As we move south, the ground is wetter. They must have gotten more rain here. No one complains of the dampness when we stop. Everyone is lost in their own thoughts. My mind has been on my sister all day. Up until now, I didn't let myself consider the kind of work Gabby was being made to do. I didn't think about what she was being put through; I just knew it couldn't be good. I find myself wondering if she will be the same person that was taken from me back in London. She was bossy and liked to break the rules but she would do anything in the world for me. Have they worked that out of her?

Nearby I see Lee take a seat next to Drew. This seems odd to me because they never say much to each other. I strain to hear the conversation. I'm curious and honestly a little bored.

"You did the right thing," I hear Lee begin, "that man would've killed Dawn otherwise."

"It's never right to kill someone. I meant to just knock him out. I don't know why he came after us," Drew says.

"You're Brits. Most Americans won't need more reason than that. The eagle represents freedom, but the people in this country who use it, they're brutal and savage. That isn't how I want my freedom won." Lee pats Drew on the back as he gets to his feet. "We should be there tomorrow." With that, he walks away.

Drew moves to sit beside me and I lean into him, desperate for any sign that he'll be okay. We've come so far since the day we left our lives behind in London.

He isn't the cocky arse that was macking on a girl who was not his girlfriend. And I'm not the ghost of a girl who did everything she could to stay invisible.

Life changes you. Time passes and none of us can go back. We grow into harder, stronger versions of ourselves.

Then it appears. The sign that we're still there. The sign that we haven't given up. Drew grins and squeezes my shoulder. Suddenly I'm me again and we aren't in the colonies. A shyness overtakes my soul and I look away.

Drew chuckles, saying, "Lee says we'll be there tomorrow."

Tomorrow. We'll see how far we've really come. Can two teens from London really do it? What if we've come all this way and she isn't even there? What if Drew's father was lying and Gabby is sitting back in some cell in London. What if she's dead?

Dread claws at my throat, choking me with its fear. Dead. She could be dead. My sister.

I pull in my knees and rest my chin on them. Drew wraps an arm around me, pulling me to him. I draw on his strength. She'll be there. We're not too late.

That's probably not the case for Drew's brother. I look up at him. His mouth is set in a firm line now, his eyes on some far-off place. He knows the odds. We won't even know where to begin looking for his brother.

But he knew that before we came, didn't he?

I can sense everything he's feeling because I can feel it too. Just like me, he didn't have a choice. It was something he had to do even if it was doomed.

With Drew's warm body beside me giving the illusion of safety, I can't help but wonder what happens to our friendship after we find Gabby.

Will any of it matter?

Too tired to dwell too much on what-ifs, I close my eyes, two fleeting thoughts passing through my mind as I drift off.

Drew and I are more alike than I ever would've imagined.

Tomorrow, I get my sister back.

Chapter 32

Gabby

A splash of lukewarm water hits my face and I sputter awake. Then another splash and another until I'm choking and gasping for air. A soldier holds each of my arms, keeping me upright. I always dreamed of having a soldier on each arm, but it was quite different than this. My head feels like it's been cracked open and pieced back together, with a few of the pieces missing. I try to lift my head slightly to see where I am, but the pain is too much. I let it sag to my chest. Memories flood back to me; the guards by the fence, hiding behind the trees, and running. It seems like I've had to run for my life too often lately.

As soon as the soldiers realize I've come to, they push me to my knees and back away. I can't stay upright so I drop to all fours. I know I'm outside because I'm in the dirt and I can feel the evening breeze blow across my skin. There's an excruciating pain that erupts in my stomach as someone kicks me. It takes everything I have to not be face down in the dirt right now.

"I thought one example was enough for you slaves, but apparently not." The man who kicked me is talking in a low menacing voice. Before every sentence he speaks, he gives another kick to my stomach.

"You can't escape," he yells. I must still be in the camp. Without even looking up, I can feel many pairs of eyes focused in my direction.

"You're here because you deserve to be." This time the kick comes to the back of my legs and I'm no longer able to keep myself from falling, my stomach hitting the dirt with a thud. No one moves to help me. There'd be no point.

“There's no salvation for you, no one coming to save you from your crimes.” Two soldiers grab my arms once again and haul me to my feet. The man who was speaking puts his hand underneath my chin and raises my face. “This girl is young and she will pay for her stupidity. I'm going to spare her life because I'm a just man.” As he holds my head up, I look him in the face. The first thing I notice is the nose and the scar on his cheek. I could never forget his face if I tried. He took Jeremy away and is all too eager to punish me.

I stare ahead defiantly. He's trying to break me, but you can't break what's already broken. I've been in this camp too long, lost to many people, to care what happens to me anymore. The commander then turns to the rankers that are holding me up. “Take her to the box. Let her think about her crimes for a day or two.”

I no longer feel any pain; only numbness. I'm numb to everything happening around me. It's as if my brain has turned itself off. My legs are too weak to walk, so I'm carried to the edge of camp. This is where the hot box is located. I know it only too well from my first few days here. I survived it then, I can do so again. The soldiers drag me up the steps and then, very unceremoniously, throw me in. As they close the door, I slump to the floor and welcome the unconsciousness that comes.

Chapter 33

Dawn

The next morning, we hit the road early. Lee and Sam tell us we only have a few hours left to walk. The scenery has changed dramatically. There are still trees, but most of them are in straight lines and are covered in fruit. I've never seen so much fruit in my life.

Along with the trees, there's also a lot of open land. We haven't come across many areas of the country that are actually being used for anything, so Floridaland is a shock to me. The British have cleared large swaths of land and even built on some of it. Much of the area is being used for animals. Cows seem to be big business here. Just wonderful, I think, as I step around another pile of cow shite.

"So, do we have any sort of plan once we get there?" Drew looks sideways at Lee.

"I have some ideas, but we need to scout the place. I don't know if the security has been upgraded since I was here a couple years ago." Lee stops there. One thing I've learned about this man is that he never says more than he needs to.

It's lunch time when we stop. We're running low on food so we've been eating sparingly. My stomach has become so used to the pains of hunger that it rarely even growls anymore. I haven't had anything since noon yesterday, though, so I need to eat something. We're going to need our strength. The only thing we have left is some squirrel Lee caught yesterday and cooked over last night's fire. This isn't the first time we've had to eat squirrel, but the thought of it makes me queasy. Every story that I've ever read about people on some adventure has made it seem like anything would taste good if you're hungry enough. Well, I'm starving, and this squirrel still tastes

disgusting. What makes it worse is that we have passed by so many cows. I would kill for a burger right about now; oh, and some chips as well.

When we're done choking down our lunch, Sam turns to me and smiles.

"So, we're here. We made it!"

"What?" I'm stunned. I thought we still had another hour or so of walking. I look around and everything looks the same as it did two hours ago. I don't see any signs of a slave camp nearby. We're sitting amongst a group of citrus trees. To our right, the trees stretch as far as the eye can see. To our left, there's a road.

"Just down that road," Lee points. I stand and dust off my pants.

"What are we waiting for? Let's get on with it then." They all get to their feet and follow me. The mood has lifted significantly, even though the hardest and most dangerous part of this journey is yet to come. A little way down the road we come upon a wire fence stretching far off in both directions. It should be easy enough to climb so I reach out my hand to try.

"Wait," Lee yells. "Do you hear that humming?"

I nod.

"It's electrified."

Oh crap, it was just almost game over for me. I can't believe I was so daft.

"Get down," Lee urges just in time for the rest of us to see them as well. The patrol is walking along the outside of the fence, scanning the woods. If we hadn't ducked down when we did, we'd be toast. I wait for them to be out of sight before asking,

"How many guards do you think there are?" No one answers me as we wait for the next patrol to pass by. It takes almost ten minutes before we see anyone else and it is the same two guards walking in the opposite direction.

"So, what now?" I ask.

"Where there is this much electricity, there has to be a transformer box," Drew says. "If I can find it, I can possibly turn off the fence."

"Possibly?" Lee looks skeptical.

"I can do it. It might take some doing, but I'll find a way to get the power off," Drew says more forcibly this time.

"OK then, how will we know when it's off?" I can see a plan forming in Lee's mind.

"You won't hear a sound coming from the fence anymore."

"OK, Sam you stay with Drew and find that box. Once it's off we'll only have a small window before they figure it out. Make sure it's off two days from now at sundown."

"Wait a second. Where will you be?" Sam looks concerned as he says this, but I'm beginning to catch onto Lee's plan.

"Dawn and I are going in. We're getting ourselves caught."

Chapter 34

Gabby

I scream as pain radiates through my limbs. I can't pinpoint where it's coming from. It's too widespread. I raise a bloodied arm to press my palm against my pounding head. This damn box. I don't have enough energy for anger, only desperation. I have to get out of here.

Delirium threatens, the walls closing in around me. My heart pounds against my ribs erratically as I struggle to breathe.

I move my lips to scream again, but the crusted blood in the corners restricts them, choking off the scream in my throat. The agony. I just ... can't. The heat ... it's too much. Dragging my knees to my chest with great effort, I welcome the unconsciousness that comes as it is the only relief I'm sure to get.

I return to consciousness just as a scraping sound reaches my ears. I'd all but forgotten about the small opening near the floor. Just as before, there's a small cup of water appearing through the hole. My mind screams at me that this isn't real. It can't be. There is no mercy in this place.

But the water feels real as it slides down my throat, sending me into a coughing fit. When I'm able to speak, it's only a whisper.

"Hello? Is somebody out there?"

"Yes, I'm here." His voice is low and quiet.

"Who are you?" I croak.

"A friend."

"Please help me."

"Keep trying," he responds. "It has been done before." His footsteps signal his retreat.

"Wait," I try to yell, "What has?"

"An escape," he says.

"Why are you helping me?"

"I just didn't want you to die in here."

Chapter 35

Gabby

“AAAAAAA!!!” I scream as the agony spreads, but there is no one around to hear me scream. Anything, I need to think of anything to get my mind off the pain. This is all my fault.

Dawn's face floods my mind, easing some of the pain. It was all for her. I pinched the bracelet for her, but she wouldn't have cared if I got her anything at all. She just wanted me with her.

A sob shakes my entire body. She'd probably have yelled at me for hitting that soldier. But she won't get the chance now.

I always thought I was taking care of my sister, but maybe I'm wrong. I hope I'm wrong. I hope she's okay. It won't take long for her to realize she doesn't need me nearly as much as I've always needed her.

It's been so long since I've seen her. I close my eyes, picturing London, and releasing a heavy sigh. The image keeps me from focusing on the pain. In it, Dawn is beginning Uni. What she's always wanted. She's happy.

And I'm here.

This new pain rips through me, taking direct aim for my heart. I've lost everyone I've ever cared about. I'll never see Dawn again, Claire and my father are dead, and Jeremy and my mother are gone. I don't know if Jeremy is still alive, but I have to believe he is. He's a hope I can cling to. Without that, I might as well give up.

It's so hot; I think I'll just take another kip now.

Chapter 36

Dawn

Lee's plan is insane. Seriously, we must be certifiable nutters. We're going to get ourselves thrown in the slave camp without the guarantee of coming back out. We don't know if our escape will work. No one ever gets out, right?

Drew and Sam better know what the hell they're doing.

None of us have ever been inside one of these camps. We have no idea what the conditions are like. But we have our plan. We have our meeting spot.

It's go time.

Terror paralyzes me for only an instant before Lee squeezes my shoulder and keeps moving through the trees along the fence. Insanely, we're looking for someone who can take us in.

Voices drift towards us as we come upon a small hill.

"Today's our last day stationed here," the first one says. "I'm so ready to be gone from this place."

"Yeah, just being around these slaves makes me feel grotty." Guard number two.

Lee pulls me down into a crouch.

"You heading to the plantation after shift?"

"Wouldn't miss this party. General Nolan is even going to be there."

I spit on the ground, disgusted that one of these pigs shares my last name. Lee looks to me, confused. I shrug and turn back to the soldiers. I'll explain when this is all over. They crest the hill. One is an old gaffer, but the other is quite young.

Lee only has to nod for me to guess what he's thinking. These are the ones. We stand and step into the open, rustling the leaves under our feet.

"Oi!" The older soldier yells. "Where'd you come from?"

Lee starts running and I follow, fast enough to look like we're trying to get away, but slow enough to be caught.

"We're gaining on them!" The yelling is closer now.

Suddenly, I'm tumbling to the ground as the younger soldier tackles me. The older one has captured Lee and is already tying his wrists by the time I have stopped my descent at the bottom of the hill.

My captor pins me to the ground with his knee and ties my wrists tightly. I don't make a sound of protest. I'm hauled to my feet, a little battered, but still intact.

I sneak a glance at Lee who's playing his part rather well. His eyes never leave the ground. There's a cut on his face. I try to imitate him and look down as we walk, but I can't keep myself from looking up at our captors every now and then.

"Where should we take them?" The younger soldier must take his orders from the older one.

"Let's go to the plantation. I'm sure it'll be OK that we left our post early since we're bringing these two." The older soldier decides.

"Maybe General Nolan will notice our good work!" I'm appalled just hearing that name.

"Good idea. We'll let him decide what to do with them."

The rest of the trip takes place in silence. I was hoping we'd be taken straight to the camp. This was definitely not part of the plan. If they keep us there for more than a day or so it's game over. We'd never make it to the rendezvous in time.

A few minutes later, we're standing in front of the largest house I have ever seen. It's massive and eerily beautiful. The white pillars and manicured lawn seem out of place here. Most of the colonies are filled with ruins and forests and the British have built horse barns and gardens? I wonder if people here actually care how close they are to the slave camp or if they are too worried about how far they are able to hit the cricket ball. The most shocking thing of all is the children. There are only two of them, but their innocence seems alien in a country such as this. They run along the grass, playing fetch with a large golden dog.

"Keep moving." And I'm shoved forward.

We go in through a side door. As we pass through, I glimpse a red hand print on the frame. Blood? Inside, a dim light stretches down a long hallway, sending a foreboding chill racing up my spine.

We stop further down the hall at a door with an enormous lock. The older soldier pulls out a ring of keys. He searches it and finds the one he wants. After he opens the door, he unties our wrists and shoves us in. The force sends me tumbling to my hands and knees as the door slams shut.

This isn't just a room. It's a cell, like in a prison. There are no windows and the only light is coming from the single bulb in the center of the ceiling. There's no way out.

I startle at a cough that echoes around the room. Huddled in the corner, is a boy. He moves out of the corner and into the light, allowing us to see his broken body. I suck in a breath and sink back against the wall. Dried blood streaks from various cuts. Both his eyes are swollen and his nose is broken. His pain is obvious.

"Who are you?" I'm glad Lee can speak because I don't know what to say. I'm frozen to the spot, staring. I want to help, but I can't move.

He stumbles, coughs again, and rasps out his name, "Jeremy."

Lee nods and points to me. "Dawn," he says, "and I'm Lee."

Jeremy stares at us, considering what to say next. He leans back against the wall and closes his eyes.

What have we gotten ourselves into?

Chapter 37

Gabby

"Gabby?"

"I'm here Claire."

"Am I going to die?"

"You'll be just fine."

"Gabby?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared."

"Me too."

Chapter 38

Gabby

"Don't you let him die in here. Escape."

Escape

Escape

Escape

I hear her say these words over and over. I'm sorry Claire. I broke my promise to you. Jeremy's gone and I will be soon. I sink back into sleep and let the dreams take over.

Chapter 39

Gabby

The London medical compound stretches out behind me. My feet pound against pavement as I hoof it down the alley. I did it! Dawn is sick and now I can save her. I couldn't just sit there and watch her slip away from me. She's the only good thing in my life. I made myself a promise a long time ago that I'd never let my baby sister down. They can't catch me, no one can. I've gotten clear of all the medical buildings and the alarms are only a distant sound now. I don't stop legging it until I reach our building. This is our fifth home in the past month. Even in the dodgy east end, the government doesn't like people squatting. We've tried foreclosed homes, builder's models, and now abandoned buildings. Wherever we live, I make sure Dawn can still get to lessons. I go too, but she's the smart one. She's going to do brilliant things one day. I'm sure she's going to be chosen to go to uni. I try to make sure that none of our troubles hold her back from her incredible destiny.

I reach the room we've claimed as our own. Dawn lays on the ground sleeping. I go to her and gently shake her shoulder. "Wake up, Dawn. I've got the medicine." She won't wake. I feel for a heartbeat and panic when I don't feel it immediately. I eventually find it. It's very faint, but it's there.

I'm too rushed to be gentle as I push the tip of the needle I'd risked so much for into her arm and press the plunger down. Then I wait. The next few hours are the worst of my life.

Finally, her eyelids flutter open. My heart skips a beat. She's okay.

"Water," she croaks.

I tip a cup against her lips. As soon as she can speak more, she asks, "How?" I just shrug. There's no way I'm telling her how I got

this medicine. She wouldn't approve of the measure I had to go to. But she doesn't get it. I'd do anything for her. I'd go to the ends of the earth to keep her safe and healthy.

"Dawn," I moan, "I love you."

At least she's safe back in London.

Chapter 40

Dawn

At this rate, we'll never make our rendezvous. Instead, we'll probably end up like Jeremy, battered and bruised to within an inch of our lives. He says he was caught outside the fence and that's why this is happening to him. Weren't we also caught outside the fence? I daftly assumed they'd just throw us in the slave camp.

"You look familiar," Jeremy says after a while. Every time he speaks, his voice is strained. "What did you say your name was?"

Up until now, Lee had done all the talking but, this time, Jeremy is speaking directly to me.

"Dawn," I say quietly.

"Dawn." He mulls that over for a minute. Then there's recognition in his eyes. "Are you Gabby's sister?" he whispers as if he's afraid of anyone else hearing this. His eyes widen, astonished.

I snap my head up. "You know Gabby?" I say urgently.

He nods, contemplating what to say next.

I glance at Lee and notice he is listening intently as well. "Is she OK?"

"She was the last time I saw her."

At least I know she's alive. "What are they doing to her? Is she hurt?" I have so many questions they just start spilling out.

"When I was there, she hadn't been hurt. She's had a hard time, but she's tough."

Is that admiration in his voice?

"She sure is." I lean back in relief. I didn't come all this way for nothing. There's still a chance.

Lee comes to sit beside me. "You good?" he asks.

"Yeah," I respond. Jeremy winces as he moves closer to us.

"So, what are you doing here?" Jeremy asks.

"We've come to get her out of this place."

"Ha! You know, Gabby would kick your ass if she knew you were risking your life for hers."

I smile at this. He does know my sister. "I'll let her, but after I get her out of here."

He spreads his arms wide and says, "How's that working out?"

Sarcasm. Gabby's favorite. No wonder he's friends with her. She does like her arse holes.

"We won't be here long, don't you worry." I wish I felt as confident in that fact as I sound.

"There's something you need to know," Jeremy says.

"And what is that?"

"Your father." He stops there. I don't know what Gabby has told him, but he has no right to mention our father.

"Yes?" I snap.

"He's alive."

I can't breathe. Come on Dawn; in and out. "What?" I croak.

"He's here. They call him General Nolan."

"Alive?" I faintly remember a soldier mentioning General Nolan. "How do you...?" I can't finish the question.

"He came here asking questions about Gabby." At my accusatory look, Jeremy continues. "I wouldn't tell him anything until he told me who he was."

"This is impossible. I remember the day he died. It was a car accident."

"Or so you were told." His voice is no more than a whisper now.

I only remember bits and pieces of that day. My mom's reaction is what I remember most clearly.

Without saying a word, Lee grabs my hand to still its trembling.

I don't know what to say. My dad, working in the colonies? I remember so little about him, but I always pictured him as kind and loving. Can this be the same man? If he's here, that means he left us. He made us believe he was dead and abandoned us to the hard life we've been living. He's no better than some tosspot. What about mom? I wonder if he even knows what his supposed death did to her. I wonder if he even cares. What will he do when he finds out

who I am? He obviously knows Gabby is in the camp and hasn't done a damn thing to help her.

After giving me some time, Jeremy speaks again. "You're a lot like your sister, you know that?" He says.

A laugh bubbles out of my chest. "One, you're delusional. And two, you don't know me."

"I really hated Gabby when she got here," he confesses. At my curious look, he explains. "My little sister had grown so attached to her and I was worried."

"Well, your sister must be pretty smart. Gabs is definitely someone you want in your corner."

He's quiet for a moment and I'm worried I said something wrong.

"Yeah, I learned that pretty quickly," he says, the sadness in his voice enough to break even the strongest among us.

Chapter 41

Gabby

*Ring a ring o roses
A pocket full of posies
Atishoo, Atishoo
We all fall down*

"Gabby, honey, don't pull your sister down so hard." Mom is setting up the food outside. We're having a barbecue today for everyone in the neighborhood. All my friends are coming, so I hope Dawn doesn't think she can follow us around all day. Little sisters can be such pains.

Mom made potato salad today and daddy's coming home early from work to help out! It's going to be a great party. It's finally gotten warm outside and Mommy said we can turn the sprinkler on later! We have better toys than my friends. None of them have sprinklers or a playhouse in the back yard. We just have to make sure we don't run in the garden.

Mom got mad last time. She loves her flowers and I do too. They're so pretty.

I run inside with Dawn close on my heels. It's so annoying how she follows me like a puppy. "Mommy?" I ask, trying to be a proper lady like she wants me to be.

"What sweetie?"

"Can I call daddy to see when he's coming home?" I love when he comes early because then he'll play with us. Mom smiles at me. She is so pretty. She walks to the phone and picks it up. She hands it to me and it is already ringing. I love it when I get to use the phone. Sometimes mommy lets me call my friends.

"Hello?" Daddy answers.

"Daddy! When are you coming home for the party?" I yell as if he can't hear me. Dawn is standing next to me trying to grab the phone. I wish she'd just go away.

"Hi, baby girl! I'm leaving now! I can't wait to see you. Are you helping your mom?"

"Yeah. She said we can go in the sprinkler later!"

"That's great. Listen, I have to go so I can get home fast! I love you. Don't you ever forget that. I will always love you and your mom and your sister."

"Yeah, daddy! Love you too!" I hang up without saying goodbye. Dawn starts to cry because she didn't get to talk. Why does she have to be such a baby? I run outside to see if my friends are here yet.

A few hours later, I run inside to grab a towel. I'm dripping water all over the floor, but mommy doesn't even yell at me. I don't know where she is. Maybe daddy got here and I didn't see him. I run outside and collide with Dawn, knocking her to the ground. She starts crying but no one comes to help, weird. I tell her to be quiet but she never listens to me.

Who invited the police? I didn't know we were friends with them. I don't think I like it. Mommy is talking to them. She sees me run up but she doesn't even turn. Instead, she just starts walking, leaving her own party.

"Mommy!" I yell but she doesn't turn. Instead, Gail from next door grabs my hand and leads me back to the house. We stop on the way and she picks up Dawn, who is still crying. She takes us into the house and sits us on the couch. I squirm, knowing mommy will be mad that we're getting the couch wet.

"Girls," Gail starts, "Your dad was in an accident."

"Oh, it's OK," I say, "I have accidents all the time. I just need a Band-Aid. I don't even cry. When will he be home?"

"He's not coming home, dear."

I wake with a start. The pain from that day feels new all over again. They say that before you die your whole life flashes before your eyes. Maybe the heat is finally killing me.

Chapter 42

Dawn

I wake suddenly. Lee and Jeremy are both on alert as two soldiers walk in. They don't look at us as they stand on either side. They each raise an arm in salute as a third man walks in. I recognize him immediately. He's older but still looks the same. For the first time since I was little, I'm in the presence of my father. He steps forward and scans the room. His eyes stop on me, but I'm not sure if there's recognition in them. He turns to the two soldiers who continue to salute.

"You may leave us." They obey and then he points to me. "You, come with me." He turns and exits the room, expecting me to follow. I do. We've only been here for a few hours and already my legs are stiff. As soon as I'm through the doorway, he slams the door and locks it. "This way."

He leads me down the long, dark hallway. We make a right turn and then a left. This place is like a maze. I can hear the music coming from the party the soldiers had mentioned. I picture those kids we saw playing with the dog. They couldn't have been much older than Gabby and I were at the party that changed our lives forever. I don't remember it but Gabby has told me the story so many times that I feel like I do. We finally stop at a door that looks no different from any of the others. He holds it open for me to enter and then comes in behind me and shuts the door.

"Sit," he orders. I look around and am surprised to find that this room is rather inviting. Against each wall to the left and right is home to plush, velvet couches. The walls are a light blue that might be considered soothing in any other situation. The lighting is warm and much brighter than any I've seen in this house so far. A dark, wooden desk sits in the center of the room.

I sit on the couch farthest from this man who abandoned me, but he pulls the chair from behind the desk and sits directly across from me.

"Who are you?" he asks. I'm stunned by this question. I don't know if I should tell him the truth. He obviously knows Gabby is in his slave camp and hasn't done anything about it. When I don't answer him he says, "I know you aren't a slave. We did a count this afternoon and it was correct." His eyes cloud over with suspicion. I still don't say anything, so he starts yelling. "Speak to me, dammit! Who are you?"

"My name," I start, through gritted teeth, "is Dawn Nolan." At first, he looks confused, but then his eyes widen and he brings his hand to his mouth, covering it.

"Why are you here?" This wasn't what I expected him to say. I don't know what I was hoping for. Maybe an explanation? An apology? I doubt I'll ever get either. Arse.

"Why do you think?" I narrow my eyes.

He gets to his feet and starts pacing the room. "You shouldn't have come. This is a dangerous place."

"I would never abandon my family. Gabby is all I have left. Everyone else is dead." I say the last part just to sting him. He may be my father, but that doesn't make him family.

"Dawn." His voice is strained.

"Save it. Unless you can explain away all our hardship since you ABANDONED us, I don't want to hear it. I just want my sister."

Pain flashes across his face and then it is gone. "What's your plan?" he asks. When I don't respond, he says, "I know you don't think so, but you can trust me. I'll do what I can to help." I don't want to tell this man anything, but at this point, we need him.

"How do I know you won't betray us?" I ask. "I don't know you. You're a damn soldier!"

"I don't think you can afford not to trust me at this point. You can't do this on your own." His eyes plead with me to accept the only thing he can offer.

"We've done everything else on our own since the day you left," I say, but after the look that crosses my father's face, I make a

decision. "Fine, the day after tomorrow at sundown the fence will be off."

"I'll take care of the guards." He says immediately, even though I didn't ask for his help. I don't thank him. Is that what he's waiting for? Neither of us moves until I speak.

"Why did you leave us?" My voice is low, but I know that he heard me. I can't look at him as I wait for his answer.

"It's not that simple," he whispers. "I thought I was protecting you. You have to understand. You don't refuse orders. If you do, they will take away your reasons for refusing. They would've come after you. Your mother..." Before he can finish, there's a knock on the door.

"Everything OK in there, Sir?" someone yells from the other side.

"Yes. Find me Rad." My father's mood abruptly changes as he opens the door and starts barking orders. "Get up. You're going back to camp, slave!" He takes me back to the cell where Jeremy and Lee are. He opens the door and points to Lee. "You too. Come." He then yells down the hall. "Rad, Jeffers." Two squaddies appear around the corner.

"Yes sir," they say in unison.

"Take these two slaves back to camp. When you get there, take the girl out of the box. She's been in there long enough." I have no idea what the box is, but I don't really care. I'm going to be with my sister soon.

Before we're taken away, my father leans down and whispers in my ear, "You need to go west."

Chapter 43

Dawn

The crisp night air is a shock to the senses after the dank atmosphere of that prison cell. The music from the ongoing party rings in my ears as we're prodded through the hot and sticky night. A mosquito lands on my neck. I try to smash it, but end up missing entirely and hitting myself in the face with the new chains that have been put around my wrists. The farther we get from the house, the darker it becomes until the only light comes from a flashlight one of the soldiers is carrying. The music grows quiet and all that is left to hear is the sounds of the bugs in the night. I really hate bugs. After the first attempt, I don't even try to swat anything that lands on me. I'm sure to wake tomorrow with red bites all over my body.

We reach the entrance to the camp and the soldiers shove us in and then lock the gate once more. Lee and I take in our surroundings before going forward. It's hard to make out much of the camp, but there's a fire in the distance that illuminates the nearby huts.

"Here we go," I say as we start moving forward. I tug Lee's arm and we head towards the fire. I need to find Gabby. If Drew and Sam succeed in their task, we have to be ready by sundown the day after tomorrow. We reach the fire and all eyes are immediately locked on us. No one speaks until an older woman stands and walks towards us.

"We didn't get a new group today," she says matter-of-factly. "Where'd you come from?"

I don't say anything, but Lee speaks up for both of us. "We were just brought here. They caught us outside the camp." After nervous whispers, a man stands and points to Lee.

"Listen to him talk. He's not from England." It's almost an accusation. Lee backs away and pulls me with him.

"Wait!" the older woman says. "Are you American?" When Lee doesn't respond her eyes widen in wonder. I step between them.

"He is, but I'm not." I walk away, not wanting to waste time talking, but she grabs my arm.

"I'm Amanda," she says expectantly, waiting to hear our names.

I point to Lee, "He's Lee and I'm Dawn."

Her eyes fix on something happening behind us and I turn. Across the camp yard, soldiers and flashlights have gathered around a box. It's a wooden structure that looks almost like one of those outhouses I've seen in old pictures. It's on stilts and has a door in the front. This must be "the box" that my father was talking about.

"Oh my, they're letting her out," Amanda whispers before heading off in that direction. Curious, we follow her.

The soldiers open the door and out tumbles a person.

"Oh my God," Lee says, suddenly beside me. The soldiers spit and walk away. The length of her hair tells me this is probably a girl. She's lying in the dirt, not moving.

"Do you think she's dead?" I ask Lee.

"I don't know," he says.

As soon as the soldiers are out of sight Amanda rushes forward to help the girl. "Oh no, oh no," she mutters repeatedly. She points to Lee. "You, come help me. Let's get her to her hut." We carry her in and lay her on a bed. Amanda begins wiping her face with a cloth, saying, "Come on darling, wake up."

As soon as the first layer of dirt is gone, my breath hitches in my throat. I drop to my knees beside the bed and brush the girl's hair out of her face. "Gabby?" I whisper. I lean down so that my forehead is touching hers and then look up at Amanda. "Is she going to live?" The words break on their way past my lips.

"How..." Amanda starts, but then realizing now isn't the time, she just says, "You know her?" I nod. "She's strong. I think she'll be okay." My heart beats rapidly as I stare down at my sister. Lee comes and kneels beside me.

"So, this is her," he says. "She survived that box."

I glanced up at him, remembering the girl he said he'd loved. She died in a cage similar to the one Gabby just escaped from.

He looks at my sister with reverence in his eyes. Shaking himself, he breaks away from whatever was holding him in place. His face slackens into a sad mask and he gets to his feet.

"I need some air," he mutters, bolting from the tiny room.

As I imagine Lee trying to save a girl very much like Gabby, I realize just how close I've come to losing her.

Chapter 44

Gabby

No no...I have to keep going. I can't stop now. I must be almost there. I'm running, always running. Only this time, I can't remember why or where to. I just keep my feet moving. Oh man, it's so hot out here. I must be sweating buckets. That'll be real attractive when I get there. That's strange; I can't think who is going to be there. It must be important though, for me to be running this fast. I love running. The wind in my hair and the scenery rushing by makes me feel invincible; like I can conquer the world. That's daft. I'm a right prat. I'm not going to be conquering anything in my life, that'll be my sister. She's the smart one. How odd, I don't know her name. Nothing seems familiar to me here except for the feel of my feet hitting the pavement. I feel like I've been running forever, but I'm not even knackered yet. I think I'll just keep going for a while longer. Strangely, though, my face feels cool, and I feel a hand in mine.

Chapter 45

Dawn

Morning brings with it its own set of worries and fears.

Gabby squirms and kicks in her sleep, still refusing to wake. Her hand clutches tightly to mine and I keep expecting her eyes to just pop open. All this movement would sure wake me up. Her feet are kicking, her arms are twitching, and her breathing is coming fast. What has she been through?

"She's probably just dreaming," Amanda says calmly. I don't know this woman, but having her around makes me feel better for some reason. I can tell she cares a great deal for my sister, but I find it strange that she's the only person in the entire camp that has come to check on Gabby. She's been here for over a month and she's always been good at making people like her.

What if Gabby doesn't wake in time for the escape tomorrow? All of this will have been for nothing. She makes sounds in her sleep sometimes. Every time she mumbles something I snap to attention, thinking she's coming around. Every time I'm disappointed.

Amanda hasn't asked much about us. I haven't even told her that Gabby is my sister. Depending on how well they knew each other, however, she may have guessed. This is a very smart and perceptive woman. Lee never says anything to her but, then again, I don't get much out of him either. He's lost in his own memories.

Suddenly, screaming fills the room and Gabby's head thrashes from side to side. I grab her and try to stop her, but I don't know what's going on. When she finally stops screaming, her eyes fly open.

"Gabby, it's okay. I'm here." Slowly, she turns to look at me, confusion in her eyes.

"Dawn?" she asks tentatively. Her voice is hoarse. Tears roll down my face as I look at my sister. This, right here, makes everything worth it.

"It's really me Gabs," I manage to choke out. She reaches up and cups my cheek with her hand. The next thing she does surprises me. She slaps me!

"What the hell are you doing here? Are you daft?" Well, at least she's found her voice. This is the sister that I know and love.

"I came to get you out of here." I don't know why I even have to explain this to her. She'd do the same for me. She tries to speak but has a fit of coughing. Lee hands her a cup of water which she quickly slurps down.

"Dawn," she raises her voice again, "you're such a prat. Why can't you just do what you're told? You should've stayed in London. This is no place for a girl like you." Okay, I know she's been through hell, but I'm here for her and she's mad? I don't give her a response because frankly, I don't think she deserves one. I've been trying to get to her for so long and now, after about a minute, she's already pissed me off. Lee refills her cup.

"Who the hell are you?" Gabby snaps at him. He stops in his tracks and stands motionless, shocked by her rudeness.

"Gabs, this is Lee. He's the reason we were able to find you and he's getting us out."

"So, I can blame you for bringing my baby sister here?" Lee sets the water down next to Gabby and steps back.

"Yeah, and you can blame me for getting your ass out of here." Lee crosses his arms over his broad chest in challenge.

"Nope, can't be done. I've tried." Of course, she has. That's probably why she was in that box thing.

"Gabby, we can." I grab her hand. "We've got people on the outside." Gabby tries to put up an argument, but she just doesn't have the strength, yet. "Rest up. You're going to need your strength."

As she drifts back to sleep, I sit on the ground near the entrance and put my head in my hands. I don't hear Amanda walk up so her voice makes me jump.

"She awake?" she asks.

"Yeah, awake and pigheaded. That's my sister." I lean back against the wall as Amanda enters the hut. After a few minutes, I follow her inside.

Amanda is sitting by the bed, making Gabby eat something. At least Gabs will listen to one person. They both look up when I enter the room. Amanda smiles at me, but there are mixed emotions on Gabby's face. I sit next to her and grab her hand. I hold it to my heart. She takes my other hand and holds it to hers. It's a sign our mother taught us a long time ago. Family comes first, the rest of the world be damned. If only my parents still followed that as well.

Chapter 46

Gabby

I can't make sense of the emotions thrumming in my chest. My sister is here. She came for me. But now she's stuck in this camp and it's all my fault. I only worked to piss her off because it eased some of the anger I had for myself. I wanted her to be safe, but when I saw her, my first instinct was to be so damn happy to have her with me.

And I hate myself for it?

"Your sister must love you a lot?" Amanda holds a plate of food for me to eat. I pick at it absently.

"She shouldn't have come." The words feel like the right ones to say.

"She loves you."

"I hit her." I close my eyes briefly.

"I think she'll forgive you."

Of course, she will, it's Dawn. She's forgiven me for a lot over the years. The real question is, will I forgive myself for her being here?

"Who's that man with her?" I ask. Dawn has always been way too trusting for her own good. She's lucky she has a sister who doesn't trust anyone.

"He hasn't said much. I think he's American." I don't know what an American is, but I don't really care right now. They say we can get out. After what happened to Jeremy and then to me, I don't know if it's even worth it to try. I trust Dawn, but I don't know Lee or these people they supposedly have on the outside. Before I can say anything else to Amanda, Dawn walks back in. She sits next to me and grabs my hand, placing it over her heart. I respond with the same gesture.

Outside the noises from the camp drift into my room. It feels strange for me to have Dawn here, but I'm secretly glad for that as well. She isn't the same Dawn I left in London. I don't quite know what it is yet, but there's something very different about her.

"Okay, sis, we need to be ready to move by tomorrow." Dawn must be joking. I haven't been able to get out of bed on my own yet.

"I need more time to get my strength up." Even one day would help.

"There's no more time." It's Lee this time who speaks. "Our only chance is tomorrow at sundown."

"That can't possibly be our only chance."

"Gabby," Dawn interjects. "Lee's right."

"Well, what's this grand plan of yours?" I direct this at Lee so my sarcasm doesn't sting Dawn. It doesn't work, though, because she's the one who answers.

"At sundown tomorrow our people on the outside will have the power to the fence shut off for about a minute. That's our chance."

"And how are they going to do that?" Do they really think we can do this?

"Don't worry about it," Lee says. He thinks he's ended the conversation, but he doesn't really know me. This isn't over.

Chapter 47

Gabby

Sleep eludes me, probably because I've been sleeping in that hot box for days. I get deja vu as I sit up in bed. It reminds me of when I first came here and was let out of that box. Amanda took care of me then too. So did Claire. I swing my feet around so they're on the ground and try to stand. The first time I put weight on my legs, I fall back onto the bed. I'm more successful the second time. My legs are weak from the heat and the dehydration, but Amanda has me drinking so much water that I need to pee every hour. All evening I've had to be held over a bucket to do my business. How embarrassing. I don't want to wake anyone right now. Dawn and Lee are both crashing in here with me, making for very little walking room. I stumble around them and out the door.

The farther I walk, the better my legs feel. I hope they'll be up for the running that I expect us to have to do.

It's late and all of the fires have been put out for the night. I know this place well enough now that I can find my way in the dark, but I stumble over rocks and sticks on the ground. Each time, my legs wobble and threaten to give out from under me. I manage to avoid falling and keep going. I'm relieved to see that the squaddies are no longer a constant presence here.

I do my business and find my way back to my hut. I sit beside the door and lean back on my elbows. It really is a beautiful night. Looking up at the sky full of brilliant stars, I could almost forget where I was. A snore from inside the hut brings me back to reality. I chuckle as I head back in.

Chapter 48

Dawn

There's a quiet snoring beside me. I look over at Lee and laugh silently to myself. It feels good to laugh, even for a second. Today is the day we either accomplish what we've come so far to do or we probably die trying. Surprisingly enough, I'm not scared. Back in London, I was the little chicken shite who was too afraid, too timid, to really live her life. It made everything so simple, but I didn't know what I was missing out on. Now, life grows scarier and more complicated every day, but I wouldn't go back to being the person that I was.

It's early, so I'm the first one awake. I decide not to get up quite yet. After tonight, life is only going to get harder. We're going to be on the run. I have no delusions about living happily ever after with my sister. I knew what I was getting myself into when I came here and she's going to flip out when I tell her that our father is still alive, but I can't distract her now. Her anger could ruin our plans. And then there's Drew. It could get ugly.

Gabby doesn't know that Drew is here. I understand why Lee hasn't mentioned it (he doesn't know the history there) but why haven't I? It'd make her happy that he came all this way. She'd think it was all for her because he never told her about his brother. She'd never suspect he was here just to help me or that we might possibly have feelings for each other. Drew has my feelings so twisted and confused that I can't answer that. Of course, he'd always choose Gabby over me. She's, well, Gabby. I won't even give him that choice, though. I can't put myself or Gabby through that. As always, I just have to bury whatever feelings I might have, for now.

I need to do something to clear my head so I get up and go to the door. Gabby stands outside talking to Amanda. They both turn to

me as I walk up.

"Good morning, Dawn," Amanda says. I barely know this woman, but she has this motherly quality that instantly makes you feel loved.

"Hey, sis. We're just going over our plans." Gabby in charge, as usual.

"Are you coming with us?" I direct this to Amanda. Normally I might object to anyone else coming since we don't have much time to get past the fence, but I can't imagine leaving this woman behind.

"Oh, dear me. I couldn't imagine. I'd never make it out there. Plus, I can't leave all these people here." Amanda looks shocked that I would even suggest her coming along. I'm confused as to why they are discussing plans if she's not coming. At the look on my face, Gabby clarifies.

"Nobody is going to work today. We just found out that the groves flooded last night and the bosses don't want to deal with it." I still don't get it, so she continues. "That means lots of people are going to be around when we're trying to pull our vanishing act. Amanda is going to help with that."

"Help with what exactly?"

"We can't trust any of them, Dawn. Some of them have been here so long that they've turned into robots. Some git around here would surely turn us in. Amanda is going to make sure people are busy tonight." I can tell Gabby doesn't want to have to waste time explaining this to me. She's never had much patience, but I have never really asked questions. I always just went along with anything she said.

Looks like nothing everything has changed.

Chapter 49

Dawn

Waiting is torture. The day stretches before us, a never-ending series of dull moments. The entire camp seems to be buzzing with a nervous energy. I guess when you're a slave, you don't really know what to do when there's no work to be done. The minutes tick by and we're all getting antsy.

Our plans have been made, everyone knows what to do, and so now the only thing left is to sit here preparing for the sun to go down. No one talks much. There's nothing left to say. We've all said our goodbyes to Amanda and thanked her for everything. Before sunset, she'll start the usual bonfire. This time, however, it'll get going much earlier and hopefully draw more of a crowd. We need as many people as possible to be on that side of the camp.

My mind keeps wandering back to Drew and Sam. We'll be back with them tonight. It's only been a few days, but so much has happened since we last saw them that it feels like it's been way too long. I can tell Lee is anxious to be back with Sam and on the move again. After everything he lost to a camp like this, it must be killing him to be here. I've been so grateful to have him with me that I fear I'm becoming selfish. I'm still lost in my thoughts when Lee taps me on the shoulder.

"Time to go," he whispers as he moves past me and out the door. I get to my feet and start moving. It's as if I'm in a dream. My legs feel like I'm walking on clouds. My body moves forward, but my mind is elsewhere and not in control of my movements.

Here we go.

Chapter 50

Gabby

The sky blazes in the West, a warning against the night to come. Oranges and pinks streak across space as the sun sinks gloriously into darkness.

It's time. We're about to find out whether this dodgy plan will work or if we'll be stuck here. Lee and Dawn join me outside and look up at the sky. I knock my arm into Dawn's.

"You ready?" I ask.

She gives me a nervous smile. "Always."

I shake my head. She sure has changed.

The three of us stand still for a moment looking at each other. We begin to hear noises coming from the other side of the camp. People sound like they're actually having fun for once. This must be Amanda's doing. One step accomplished. I nod to Lee and Dawn and start off in the direction of our escape route. I've chosen a section of the fence that is far enough from the bonfire that no one will see us. It leads directly into a group of trees to provide us cover. Once we reach the other side we should be able to find our rendezvous spot to meet up with these people that are supposedly out there.

As we near the fence, there's a faint humming. This is the first time I've been near a working part of the fence, so I haven't heard this before. I reach out to grab the fence, but Dawn jerks my hand away roughly.

"What the hell?" I ask her.

"You hear that?" She must mean the humming. "That's the electricity."

"I thought your friends were supposed to have that off by now," I state.

"Be patient." Lee's low voice cuts through our almost bickering. Patience isn't one of my strong suits. The sun has completely disappeared and has been replaced by utter darkness and still, the electric humming persists. We wait and begin to worry that something has happened. The longer we wait here, the better the chance of being caught by one of the patrols. I don't want to take that chance. I turn around and start walking. Dawn grabs my arm and refuses to let go.

"They'll get it done, Gabs." She's very sure of these friends of hers.

"Yeah? Before or after we get caught and thrown in the hot box?"

"Don't you dare..." She doesn't get a chance to finish that sentence because the fence has stopped humming.

"Come on," Lee urges. I go first. I grab the bottom of the fence and swing myself underneath it. Dawn and Lee follow me. As soon as we're all through, we hear the humming start up again. Once we're on our feet once more, we take off running through the trees. I'm suddenly reminded of Jeremy and the night he was caught. This patch of forest is very similar to the one leading to the beach and, once again, there is no light to guide us. I'm able to avoid more of the rocks and roots on the ground this time. Lee is ahead of me and, much to my surprise; Dawn is next to me running at about the same speed.

My legs begin to tire. I'm still not fully recovered from the box and I clench my teeth against the pain. My lungs burn, bringing tears to my eyes, but I keep pushing. I'm relieved when Lee begins to slow.

"Listen," he says. "We're not being followed." Dawn and I jog the last few meters to catch up with him and then stop and look around. He's right. If we were being followed, we'd see flashlights and hear barking, but the forest is silent. Where are the patrols?

"Okay, which way to the guys?" Dawn says as I say "What now?" We look at each other and stop talking. There's no way I'm going to let my little sister take charge. Lee ignores us as he turns and starts walking in the direction that I'm hoping is the right one.

Chapter 51

Dawn

Gabby makes me so mad. I'm not the same pushover kid that Gabby left in London. I came all this way to save her and after everything I've been through, she isn't going to order me around and take charge. I stalk off after Lee without a backward glance. After a few moments, I hear Gabby's footsteps behind me. I can't believe we're still fighting when we're running for our lives; typical.

When we were running, the ground seemed much friendlier than it does now that we've slowed down. I constantly trip over tree roots, sticks, and rocks. I even run into a tree once or twice in the dark. The moon has risen but only rarely does its light break through the branches. In the dead of night, the world is silent except for the crunching of leaves and sticks underneath our feet. I catch up to Lee and break the silence.

"We did it," I whisper.

"We still have a ways to go," he says.

"I don't know what we're going to do once we reach the guys. I mean, can we really go back to London after everything we've seen?" This worry has secretly been nagging at my heart. Lee stays quiet for a few moments before responding.

"Don't go back." His bluntness makes me pause. This thought had been in the back of my mind for quite some time, but staying here carries its own set of risks.

No one says another word as we walk for what seems like hours. Finally, in the distance, we see two fires burning a few meters apart.

"That's it. That's the signal." I say this mainly to Gabby because Lee already knows. As we get closer, the three of us duck behind one of the larger trees surrounding the clearing. There are two figures near the fires, but we need to make sure it's them.

"Eagle," Lee says, throwing his voice towards the clearing. The two figures come closer.

"Don't you mean American eagle, you fool?" Sam's laugh sounds like the most musical thing I've heard in years. We step into the open and can now see their faces clearly. Sam's grin stretches from ear to ear and Drew looks relieved. The five of us stand there staring at each other until Gabby speaks up.

"Drew?" she asks, stepping closer to the fire to get a better look. "You cheeky bastard."

"Hey Gabs," he says. She immediately runs to him and throws her arms around his neck.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she says before planting a kiss on his lips. Her back is to me as she continues to hug Drew, but I can see his face clearly. Our eyes lock and I can't tear myself away no matter how painful this feels. He continues to watch me as he has his arms around my sister.

Catching me off guard, Sam runs up behind me, sweeps me off my feet, and spins me around and around.

"Hey, little lady. It's damn good to see you!" he says. I can't help wishing that I could feel his joy. I should be happier now that I have my sister back.

Sam keeps spinning me in his arms and I hug him with all my strength. It sure feels good to be back with this man. He's become family to me, as has Lee, and I love him like a brother.

Chapter 52

Gabby

Shock doesn't begin to describe the feelings flashing through my mind when I find Drew waiting for us. He looks even better than I remember. His refined looks are more rugged than before. No matter how he changes, he'll always be one hell of a beautiful man.

Guilt stabs at me as I wrap my arms around Drew's waist. I can't shake Jeremy from my mind. Is he alive? Where is he?

We were nothing more than friends, brought together over his dying sister, but I picture his face every time I close my eyes. I push those thoughts down deep and release Drew. I look around and some man is spinning my sister and goofing off. I get a better look at him. Go Dawn, he's hot! I always told my sister that all she needed was a man. He sets her back on her feet and they walk towards me.

"Gabby, this is Sam." I go to shake his hand, but he takes it one step further, wrapping me in a bear hug. I wiggle out of his embrace and look at our little band of outlaws. Two guys? When Dawn said she had people on the outside, I was picturing more than this. Shite. What now?

"This is where we're spending the night." Drew turns and starts walking closer to the fires and I catch up to him and loop my arm through his. Whatever was between us before isn't there anymore, that sparks, but he reminds me of a life outside the hell that is the colonies.

Drew starts working to put one of the fires out by throwing dirt on it. Sam and Lee both go to help him while Dawn and I look on. Our eyes meet, but it's not the time for words.

There's no shelter in the clearing, only the tree cover, so we sleep partially under the winking stars. There isn't a cloud in the sky

and the moon seems to grow brighter as the night wears on. Next to me, Dawn is fast asleep. Back in London, after we had long rows, I'd watch her sleep. She always seemed so at peace in the world of dreams.

Is it the exhaustion or the stress? There's something between us and something very different about her. She's no longer that little sister that would do whatever I told her to. I look around as I hear someone tossing and turning on the ground. Drew sits up disoriented.

"Can't sleep?" I ask him.

"It's been a long couple of days," he responds. I let the silence stretch between us for a few minutes before saying anything else. There's so much I want to ask him. How did they get here? Who are Sam and Lee? Why did he come? Dawn has seemed hesitant to tell me anything, so I decide to try Drew. I start with something simple.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" I say hesitantly.

"You're going to ask me whether I mind it or not," he says with a smirk. I smile. He knows me well.

"How did you find my sister in London?"

He tells me about his father telling him that I was gone and setting off to find my sister. He talks about sneaking onto a plane and then wandering through the wilderness. He tells me about the man that tried to kill them and the bear that chased after them. I wince as he describes Dawn getting hurt and Sam saving her life. I'm amazed to hear about the Americans living in caves and how they took care of my sister. Drew talks of the journey to my camp which is supposedly located in a place called Floridaland. The last part of the story is about separating from Dawn and Lee and waiting for two days to find out if they were all right.

As I listen to this incredible tale, I watch Drew's face. He tells the story as if it was the best time of his life. His eyes shine from unshed tears during parts and they light up during others. There's one expression that's reserved for the mention of Dawn. At first, I can't quite guess what it is, but then it hits me like a ton of bricks. Drew has fallen for my sister. I catch him glancing towards her sleeping form and the look he gives her is one I've never seen before.

Knowing my sister, she has no clue. She would've brushed off any advances towards her. I don't know if this is something I should talk to her about or something I should just let go. Drew was supposed to be mine, even though I don't have feelings for him anymore. It feels like betrayal even though it's not. Even if I were to forgive Dawn, Drew isn't the right guy for her. He isn't good enough. He's a slag. I was OK with that, but Dawn deserves better. Oh man, what do I do?

Drew's tale has ended and he's finally fallen asleep. I guess I should get some shut eye because who knows what tomorrow brings. As I drift off, I can faintly hear Dawn mumbling in her sleep beside me as the rain begins to pour.

Chapter 53

Dawn

Running through the house is usually fun but not today. The rain is pouring outside and the thunder shakes the walls every time it claps. Tonight, our home is a dodgy building on the edge of the east end of London. Mommy and daddy have been gone for two months. I count the days, hoping that mommy will come back to me. When daddy died, she just walked away and never came home. She didn't even come back to clean up from the party. I wanted to wait at our old house for her to come back, but my big sister Gabby said that they would split us up and take us to another family if they found us. I don't know how mommy is going to come get us if she doesn't know where we are.

The water is pouring in from the outside and the floor has got all slippery. Gabby is running in front of me, but she never lets go of my hand, not once. There's a man running after us. I think Gabby took his food. I haven't eaten in two days and my tummy hurts so Gabby tried to feed me. He's not too happy right now. The storm outside is so loud that I can barely hear the man screaming at us. I really don't like storms; they're too noisy. There are stairs in front of us and we run up them. I haven't been up here yet, but there are more people. They watch us run by but no one helps.

"Ouch Gabby!" I yell as Gabby yanks me into a closet. We crouch down on the floor and huddle together. Now that we've stopped running, I'm getting scared. Tears start rolling down my face and I start to weep. Gabby is always telling me to be brave, but I just can't. I feel her slip her arm around me and kiss the top of my head.

"Shhhh, little sis, don't worry," she whispers. "I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you."

Distant thunder. I wake suddenly and sit straight up. It must be pretty early because I can see a tiny sliver of sun trying to rise through the storm clouds. I'm surprised to be the only one awake because we're all damp from the rain.

I should be used to sleeping on the ground by now, but my back and neck are both driving me nuts.

I get to my feet to stretch and walk around a bit. A few short months ago, a storm like this had me cowering in the corner. Now, I'm able to see the beauty in it. It's like a wonderfully choreographed dance or a brilliant symphony.

Things sure have changed.

I find a much drier spot under a large tree. There's no way I'm getting back to sleep. I would kill for a hot cuppa right about now.

Thunder.

Gabby wakes and seems surprised to find me watching the storm instead of hiding from it. She curls in next to me.

"You sure have changed Dawn," she says quietly as she takes my hand in hers. I don't respond. "We always have fought a lot, haven't we?" At this admission, I turn to look at her.

"Everything we fought about back in London seems so small now, doesn't it?" We lean into each other and I continue. "Our entire lives before the colonies seem so small."

"Yeah, they do," she says wistfully. Silence stretches between us. We're both lost in our own thoughts. I think of our father, but the time isn't right. Should I tell her? No, not yet. But about Drew...

"Hey Gabs?" I finally have the courage to ask the question that is killing me.

"Yeah?" she responds.

"Do you love Drew?" I look away, unable to face her. She doesn't say anything right away and I can tell she's considering her answer.

"No, I don't. Not like that if that's what you mean. I never really did."

"Oh" Is all I can manage.

"He's in love with you, Dawn." This was the last thing I expected to hear from her.

Shocked, I say, "don't be daft. Of course, he isn't."

"Dawn, I just spent most of the night talking to him. He told me everything you guys have been through together. I can tell you that he's never looked at me with the expression that was on his face when he was talking about you. He may not know it yet, but he's into you."

If the past has taught me one thing, it's that people always choose Gabby over me so I don't know what to think when there's a possibility of things going the other way. "Oh."

"Can you promise me something?" Gabby is starting to sound way too much like the big sister.

"What?" I ask.

"Be careful with him." She doesn't need to explain her warning because I understand all too well. I picture the classroom back in London. It took a lot for me to move past my dislike of Drew.

"Yeah," is all I say.

Sensing that I don't want to talk about this anymore, Gabby gets up to give me some space. As she's walking away, she stops and turns back to me.

"Thank you for coming for me Dawn." She turns back around and walks away without another word.

I follow in Gabby's footsteps a few minutes later. The rain has stopped and the rising sun has finally broken through. The boys are waking up. We need to decide our next move and get on the road. We have no food so breakfast takes no time at all. By now, my stomach has grown used to being empty and it rarely growls anymore. This probably isn't a good thing but we'll make do.

Sam is already wide awake and in a lively conversation with Gabby. Those two are already becoming fast friends, but that doesn't surprise me. Sam has that magic touch with people. Lee and Drew are arguing about our next move as I walk up. I can't look Drew in the eyes after my talk with Gabby early this morning.

"We could go north and head back to the caves," Drew is saying.

"No way. We may eventually have people after us and I'm not going to put Ma and everybody in that kind of danger," Lee retorts.

"Well, what about West? What's out there?"

"There are Americans out there, but they might not be friendlies. I've heard there's also a few large settlements, but I don't know if we should risk it."

Drew is getting exasperated with every word Lee says. "What do you want us to do then?"

"I say let's go a bit west, then south."

"What's south?" Drew looks confused.

"Mexico." Lee looks around at the rest of us and I finally decide to speak up.

"No," I say. "We go west." Gabby and Sam have wandered over by now and everyone starts talking at once; asking me why and how I can be so sure. I look over to Gabby because I know what I'm about to say is going to affect her most of all. When I speak, I'm speaking directly to her.

"Dad told me to." Everyone is stunned and confused except for Lee.

"Is that what he whispered to you before we were taken away?" Lee asks. It's not that I'd forgotten to tell everyone about the plantation and what took place there, I'd consciously chosen not to. I wasn't ready to talk about it, but now I see no other option. I go on to tell Drew, Sam, and Gabby everything that happened. When I finish, I'm surprised that Gabby's first question has nothing to do with our father.

"Jeremy is alive?" she asks urgently.

Chapter 54

Gabby

Thoughts race through my mind and a red hot flush creep up my face until I can no longer control myself. I start pacing back and forth as I say, "What are we waiting for? We need to go get Jeremy." Looking at the faces surrounding me, I'm the only one who sees the immediacy of this situation. "Are you guys daft? We need to go. Now!"

"We can't just break him out of the plantation. You guys haven't seen this place. Dawn can attest to how impossible this is." Lee looks to Dawn, but she's staring at me instead.

"Let's go get him," she says.

I've never been more grateful to have Dawn as my sister than in this moment. She starts walking and I run up behind her to wrap my arms around her back. She grips my arm and squeezes. Who knew my scared little sister would be the boldest of us all.

The boys take a little longer to grow some balls before they join us.

"How do you expect to do this?" Lee asks.

"We'll find a way." Dawn isn't wavering in her resolve.

As we're walking, I can hear Claire's voice ever so sweetly making me promise to escape with Jeremy. I may not fail you after all. I want to run all the way to the plantation and scream until they let Jeremy go. I want to burn the place to the ground. Energy soars through my blood stream. We're about to go into the belly of the beast.

We reach the road leading to the plantation pretty quickly since both Dawn and Lee know the way. Later on, I'm going to have to deal with the other revelations like my dad being alive, but, right now, Jeremy is all that matters.

When we get nearer to the house, I'm amazed at what I see. It's so beautiful that I can't even imagine the horrors that must take place inside those walls. We hunker down behind the barn to the left of the front door. The barn is huge and I can hear the animal sounds coming from the inside. I peer through a window and see stalls and stalls of horses. One stares straight at me, holding my gaze unblinkingly. I feel the accusation thick in the air and break away from the intensity of those eyes.

I look towards the front of the house where a steady stream of rankers are coming and going. We observe for the next hour or so before beginning to make a plan. I turn to the rest of the group with a grin on my face.

"I have an idea," I say as I point to two soldiers that have just exited the front door. I look at Dawn and can tell that she knows what I'm talking about, but the boys look lost.

"We're going in," Dawn says.

"How do you expect all of us to do that without getting caught?" Drew looks dubious.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," I clarify. "You're not going in. Dawn and I are."

Immediately the three of them begin to object.

"There's no way we're sending you alone?" Lee states.

"Good thing you don't control what I do," I bite back.

Drew is the first one to agree to our plan, cutting off Lee's next words.

"I think it's the best option," he says. "If you're caught, your father is a lot less likely to shoot you than us."

I hadn't even stopped to consider that he'd be in there.

Dawn looks to me. "We need uniforms."

"Easy enough," Drew says. "This place is swarming with soldiers. Hold on." He disappears around the side of the barn.

The rest of us wait in silence, having no clue what Drew is up to. After a few minutes, he comes sprinting around the corner, two soldiers close on his heels. They yell to each other as they catch sight of the rest of us, but they don't slow down. Drew whips past us and Sam lunges towards the soldiers, bowling both of them over.

They scramble to get up, but both Lee and Sam are ready for them. Before the soldiers can even reach for their guns, the boys knock them out. Well, that was surprisingly easy.

We strip the soldiers of their uniforms. As Dawn and I don our new digs, the boys look like they want to object again, but they smartly stay quiet. I laugh as I look at Dawn. Her uniform is really big on her tiny body. She has to roll the pants at the waist and tuck the shirt in deep. I'm sure I look just as silly. The last piece of our ensemble is the rifle slung across the back of each soldier. They're constantly armed and therefore, we must be too. It's heavy in my hands.

"Do either of you know how to shoot those?" Lee asks. He takes it out of my hands as soon as I shake my head no. "These rifles look pretty simple. Point and shoot mostly. Just make sure the safety is on when you're not using it. We don't need you shooting yourself." He hands it back to me and I sling it over my shoulder.

"So, you guys are going to stay here so we know where to find you," I say. I grab Dawn's hand, giving it a squeeze before releasing it. "You ready?" I ask.

"You bet," she says as she picks up her rifle and walks out into the open.

Chapter 55

Dawn

Uneasiness twists in my gut as my rifle slaps against my back. Strength. Project strength. Any sign of fear can get us killed. We have to act like we belong. Gabby needs me to be strong. It's all for her. Jeremy obviously means a great deal to her.

Walking out from behind the barn is the most nerve-wracking experience I've had since getting here. These uniforms have that effect on me. We're about to enter a house full of people who won't hesitate to kill us if we're recognized. I have to keep telling myself to be brave, but it's not that easy.

As we walk across the lawn, I imagine everything that could go wrong. Surprisingly enough, at the top of the list is being confronted by my father again. I'm still not ready to face that reality. Last time, I was so shocked that I wasn't truly aware of what was happening. But at the same time, he's probably the only person in the house who will hesitate in killing us.

Every step brings us closer to the front door. This plan is the craziest one we've come up with. We're joined by other soldiers moving towards the house. Occasionally someone tries to make small talk and I just nod until they finally shut up. By the time we reach the front steps, we're in the middle of a throng of soldiers. We walk up the steps and straight through the front door. If we pause, even for a second, someone may grow suspicious. The closer we get, the most the gun feels like a comfort rather than a hindrance.

As we step through the front door we're confronted with a large room full of people bustling about. The interior of the house seems even grander than the exterior. The walls are white with detailed carvings along the baseboards and ceiling. Every few meters along the walls there are gorgeous paintings of all sorts of styles. The

carpeting is a rich red color. To our left, there's a spiral staircase with golden railings leading to the upper floors of the house. There are about a dozen hallways going from this room and we don't have much time to choose one.

"We need to keep moving," Gabby whispers to me.

"I know we need to go to the right, but there are about four different hallways we can choose."

"Just choose one," Gabby urges. I lead us to the hall at the farthest end of the room and we turn into it. I can tell almost instantly that this is all wrong. The hall is extremely well lit and just as ornate as the room we have come from. It also seems to dead end into some offices up ahead. I turn back and Gabby follows without a word. I'm surprised that she's willing to take my lead on this.

I turn us down the next hall, hoping this one's more promising. It begins to look more familiar the further we go. The walls are the same green as the place I was kept before. We walk through the many twists and turns until we reach the end.

"Dammit," I grunt as we come to a dead end.

Gabby is eerily calm beside me. We turn back around and head out to the main entrance once again.

The longer we're in this house, the more at risk we're of getting caught. We start down the third hallway and it looks exactly like the second. At this point, I'm completely disoriented and am not very hopeful. The farther we go down the hall, the darker it gets. This part of the house looks like it doesn't get much use, but it becomes more recognizable the further we go. This must be it. We reach the end of the hall and there's a door!

As I'm reveling in this fact, there's a noise behind us; footsteps. Gabby and I look at each other frantically. There's nowhere to hide. We try every door we can find but none of them open.

"What do we do now?" Gabby hisses. I grab my gun and motion for her to do the same. Her eyes widen, but she does what I say.

Shite. The footsteps move closer. The lighting is so low that we can't see anything until the person is right in front of us. My heart leaps into my throat and my grip on the gun is slick with sweat.

"Who's there?" A deep voice comes from the dark. "No one is supposed to be down here."

We have our guns pointed towards the sound of the voice, but my finger freezes on the trigger as a man steps into the light nearest us.

"Soldiers..." he begins to say, but stops as his eyes show recognition. I'm frozen for only a moment before I reach over and push Gabby's gun down with my hand.

"What are you doing here? I told you to leave and go west," he whispers urgently.

"Who the hell are you?" Gabby doesn't have the time or the desire to feign politeness.

"Gabs," I pause, "this is our father."

Chapter 56

Gabby

I brush Dawn's hand away and raise my gun, this time directly in my father's face.

"Gabby—" Dawn tries to say, but I don't let her finish.

"Get out of our way. I won't hesitate to shoot a man who means nothing to me."

Dawn's face strains, but she stays quiet. I push the man aside with my gun and walk past him. Dawn follows me without another word.

"You won't find the boy without help," he calls after us.

I stop walking, but I don't turn to look at him. Dawn turns and walks back towards him.

"Where is he?" she asks.

"I can take you."

"Why should I trust you?" I demand.

"The water," he says.

"What?" It couldn't have been him.

"In the box. I made sure you survived. I brought you water. Is that a good enough reason?"

"How do I know it was you?" I would be dead if it wasn't for that water.

"Do you really think they would've cared if you died in there? The second time they were actually hoping you would." He brushes by me as does Dawn. I have no choice but to go along. He could be leading us into a trap, but he's the reason I'm still alive. It was his soldiers that put me in there though, so I don't know what to think.

All I know is I need to do whatever is necessary to get to Jeremy.

We head back down the way we'd come, eventually making a right turn and then a left. We stop outside a door that looks no

different from the rest.

The man calling himself our father produces a key ring with so many keys that it looks like it could open any door in the world. He shuffles through them, finally choosing one. He sticks the key in the lock and we hear three short clicks. The door swings open. At first, the room is too dark to see anything, but as my eyes adjust I see a figure huddled in the corner. I run into the room and drop to my knees in front of the man. I lift his face and choke back a sob.

"Jeremy, what have they done to you?" I whisper. He isn't moving so I check for a pulse. The faint rhythm beats against my fingers. "He's alive!" I motion back to Dawn. She hurries in and crouches next to me.

"We need to get him out of here now," Dawn whispers. I look over my shoulder at the man still standing in the doorway, considering our options. I stand and walk back towards him.

"You want to help?" I ask and he nods slowly. "Then get us out of here."

He thinks for a moment and then steps forward. He helps get Jeremy to his feet and Jeremy opens his eyes. He shows no sign of recognition, but at least he's awake and we won't have to carry him out.

"Let's get him out of these chains," I say hurriedly. It hurts me to see Jeremy like this.

"No, leave them on. You three will never get out of here without them."

"What do you want us to do?" Dawn asks hesitantly. He uses a hushed voice to tell us exactly how to get Jeremy safely away. I don't trust the man, but his plan is the only one we've got. I just don't understand why he's helping us.

Our father hands Dawn an envelope. "Go west and find a man named Jonathan Clarke. He'll explain everything to you girls. They will come after you. I'll try to stall, but it may not be enough. Be safe. And girls," he pauses.

"What?" I say, anxious to get moving.

"Floridaland is only the beginning." With that, he leaves us standing in the hallway, holding Jeremy up, having no clue what he

meant.

We head down the hall and find the door unlocked. Jeremy grows heavier with every step. He's only semi-conscious and we can barely hold him up. We just have to make it back to the barn. Hopefully, the guys will still be waiting for us there.

"Stop right there." Three soldiers step out to block our way. "What are you doing with this prisoner?" The soldier who spoke pokes Jeremy in the stomach with the butt of his gun.

"General Nolan ordered his return to the camp." I only hope my voice sounds more confident than I'm feeling right now as my eyes dart nervously between the soldiers. They don't move. I try to look dutifully bored. The soldier in front is the man I see every time I close my eyes. His scar; his pocked face. It takes everything I have not to shoot him right then and there. I wait for his look of recognition. It never comes.

"Carry on then." Finally, he steps out of our way and the other two follow his lead.

After some distance, Dawn and I let out a collective sigh of relief.

Chapter 57

Dawn

My arms are about to fall off. Seriously. I'm not joking. This guy is heavy. We pass by a few more soldiers as we make our way across to the barn, but no one else gives us a second thought.

As soon as we round the corner of the barn, Lee and Sam take Jeremy from us and my arms drop to my sides, shaking. Gabby runs past me and vomits on the ground.

Wiping her face, she drops to her knees on Jeremy's side. Lee slams a rock onto the lock of Jeremy's chains, trying to break them open. The noise of rock on metal is loud, but I don't think we'll be heard over the noise from the plantation. It looks like he's done this before. I know so little about him.

Drew rushes towards me and sweeps me up in his arms, stealing the breath from my lungs. I'm so stunned that it takes me a moment before I hug him back. He buries his face in my hair and squeezes tighter.

"We were so worried," Drew mutters. "You guys took so long and we didn't know what was happening."

"It's okay." I rub his back. "We're here." I smile up at him. There's so much I want to say to him, but I don't get a chance as Sam comes to get us. I immediately release Drew at the urgent look on Sam's face.

"He's awake," Sam says. I walk quickly to the spot where Jeremy is lying. Gabby leans over him. His eyes are only starting to open and I watch my sister run her fingers along his face. Gabby isn't a gentle person. The only person she's cared enough about to treat like this was me. I guess I'm not the only one who's changed.

Jeremy comes to, but I can't hear the words he says to Gabby. Lee backs away to give them some privacy. Sam comes up and puts

his arm around me. I return the gesture and lean against him.

"I'm glad you're back, little lady. You gave us quite a scare." He kisses the top of my head. "Proud of you," he whispers.

Lee steps forward and says, "We need to get going before anyone finds out what you two just pulled off under their noses." There's a grudging respect in his voice.

"Jeremy, can you walk?" I ask as I walk towards him. "Lee's right. We've got a head start and we don't want to waste it."

"I think I can." Jeremy's voice is filled with pain, but I can tell he's going to push through it. I look towards Gabby and see that she's staring at me as well. We both hope that our father is going to delay things a bit to give us some time, but neither of us mentions this. For now, our father is something we want to keep between us.

Sam helps Jeremy up and wraps his arm around his waist to stabilize him. Gabby goes to Jeremy's other side and slips underneath his arm as they begin walking. I follow closely behind them with Lee and Drew watching behind us. We skirt around the other side of the barn and slip back to the woods.

Chapter 58

Gabby

I run my hand along his jaw and over his cheekbone. I touch every bruise and cut, imagining that I can heal him. I'm still not sure this is real as I kneel in the mud by his side. His nose looks broken and blood is matted in his hair. I lean down to plant a gentle kiss on his forehead and his eyelids flutter open.

As he comes to, he's disoriented and confusion clouds his face. "Gabby?" he asks tentatively.

"It's me. I'm here." Tears well in my eyes. I can feel everyone's eyes on my back and I tell myself that I will not cry.

"I didn't think I'd ever get out of there," he says with a tremor in his voice. We're both crying now. We cry for our pain. We cry for Claire. And we cry because we're safe here, together.

"I thought you were dead," I whisper.

"I thought I was too. I can't believe you came for me." Jeremy squeezes my hand. I place my hand under his chin and our eyes meet.

"I promised Claire. I will always come for you."

He holds my gaze for an intense moment before looking over my shoulder at the people surrounding us.

"I hear you've met my sister and Lee." I try to gesture to them, but Jeremy doesn't want to let go of my hand. "That's Sam and that's Drew." I nod their way, but Jeremy's eyes fix on my face again.

Lee brings us back to reality and says it's time to go. Sam helps Jeremy to his feet and I look towards Dawn. What passes between us can only be understood by sisters.

I wrap my arm around Jeremy's waist to steady him as we walk and we make our way back into the relative safety of the trees.

We have to stop every hour or so because Jeremy is still pretty weak. Nightfall comes quickly and we keep moving until the woods have become so dark that we're basically running in to trees. We've been lucky so far since we haven't had to spend much time in the open. The cover of the trees has become somewhat of a comfort. I'm amazed how much of this country has been completely taken back by forests. I guess that's what happens when you kill millions of people and no one is left to rebuild.

Knackered, we finally stop for the night. No one builds a fire and no one talks. I find a spot on the ground next to Jeremy and curl up. I'm asleep within seconds.

Chapter 59

Drew

I'm utterly drained. No energy, no strength. My entire body aches with exhaustion and my mind is clouded. I drop to my knees with a thud, roll onto my side, and pass out.

When I wake it's almost light. I don't know what woke me, but I close my eyes again, trying to soak in the last few minutes of sleep. It's no use. I sigh as I resign myself to the conscious world. I'd give anything for a comfy bed and a hot nosh right about now. Back in London, the two would go hand in hand. On the weekends, I could have a maid bring me breakfast in bed. That way I wouldn't have to see my father before he left for work. He didn't even take weekends off. I think he hated being around our house as much as I did. The cold design and even colder atmosphere inside did not make for the most pleasant home. My father and I dealt with the crap home life by leaving, while my mother dealt with it by wallowing in her pills. I guess you could say that was her version of leaving.

I try my hardest to remove all thoughts of my father from my mind so as not to let that arse continue to invade my days. Sitting up, I stretch and glance around at the others. I'm the first awake. It's always pretty funny watching people sleep. Lee is lying on the ground twitching, while Sam has the most ridiculous grin on his face. Jeremy occasionally lets a small groan escape his lips. Then there's Dawn and Gabby. They lie next to each other with Dawn's head on Gabby's shoulder.

They are so completely different from each other, yet alike in many of the ways that actually mean something.

Gabby is hot. There's no doubt about it. Even after everything, she's been through and even though we're all pretty grotty because none of us has showered in forever, she still looks good, or at least

better than the rest of us. She's changed from that girl I knew in London forever ago. For one, she actually seems to care about things. I may not have ever really shown it, but I did really like Gabs. I was a shite boyfriend. I cheated on her and I lied, but we always had a lot of fun.

Dawn is a different story altogether. A few months ago, I didn't know her and I didn't like her when we met. Frankly, she seemed like a whiny little brat. Now, though, I can't imagine not having her in my life. She's my best friend.

As I watch her face and the slow, steady rhythm of her breathing, my lips twitch upwards. We've been through a lot together, she and I. We've both come a long way from that abandoned building in the east end where we first met. I'm no longer that cocky arse and she's no longer that scared little girl.

I move closer to where the girls sleep and lightly brush the hair out of Dawn's face, tucking it behind her ear. She stirs but doesn't wake. I don't understand the feelings that are rolling around my head or how they relate to these girls. I've never met anyone like Dawn or Gabby. They're both strong, yet surprisingly vulnerable. Both of them will go to the ends of the earth for each other. I never knew bonds like that actually existed. They're the stuff of stories. In today's world, people don't risk everything for each other.

Someone clears their throat behind me. I immediately stand and turn.

"Morning." It's Sam, standing straight up with his feet shoulder length apart and his arms folded across his chest. He almost looks like a soldier at the ready. He's trying to act stern.

"Hey man." I grin sheepishly. This breaks him. Sam can't stay serious for long. He starts laughing and steps forward to clap me on the back.

"What're you doing?" he asks.

"Oh, uh, I just woke up," I lie.

"Yeah, whatever," he pauses. "Why don't you just tell her, man?" Sam sits on the ground and leans back on his elbows, I do the same.

"Tell her what?" I'm trying to maintain a straight face, but am failing miserably.

"That you love her. Duh." His face-splitting smile is enough to make me grin as well. He's talking nonsense.

"I don't know what you're talking about. We dated in London, but I'm pretty sure that's over now." As soon as I stop talking, Sam reaches over and knocks me upside the head.

"Hey," I yell. "What was that for?"

"You're an idiot dude. I wasn't talking about Gabby."

Rubbing my head, I glance towards the girls, feeling like a prat.

Dawn.

Gabby.

Dawn.

Gabby.

Dawn.

Chapter 60

Dawn

My stomach folds in on itself, remind me that today we must find something to eat. Now that we have rifles, hunting is an option.

Sam and Drew's laughter drifts towards me. A short distance from them, Gabby and Jeremy are in a whispered conversation. Lee is leaning against a nearby tree. I get to my feet and make my way over to sit next to Sam.

"Morning sleeping beauty, glad you could finally join us." Sam is trying to be funny. I give him my sweetest grin and then lightly slap him on the back of his head. He sprawls on the ground as if I've just pummeled him and rubs his head, feigning pain. I can't help but laugh and it feels good.

There's something very different about the group this morning. Everyone seems almost happy.

"Okay guys, we need to get moving." Lee always brings us back to the here and now. "We'll go hunting this afternoon, but we should cover a lot of ground this morning."

I walk with Sam and, once again, he's talking nonstop. I don't mind, though. The joy in his voice lifts our spirits. About midday we come to a sudden stop at Lee's insistence. Gabby tries to ask him what he's waiting for, but he holds up his hand for her to be quiet. He's listening for something. Lee is very adept at tracking so I trust him more than anyone to lead us. He crouches down and comes up with a fistful of mud. Without saying anything to the rest of us he turns to the right and walks in that direction. After a few minutes, he yells to us.

"Water!"

We run to his voice and find him standing on the edge of the most beautiful thing I think I have ever seen; a small stream of

crystal clear water tumbling over rocks and into a pool. I think I'm going to cry. We all run forward and fall to our knees to drink. I cup my hands in the ice-cold perfection and bring the water to my mouth again and again. When I've finally had my fill, I dip my entire head into the water. As I come back up for air, I fling my hair out of my face and let the water run down my back, cooling my skin.

We decide to rest by the stream for a few hours and give the boys enough time to find some game. I give Sam my rifle, but when Lee tries to take Gabby's she refuses to let him use the gun unless she can go with them. I chuckle. Some things never change.

The three of them set off to find us some food. Jeremy slowly gets to work building a fire. Since he joined us, he's barely said anything to anyone but Gabby. I let him be and lie down next to the water to stare up at the blue sky peeking through the trees. It's magnificent.

After helping Jeremy build the fire, Drew sits down, leaning back against a large oak. I feel him watching me so I get up and move closer. I don't know if the water has energized me or what, but I'm suddenly feeling very bold.

"Hey," Drew says as I sit down. I don't say anything. Instead, I watch his face, considering my next move. Confusion clouds his eyes at my silence. "What?" he asks. I've made my decision and I just need to do it before I chicken out. I get to my knees and lean forward. The confusion doesn't leave Drew's face until our lips meet. Regret stabs at me instantly as he pulls away quickly. I scramble back and try to get up, but Drew grabs my arm.

"Dawn," he says, "wait."

I yank my arm out of his grasp and stalk off without a word. He doesn't follow me and I'm left to stew in my embarrassment. A few minutes later, Jeremy has finished with the fire and walks over to me.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fine," I snap. I really don't want to talk about this.

"You don't look fine."

"Well, I am."

"OK then."

He walks off, but I'm not OK. I'm not OK at all.

Chapter 61

Gabby

I could really use a cute hunting outfit right about now, but I'll settle for some food in my belly. Lee holds up a hand for us to be as quiet as possible as we make our way through the woods. I'm a loud person by nature, so this isn't an easy thing to do. The ground is covered in dried leaves that crunch as we walk and, of course, Sam won't shut up. Lee scowls in annoyance. He probably wishes he was out here by himself but he got stuck with us. As we're walking, Lee sticks his arms out to the sides to stop us in our tracks. He then places one finger over his lips and points with the other. At first, I can't tell what he's pointing at but then I see something move.

As silently as possible, the three of us move closer to get a better look.

"It's a deer," Lee whispers. It's so cute, possibly the sweetest thing I have ever seen.

"Look at those precious eyes," I say. Sam and Lee both turn to me in disgust as if they're realizing why women shouldn't be allowed to hunt. Lee raises his rifle and takes aim. He closes one eye and pulls the trigger. His shot misses and sends the deer scurrying away.

"Run away," I yell in relief. The boys just shake their heads and we move on. For the longest time, we don't see anything and we begin to think we'll have to go back empty handed and be hungry for yet another night. And then there's a small movement in the bush ahead. I step forward and take a closer look.

"Quail," Sam whispers in delight. "Delicious." I guess I can live with this. They aren't as cute as deer. I don't think I've ever seen this kind of bird. All birds have meat though, right?

"Think you can hit that thing before it's gone? You've barely shot a gun before. We might as well move on." Lee, ever the pessimist.

"Let's try," Sam says.

"Can I?" As I ask this they both stare at me like I'm crazy. I've never shot a gun before, but I've always been pretty good at whatever I tried. The boys look to each other and then Lee just shrugs.

"Okay, you can give it a try. Take the gun and hold it out like this." He shows me with his gun and I try to imitate him.

"You want the butt to be at your shoulder. Keep your arms stiff and close one eye when you shoot. It'll give you better aim." I do as he says. Without even thinking about it, I point and shoot. The first shot misses so I quickly take another one and feathers fly up in the air.

Sam lets out a long whistle and then claps me on the back. "Nice shootin' there."

Lee doesn't say anything as he picks up the bird and begins looking for others. Much to Lee's dismay, I kill the next one too before he's had a chance. They already have the fire started when we arrive back with our two quail and a few new stories. The boys get to plucking our catch. I let them handle that part because, frankly, it makes me want to puke.

I sit down next to my sister, who seems lost in her thoughts. Dawn has always thought way too much and it makes her seem kind of daft. I try to get her attention so I can tell her about the quail I shot. She probably won't really care, but I'm damn proud of myself. I nudge her with my shoulder and she finally looks over at me.

"Oh hey," she says.

"I totally shot two birds!" I brag, grinning from ear to ear. "Lee missed a deer, but I saved the day. It was brilliant."

"That's great Gabs." We haven't had a proper nosh in days so you'd think she'd be a little happier to have some sustenance.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says. I'm not buying it. I give her that knowing look that all big sisters have.

Just like big sisters have their look, so do little sisters. She looks at me with a vulnerability that makes me want to just hold her and

tell her everything is going to be OK, whatever the problem is. I wrap my arm around her and she leans her head on my shoulder.

Chapter 62

Dawn

It feels really good to have food in my stomach and my big sister by my side. We finish eating and it's time to get back on the road. I don't talk to anyone as we put out the fire and get going. Gabby hangs back with me to make sure I'm alright.

She must've gotten her signals wrong about Drew. I knew he couldn't possibly have feelings for me, but she encouraged me to try. I ended up making a fool of myself and now, I don't know how to fix this. I feel like I'm back to being that quiet, awkward London girl. People only knew me as Gabby's sister. I can't let myself revert back to that all because of a stupid boy.

We keep moving all afternoon under the glaring sun. The trees have thinned out quite a bit so the rays make their way directly towards us. It's hot as hell and the sweat is dripping down my face. The heat makes us tire quickly so it's very slow going. As the sun begins to set the air cools down and the stars come out. The woods give way to rolling hills and grasslands, untouched and wild. Hard to believe this was once farmland and there were towns. I wish I could've seen it.

We stop for the night and build a fire, planning to cover a lot of ground tomorrow. Everyone is in good spirits as we settle in and eat the remaining bits of quail. I've even forgiven myself for yesterday. I've come to the conclusion that whatever happens, I'll be OK. It's taken me all day to see it, but I've never had so many people I cared about or who cared about me. It's always been me and Gabby against the world. Now it's me, Gabby, Drew, Jeremy, Lee, and Sam against the world. It feels good.

I don't realize Drew is behind me until he speaks. "Dawn," he hesitates, "We need to talk." Here we go. He's about to tell me that

he only sees me as a friend and I should just get over it. I've prepared myself for this. I get to my feet and walk with him to find a little privacy.

As soon as we're out of earshot of the rest, Drew turns to me, irritation in his voice. "Dawn, what was that earlier?" I don't know what to say to him so I decide to apologize. That's probably what he wants.

"Yeah, sorry about that. It was a daft move. I didn't mean to..." He doesn't let me finish.

"Didn't mean to what? Didn't mean to kiss me?" His eyes lock on mine. "Or didn't mean to make me fall for you?"

"I," I begin, but then I realize what he just said to me. "Stop messing with me," I whisper.

"Dawn." Drew gently leans his forehead against mine. "I don't know how to do this. I'm so lost." His voice sounds pained.

"What are you talking about?" I need some space so I back a few steps away, but he moves closer to me once again.

"I don't know how to..." He hesitates, searching my face. "Be in love." The last part is no more than a whisper. I can't tear my eyes away from Drew's, but I manage to stumble backward until my back is against a tree. There's nowhere left to go. My heart beats so fast it feels like it'll jump right up out of my chest as Drew closes the gap one last time. I gulp air, trying to breathe.

"Drew." I manage to put one hand flat on his chest to keep him from coming any closer. "Don't you do something you'll regret tomorrow."

"Never," he breathes. He pins my hand to his chest and draws me in and then he kisses me. It is gentle at first, his lips guiding mine. Our kiss deepens and fire erupts in my veins. I'm as hungry for him as he is for me.

Everything that's been building since we got to the colonies is poured into this moment. The fear. The desperation. The courage. The friendship. All of it makes up who we are, who we've become. We're connected by a purpose fulfilled.

He pulls my hips against him and I wind my arms up around his neck and press closer. I want this. I want all of it. Other than my

sister, I've never needed anyone, but I need him. I need him like I need my next breath.

Our kiss is cut short when a stick snaps nearby. I reluctantly pull away to catch my breath. Drew is still staring down at me when Gabby comes into view.

"Hey you two. We were wondering where you got off to. I was worried." Gabby has that all knowing grin on her face. She knew perfectly well what we were doing out here. Drew takes a step back to allow me enough room to catch up with my sister.

"Hey," is all I say. I look back to where Drew is following us with a secret grin on his face. I hide my own grin and turn back to my sister.

"So?" Gabby is leaning towards me so as not to be overheard.

"So what?" I shrug, trying my hardest to act nonchalant when my whole body wants to be doing some sort of happy dance.

"Dawn. Come on! I know you. Something happened." Gabby is wearing her smuggest grin as if to say that she was right all along. I give her my sweetest smile and wiggle my eyebrows. She gives up her prying ways, but not before she lets out a little squeal and hugs me tightly.

It's amazing, that amid all of this hardship, I can find any slice of happiness.

Chapter 63

Gabby

I know something happened between Dawn and Drew. She was in such a bad mood all day until she went off with him. When she came back, she was way more smiley than the Dawn I know.

The funny thing is, they think they're hiding it. The group sits around the fire telling tall tales and amongst all of that, Dawn and Drew can't keep their eyes off each other. I've never seen either of them like this and I kind of like it. It's fun to watch them glance at each other and then look away, hoping no one notices. I interrupted them earlier tonight for my sister's own good. If there's anything I'm good at, it's boys. I made sure she left him wanting more. What would she do without me?

When we wake in the morning, there is still some meat from the night before. We eat it all, making a plan to hunt again later. We've been on the road for so long now that I would never be able to guess if we were getting close or not. I'm relying on Lee and Sam for that. I rely on them for a lot of things. After our grand adventure, I can't imagine a day without each and every person in our group.

Soon after we finish eating, it's time to be on the move again. We clean up our site so we can't be tracked. As soon as we're back to walking again, I weave through the group until I'm next to Drew, who's walking alone. He looks at me with a guilty expression that says 'I've been macking on your little sister'. Even though I'm happy for them, I don't appease his guilt. Instead, I mold my face into a grimace and say,

"You hurt her, I hurt you. Got it?"

"Gabby, I couldn't -"

I cut him off. "Got it?" I ask once again.

"Yeah," he responds with a smirk.

“Good boy.” I smile as I start whistling and speed up to walk with Jeremy.

Chapter 64

Gabby

The sound of rushing water hits us around midday and we speed up excitedly. What we find could ruin everything. There's a wide river with no bridge. The water is rushing by us at an alarming speed, boiling over the rocks in swells and whirlpools.

"Shite." I'm the only one to break the silence. Running my hands through my hair, I turn to the others for answers.

"What now?" Dawn asks.

Lee looks uncertain as he says, "we swim?"

Dawn looks as scared as I feel. The water is dark and could be deep.

"Think the current will be much of a problem?" Drew asks. Of course, he can swim. He did grow up rich and all. I can't take this anymore.

"Are you guys daft?" That must have sounded harsher than I meant it because of the glares I'm getting from all three boys. To my surprise, Dawn is the next one to speak.

"We don't know how to swim." I haven't heard her sound so small and scared since we were back in London. The boys gape at her. Sam goes to her and wraps his arm around her.

"We'll get you across," he says.

"Of course, we will." Jeremy directs this to me.

Dawn looks to me with fearful eyes. "We have no other choice," she says. I nod in agreement as I follow Jeremy to the edge. The ground we're standing on is elevated and therefore we have to climb down to the level of the water. I reach down and skim my hand across the surface and it is ice cold. The others have reached the water's edge as well and are preparing to swim across. It's agreed that Drew and Sam will get Dawn across while Jeremy and Lee take

care of me. We're to go first. Lee steps into the water and is immediately forced into a fight against the current. We must go quickly. I submerge myself and Jeremy follows.

The current tugs at me, trying to pull me downstream. I've seen people swim before so I try to imitate what I've seen. I kick my legs back and forth, not really sure if it's helping.

The water is deep and the far side of the river doesn't seem like it's getting any closer. Lee has a hold of one hand and Jeremy has an arm around my waist. We're trying to move quickly and we're almost there.

I may be imagining it, but the current seems to be getting stronger, making it harder to keep hold of Lee's hand. In an instant, we're pulled apart. Lee is pushed on ahead and Jeremy and I are pushed further downstream. A rock appears, almost out of nowhere. I reach out, desperate for something to hold on to. Instead of grabbing it, I'm slammed into the rock and Jeremy's hold on me is lost. I have too much adrenaline pumping through me to feel any pain as I hang on for my life. I can't see where Jeremy is but Lee has reached the other side and is watching me in horror. I can't keep my head above the water as my hands slip.

Every few seconds I come up, just long enough to gasp for air. The current pushes me to another rock and I pull myself up just as Lee jumps in after me. He swims as fast as he can as I gasp for breath, my mouth filling with water. Panic squeezes my chest as he reaches me.

"Put your arm around my neck and don't let go," he yells.

As soon as I do, he takes off towards land. Lee sets me on the bank and I choke out the water that has filled my lungs.

Jeremy comes running down the bank and kneels beside me. I've never been happier to be throwing up.

"Gabs, I'm so sorry. I got taken downstream," he says, running his fingers down my cheek.

"It's okay." I turn to Lee. "Thanks." He doesn't respond because he's already watching for Drew, Dawn, and Sam.

Chapter 65

Dawn

I thought we had lost her. Lee's strength amazes me, but I don't have time to revel in the fact that they made it across because now it's my turn. Learning from their mistakes, I climb onto Drew's back, put my arms around his neck, and lock my hands together.

"There's no way I'm letting go of you," I say.

"Never," he responds before plunging into the water.

Sam follows us, keeping a close eye on me. As soon as Drew's feet can no longer touch the bottom, I feel us drop. I scream in fear and my mouth fills with water. Drew's feet kick furiously as he struggles to keep our heads above water. The current tries to tear me from his back, but I hold on tighter. "There's no way I'm letting go," I repeat.

Drew tries his hardest to stay away from the rocks, but the water has other plans. I hit first. My back slams into the rock and my head snaps back. There's pain. The next thing I know, I'm waking up on dry land.

"Dawn." Someone is blowing air into my mouth and pressing on my chest. I'm choking and then I pass out. When I finally open my eyes, everyone is standing around me with worried looks on their faces. Drew kneels beside me.

"You didn't let go." He smiles.

"I promised," I say. "You look like a bunch of drowned rats." I can't stop the laugh that bubbles out of my chest bringing the last bits of water with it. Drew helps me sit up slowly, but I can't stop laughing. It feels good.

For a few moments, everyone stares at me as if I've gone nuts, bewildered, until, one by one, they break into laughter as well.

"Look who's talking," Gabby says in between fits of laughter.

We're soaking wet, a little battered and bruised, but we're alive. There's a gash on the back of my head, but it's nothing serious. Drew cleans it with water from the river and lifts me to my feet. We can't stay out in the open like this.

Walking in soggy shoes and sopping clothes isn't fun, but it must be done. We're glad to find tree cover once more. Exhausted, we stop for the night as soon as the sun begins to set. The air is warm, but we start a fire, hoping it will dry us out. We're all tired, but we're also starving so Lee, Jeremy, and Gabby take the rifles and walk off.

I collapse near the fire in bone-deep weariness, not knowing how the hell we're supposed to keep doing this day after day.

Chapter 66

Dawn

I'm still laying near the fire when Drew sits down next to me.

"Thank you for saving my life," I say.

Drew reaches for my hand and sighs. "Quite a day."

"Yeah."

Sam walks up and smirks as he looks at us. "So, what's this here?" Sam points to our interlocked hands and raises his eyebrows.

I reach over with my free hand and punch Sam in the leg. "Shut it," I say. He feigns hurt.

"You better watch that one, Drew. She'll beat you up." His smile broadens and is still plastered on his face when it happens. A shot rings out in the dark and Sam falls over sideways.

"Sam? Sam!" I lunge for him, but Drew tackles me to the ground.

"Stay down," he yells. Another shot rings out.

Drew changes his mind. "Dawn, get up and go." We start running.

I don't look back; I can't.

Chapter 67

Gabby

The first noise I hear is in the distance. It sounds like a gunshot, but I can't be sure. By the time the second shot comes, we've already broken into a full run back to camp.

Lee's the first to take cover as we approach the campfire. Jeremy and I arrive a moment later, out of breath and crouching behind him in the firelight. Lee and Jeremy raise their rifles and take aim. We can't see our attackers, but the boys fire anyway. Suddenly, the forest around us erupts in gunfire. I yelp as a bullet cracks into the nearest tree. They fire furiously, but we can still hear the sounds of the soldiers and dogs.

"I'm out," Jeremy yells over the din.

"Me too," Lee responds.

"Time to go," he says as he pulls me into a run. Lee follows close behind. I release Jeremy's hand so I can use my arms to run faster. This isn't the first time I've run for my life.

I soon realize that I'm not with Jeremy or Lee anymore and I feel a panic in my chest at the thought. I'm alone except for my pursuers. The bastards.

I dodge from tree to tree, imagining they provide me with some extra protection. The tree bark cracks beside me from the impact of bullets. Either I'm too fast or their aim is shite. I feel a slight rush of air by my ear and see a bullet explode into the trunk in front of me.

For a split second, I worry about Dawn and Jeremy, but I have to believe everyone is fine and push on harder through the dark forest. My lungs burn as I force breaths in and out.

Ego is a person's worst enemy. The adrenaline is pumping through me and I'm feeling invincible when suddenly a British soldier comes out of nowhere and tackles me to the ground, knocking the

wind out of me. I kick and claw at him. He grabs my throat and I kick him in the groin. He doubles over just long enough for me to stand. As I start to run, another soldier grabs me from behind, knocking me to the ground.

Standing over me, he pulls out his revolver and points it at my face. The first soldier scrambles to his feet.

"Wait! Do we have to kill her?" he asks. He looks to be about my age. I glance at his face. He's just a boy.

"Of course, we do, Cam. It's our orders." The second soldier grins, showing a full set of yellowing teeth. His stare is menacing as he looks into my eyes, probably hoping to see fear when he kills me. I will not give him that satisfaction.

The soldier's finger moves on the trigger, but before he can pull it, gunfire and a hole appears between his eyes. He's been shot. He falls to the ground with a thud. The boy turns to me, fear in his eyes and I say, "Run." As he steps, he's dropped in his tracks. They look like soldiers as well but are dressed differently than the British. One of them rushes up to me,

"Are you okay, young lady? Are you hurt?"

Stunned, I manage, "I'm fine."

"Go that way." He points and hurries off towards the sound of more gunfire. I stand there for a moment, looking down at the boy. He could've been a classmate.

Without another glance, I start running again. When it feels safe, I take a moment to catch my breath. I hear distant gunfire, but nothing nearby. From what I can tell in the darkness, I have come out into a large field. The grass is dry and crunchy underneath my feet so I stop to listen for any signs of Dawn or the others, but there are none. Then I hear something behind me and do a quick 180.

There's a line of soldiers coming out of the woods and heading straight for me. There's nowhere to run and nothing to hide behind. This is it.

"Stop right there!" A soldier steps out from the rest and makes his way towards my now frozen figure. He stops when he gets close and lifts his visor. "Picked a fine night for a walk ma'am," he says. "Who the hell are you?"

My muscles tense and my mouth dries up. He comes closer and shines his flashlight onto my face. "Oh my gawd, boys, we got ourselves a battlefield beauty queen!" The field erupts in laughter with shouts and whistles coming from the dark.

"My name is Gabby."

Another soldier steps forward and speaks up. "Jesus H. Christ. She's just a girl!"

"You will only speak with my permission, Soldier," the commander barks at the other man. "This young lady had an entire unit of British soldiers after her." He looks to me. "I need to know why they want you so bad that they would risk crossing our border."

A radio crackles. "Yellow Rose, we're clear of the drop zone. Let 'er rip!" There's a roar of engines overhead and the commander barks,

"Time to hit the deck boys. This battle is about to be over."

Everyone flattens themselves to the ground as the forest behind us explodes.

"Dawn," I yell.

The soldier on the ground next to me says, "Welcome to the Republic of Texas, ma'am."

Chapter 68

Dawn

We keep moving, even as our legs and our lungs cry out for respite. It's not only the soldiers dogging our heels, but the bullets chasing us as well. I've flipped a switch on my emotions for the time being. If we make it, there'll be a time and place to mourn for Sam, but now we just need to stay alive.

Suddenly, in the sky, we hear the thunderous roar of engines and several explosions followed by a silver rain.

"Cluster bombs," shouts Drew as he throws me to the ground behind a log, shielding my body with his as the tree canopy bursts into flames. The ground around us begins to shake with a thousand smaller explosions.

"Dawn, I love you," he says, holding me tight and just then, the ground erupts nearby and his body goes limp on top of mine. I can't move. I scream as a piercing ring fills my ears.

"Drew! Drew!"

Moments pass and I'm finally able to move my hand to check his pulse. He's alive, but just barely. I gently roll him on his side and sit up next to him. His leg is a bloody mess and the right side of his beautiful face is burnt. All around us, the forest is on fire and the smoke and cinders are swirling down. We're trapped and going to die here.

I lay my head on his chest as I whisper, "I love you too," and my entire world fades to black.

The End

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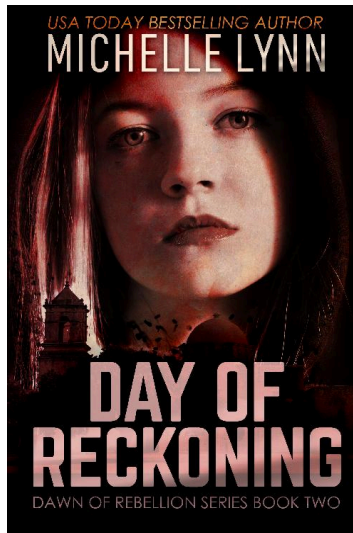
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Life isn't always easy. We're tested time and time again. I'm grateful that God has given me the people in my life to help me get through anything. That includes every single person who reads this story. This story is about family; both the ones we're given and the ones we make ourselves. You are all a part of my family and I thank you for that.

Next in the Series

Day of Reckoning



Safety is an illusion.

We're back to where we started – two sisters living under a government we can't trust. The rest of our friends are dead or missing. Texas should be our safe haven, but have we traded one prison for another?

There are larger things at work; more allies and enemies to be found. They all look the same to us. The Texans want us to fall in line. The rebels want us to fight.

The colonies are more dangerous than we imagined, and we're caught in the middle. Not all of us are meant to be soldiers, but the time for indecision has passed.

Sides must be chosen. Bonds must be broken. And the war will begin.

[Day of Reckoning](#)

About the Author



There is nothing better than a good book. Other than maybe a good hero. I've loved reading all my life and am excited I get to spend my time sharing stories with others.

Under M. Lynn, I escape into fantasy worlds where magic and princes roam the land. Michelle MacQueen is a bit more reserved. That side of me delights in the slow burn of a good love story. Sometimes, the two people in my head war with each other trying to come out, but I make time for both.

In my free time, I'm a full-time aunt to the most amazing niece and nephew. I love hockey and warm weather which seem to be at odds with each other.

I'm a simple girl living in this complicated world and I'm so very pleased to connect with you.

* * *

To learn more about Michelle Lynn, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).