

Savage Run

Book 1

E. J. Squires

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For my children.
May freedom and love
be the inspiration behind
every choice.

Chapter 1

Biking up the same mile-and-a-half long asphalt hill is so much harder when I know that at the end of the journey I'll either be an outlaw, or I'll be dead.

Rippling wind tugs at my black uniform as I push the pedals on my bike, one after another. The rhythm of the squeaky, swooshing sound is as familiar as the fragrance of the seemingly never-ending lavender field to my right—the purple meadow that divides the Masters' estates from the Laborers' slum: the slum where I was born, the slum where I live, the slum I hope to escape from soon.

I glance down at the prescription bag lying in the rusty basket attached to the steering wheel. The bag is supposed to hide my father's kitchen knife, but it has shifted and catches the sunlight, winking at me from the bottom. After a quick scan of my surroundings to confirm that no one is watching, I reach down and readjust the bag over the blade. And just in case, I glance over my shoulder to make sure the change of clothes is still attached to the back railing of my bike. It is.

Zooming up the wide, cracked road, I pass countless Laborers—nameless, faceless shadows—scurrying to their Masters in the mountains or toward the factories and fields. The muted, gray line of men, women, and children winds toward Mount Zalo, and will eventually

disintegrate as each person disappears into the white, gated estates they are assigned to. This long walk is the extent of a Laborer's freedom. Most are forbidden to go anywhere without their Masters—unless they are traveling to or from work, before dawn—after sunset.

I pass a few young men, guys I thought for sure would have signed up for the Savage Run, a grueling, new obstacle course program that for the first time in history, allows inferior class teenage boys to demonstrate their worthiness to become Masters.

As I continue to bike ahead, I see my best friend's mother, Ruth. Since Gemma left last year, Ruth has diminished into a walking skeleton. Not that she ever had any extra weight on her anyway. All Laborers pretty much have the same build with sunken cheeks and concave bellies grumbling on and on because the measly amount of food we're rationed could never be enough. But unlike all the other Laborer women, Ruth's hair is still short—even after a year—an indication that she's been in trouble with the law. Normally I welcome any meeting with her, but because of where I'm headed, and because of what I'm about to do, not so much today. Yet gliding right past her and pretending not to see her is just not right, no matter what. Not after what she's done for me.

I slow my bike as I approach her and say, “Nice day for a walk.”

“Ah, good morning, Heidi. You already running deliveries?”

I eye the bag in the basket to make sure the blade isn’t showing again. “Yes, I’m on my fifth one.”

“Where are you headed?” Ruth smiles, and the sides of her brown eyes crease like the wrinkles on a scrunched up paper bag.

Should I lie to save her feelings? I decide on the truth. “To Master Douglas.”

“Ah...” The edges of her lips rise upward a little, but the rest of her face is like a dry ocean.

I should have lied.

“Tell Gemma I say...hello.” Her words carry the weight of our late-night conversations. But rehashing how her only daughter serves a Master who is rumored to have beaten two of his Laborers to death won’t help. I wish I could tell Ruth what I’m really doing—what I’ve been obsessing about for months. And I would if I knew I could pull it off. If I could look her in the eyes and promise her nothing would happen to her Gemma. But I can’t.

“I will.” Then I quickly change the subject. “So, did you see anyone heading toward Culmination this morning?” President Volkov decreed today to be Savage Run registration day, a day off for male Laborers and Advisors ages

thirteen through seventeen. “To give the least of us a chance at liberty.” I thought for sure every Laborer who fit into those categories would jump on the opportunity. As I left, I didn’t see a single soul do anything other than depart their squat, aluminum trailers and join in the march.

“No. Trusting President Volkov’s words is like digging your grave with three sticks of dynamite.”

My stomach sinks. A lot. “Well, I should get going so I won’t be late.”

“It was good to see you, Heidi.”

“You, too,” I reply with a smile.

On my way to the mountains, I pass the tail end of the Laborers’ sector. In front of our sector there are light waves that everyone calls “the veil.” They hide our less than aesthetically pleasing buildings from the Master side of town. It would be a shame to ruin their view. I can’t see it from here because of the veil, but each ten by twenty, squat aluminum trailer is stashed on top of another, three high, and side-by-side, fifteen long. When they built our housing, each trailer was intended to house one family. Now, two families occupy most trailers, though a few of us are lucky and don’t have to share. Outside of work we spend our free time around campfires preparing lackluster meals or doing laundry. If we once in a while manage to have a few moments

for ourselves, we huddle together around bonfires or visit with neighbors.

I approach downtown and ride by the Colosseum where many of the national sporting events are held. The cultural hub of Newland, Culmination is one of the country's most esteemed towns and is the home of the Porto Tower—the tallest building in the world. It's a town brimming with sculptures, mosaics, paintings, museums, and art academies, and it's even rumored that the ancient statue of David and the Mona Lisa are kept beneath the Culmination Historical Museum. In Newland's early years, many world-renowned architects and artists settled in Culmination, drawn here by President Volkov's offer of immediate Master status by President Volkov Sr., and the dramatic countryside. Now a little Rome, Culmination is the place to send your Master kid for an education in art.

As I let my bike roll to a stop a generous distance away from Master Douglas's gate, the wind whistles through the trees, sprinkling some of the leftover raindrops on my hands and face. I've been here hundreds of times before to deliver medicine, but I have to admit that my hands have never shaken so much that I had to white-knuckle the handlebars just to steady them. Dare I go through with my plan?

Lifting my gaze, I see the ivory stonewall that encases the white, oval mansion. The abode itself is at least fifty times larger than the trailer my father and I share, with six thick marble columns and more floor-to-ceiling windows than I would ever want to clean. Poor Gemma.

Most girls my age are already stuck inside a mansion similar to this one—cleaning, cooking, serving, or washing clothes. But since my father worked the majority of his life as a pastor at Culmination Hospital, he submitted my name, hoping I would qualify as one of their prescription couriers. And I did. I quite enjoy my work. Although, I don't like being under my father's scrutinizing eye. He reminds me almost daily that I should abstain from all appearances of evil. Whatever that means. As Laborers, my father and I are fortunate to have such great jobs since working in the oil rigs off the coasts, sorting trash, harvesting fruits and vegetables, or laboring in sweatshops are the norm.

Venturing into the woods with my rusty three-speed, my feet sink into the damp forest floor. The scent of the sodden, musty earth rises into my nostrils, and the earthy fragrance reminds me of when Gemma and I used to hang out in the woods behind our lane, commiserating about how unfair life is for Laborers. Her spontaneous laughter would vibrate off the sidings and bring life to all of the rusty trailers on our street. It's

been almost a year since Gemma received her vocation, since I heard her laughter—that free and careless sound. Now, whenever I see her, her eyes are like dead stars.

I never truly questioned my obligation to submit myself into the service of a Master—it's a Laborer's place, my God-given contribution to society. My father has pounded this fact into me before I can remember. However, when I came here a couple of months ago and saw Gemma's eye crusted with blood and swollen shut, everything I so blindly believed, lived, and trusted—the entire framework of our society—all came tumbling down at once.

I sneak around the towering wall and all the way to the back of the Douglas household. Carefully, I slip my sandals in my bike's basket for easy access just in case I have to make a run for it. And before I proceed, I glimpse at the knife and the tan plastic bag to ensure they are still there. They are.

Grabbing onto the lowest branch, I press my feet against the trunk, hoist myself up, and climb high enough that I can glimpse into the backyard. I see Master Douglas sitting outside on a garden couch, wearing a black silk robe over red silk pajamas. He's drinking beer and reading the newspaper. The man is well known and highly respected in Culmination, and from his charm and charisma, and the fact that his name is on the

majority of art museum contributor plaques, it's not hard to see why. But even without considering the rumors I've heard, there's just something about being around him—or even just thinking about him—that makes my skin crawl.

I find a wide spot on one of the thick, lower branches and straddle it. Still keeping Master Douglas within eyesight, I see him tearing out a Savage Run advertisement from the newspaper. He rips it to shreds and scatters the pieces so they fall to the white marble floor. I've talked to a few Masters about the Savage Run program and it's funny how all of them insisted that the survival of our nation depended upon individuals remaining in their class of birth. They couldn't understand what President Volkov was thinking creating a program that made it possible for inferior class citizens to receive Master status.

My chest squeezes when I see Gemma come out with a silver tray filled with all sorts of heavenly pastries. She's wearing a ruffled, peach, above-the-knee length dress that has a low neck, showing off her cleavage. Riding around town, I see more and more Laborers wearing fine clothing. And it's funny how in the past few years, it has almost become a competition among Masters to see who can have the prettiest and most well-dressed Laborer. A Laborer doesn't get to keep the clothing, but changes into it when arriving at their Master's and leaves it when they

head home. Some Laborers, like Gemma, are forced to live with their Master and wear whatever they're told whenever they're told.

Gemma approaches Master Douglas with slumped shoulders and her gaze is down, as if she can't take a breath. Seeing how she has turned into one of these nameless, faceless shadows makes me want to scream at the man.

"What took you so long?" Master Douglas yells. She opens her mouth to answer, but a gust of wind rustles the leaves above my head, overpowering her reply. He hits the tray out of her hands so it lands on the ground with a crash.

My stomach clenches with anger.

He demands that she clean it up and tells her to go get another platter with the crumpets. Gemma apologizes, cleans up the mess, and scurries back inside the mansion, her face as ashen as the scattered clouds above.

Back when Gemma found out who she was being sent to work for, we joked that if things got too bad, we'd run away and somehow miraculously gain our freedom. I never dreamed that one day I'd actually find a way to make it happen.

It's not only Gemma who needs to get away, though. This morning my father woke me, shouting from the living area, asking where his lazy good-for-nothing daughter was. As I served him breakfast, he continued to lecture me about

how it's not like I can skip a day's worth of work and sign up for the Savage Run or anything. I'm just a girl—the wrong gender. And besides, the hospital needed me to make an “emergency” prescription delivery to Master Douglas by 7:00 a.m. Yelling after me as I left, he said he'd pray that I'd swiftly repent of my irresponsible ways.

Like my father, Gemma has no clue about my plan, and I'm not even sure she'll go for it—it's kind of like jumping from the lion's den into the valley of death. However, being dead can't possibly be worse than enduring the life I'm living now, or the life I'll soon be forced to live. When I turn eighteen next week, I'll be assigned to my own Master. My father says he'll miss me, though he won't miss having another mouth to feed. What he'll soon realize is that he doesn't even have to wait until next week to be rid of me. I should be well on my way when he finds the note I left under my pillow, explaining that I won't be returning home.

Birds sing freely around me as I wait for Master Douglas to finish pigging out on the sausages. I peruse the forest, making sure no one's around. If caught straying from my responsibilities, I'd receive a harsh punishment like solitary confinement or beatings. Though these types of reprimands are fairly common, they're still dreaded among Laborers. Not to mention degrading. But occasionally there's a

Laborer who for whatever reason openly defies their Master or tries to run away. In those instances, the retribution is much worse. It's always a heavy day when we're forced to Skull Hill to watch a beheading.

Sitting here is awkward and my leg is starting to tingle. I shift a little to get comfortable and to prevent it from going completely numb. I peer over the wall again, but still no Gemma. What could possibly be taking her so long? Doesn't she know that Master Douglas will ream her out again if she doesn't hurry? And the longer she takes, the more likely it is that my plan will fall completely apart. Finally, Gemma comes out with a new tray overflowing with pastries and crumpets and sets it on the marble table. How much breakfast does the man need? Even for a Master, he has an exquisite taste for gluttony.

From studying Master Douglas' routine, I've figured that the best time to get Gemma and make a run for it is right after he leaves for his hour-long walk. Around that time, the front gates will be left open for about ten minutes to let in a shipment of goods. The Unifer guarding the gates will be busy with the delivery and will take time to chat with the delivery driver. With a little luck, Gemma and I will slip behind the truck unnoticed.

I lean my head back onto the tree trunk, and let out a soundless sigh. This is taking way too

long. Then suddenly, a lighthearted laugh catches my attention. I peek into the courtyard and see Master Douglas' seven-year-old daughter hopping onto his lap and planting a kiss on his pudgy cheek. She's always smiling and laughing, especially around him.

"Hi, sweetheart." His black, round eyes fill with adoring love for the child. "Will you be coming with me this morning to go horseback riding?"

"Not today, Dada," she says, hanging on his neck and stroking his graying hair. "I want to go swimming."

"Swimming?"

"It's so hot, and Gemma promised she'd take me."

"She did, did she?" He twirls her golden braid around his finger, while staring at Gemma. "I'll make sure I tell Gemma that she needs to take extra good care of you."

"See you later, Dada." She slides off his lap, and skips back into the house.

Master Douglas gulps the rest of his beer, pushes his palms against the armrests, and rises to his feet. He flicks his wrist toward Gemma. "Get lost!"

Gemma bends her head lower, and without a sound, she shuffles back into the house.

Heading inside, Master Douglas lets out a loud belch. I'm not quite sure, but I almost think I

can smell his beer breath from all the way over here. I cover my nose with my hand and feel pressure rising at the back of my throat. Well—at least he's on the move.

I hop down from the tree and shove my feet into my cold, wet sandals. When I arrive at my bike, my whole body is shaking. This is it.

Chapter 2

I once heard that if I run toward my fears as fast as I can, my fear will transform into courage—and courage will lead me to freedom. But as I sit down and wait with my bike behind the thick hedge in front of Master Douglas' property, my whole body is quivering. Where is the courage now?

I have a heightened awareness about everything—from the soft rushing sound of the leaves to the squirrel in the tree chewing on a chestnut, to the damp spot on the back of my legs. The pit in my gut is growing wider by the second, festering like an untreated ulcer. Is this a ridiculously bad idea? After all, it isn't called

Savage Run for nothing. I shouldn't even be considering signing up. If I'm discovered, as a female Laborer—the lowest ranking citizen in our nation—I'll immediately be taken to Skull Hill.

No. I can't second-guess myself now.

Hearing the whirring sound of an aircraft above, I look up. It roars loudly as it makes its final descent into Culmination. Red, yellow and white stripes—the official colors of the Savage Run—decorate the tail. My father says billions of newkos have been spent on the Savage Run program and it disgusts him. Although I'm sure that if he had a son who could honor him by becoming a Master Citizen, he'd think differently.

Suddenly, I hear the gates creak open and my arms clasp my chest, just above my racing heart. Master Douglas jogs past me in a green jumpsuit and continues down the road. I undo my ponytail and pull back my black, wiry hair, looping the elastic band around so tightly that it tugs at the edges of my already slightly slanted eyes. I wait until he disappears around the bend, and when I'm sure he's gone, I push my bike out onto the road. Grabbing the concealed knife from the basket—just in case I need it—I slide it up my sleeve and head straight for the gates.

A transporter zooms by me, and I pretend that I'm just doing my job as usual, delivering medicine. This transport is one of the newer

models, shiny blue, oval-shaped and with three wheels. Not only can it drive up to three hundred miles per hour, it can also with just the press of a button fly you anywhere in the world. I stop at the entrance feigning to pant, as if I just climbed the long hill, and nod toward the heavily armed Unifer. Recognizing me, he punches in the code and the tall steel gates open. Clutching my arm against my abdomen to keep the knife in place, I walk the bike across the courtyard and rest it against a fountain. I pick up the prescription bag from the basket and step up to the stained-glass-encased silver door. I ring the golden doorbell. A few moments later, the door swings open. I'm ready to greet Gemma with a warm smile, but when I see that the entire left side of her face is red and bruised, I gasp.

She quickly lowers her eyes.

“What happened?” I whisper, barely able to speak.

She shakes her head. When I reach out to touch her, she takes a step back and wraps her arms around her abdomen.

“You can't stay here anymore,” I say.

Gemma's bottom lip trembles, and her brows draw heavily over her eyes. “Go—before he comes back.” She holds a pale hand out to receive the medication.

“No, listen.”

Her eyes cautiously flick to mine.

“When the truck comes...follow me; I have a plan and I can explain on the way.” But standing in front of her now, I somehow know she’ll object.

She shakes her head again, her blue eyes wide and fearful. “He’ll hunt you down and kill you,” she whispers.

I step closer to her, eyeing the Unifer behind me. He’s talking on the phone. “If we make it downtown, we’ll be safe. I promise.”

She closes her eyes, and a tear rolls down her cheek. “Please—just go.”

“No—come.”

Opening her eyes, they wander side to side like they always do when she’s thinking. Just as she opens her mouth to speak, her gaze focuses behind me. Gasping, she brings her hand to her lips.

“Heidi,” Master Douglas’ voice trills.

The hair on the back of my neck spikes as I slowly swivel around to face him. I notice the sweat beads on his tall forehead, and a patch of moisture on his chest. Instantly, I lower my eyes, and as my inferior class dictates, I wait to speak until he invites me to.

“How are you, dear?” he asks.

“Well—thank you.” My vocal cords feel like sealed clams. “Did you go...running this morning?”

“Yes, well, normally I go for much longer, but this morning I seem to have a bit of indigestion.” He shoots Gemma an accusing glare as his beer breath hits my face.

“This is for you,” I say, handing him the prescription bag. I hope he doesn’t notice how my arm shakes.

Master Douglas steps into the doorway, shoving Gemma behind him like she’s nothing but a rag doll. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.” He signs the flap on the bag, tears it off, and hands it back to me. “But I ran out of a very important medicine, and I simply can’t live without it. It’s life or death.”

I eye the green label, which means the content in the bag is a supplement, not a prescription.

“It was no problem.” I nod, looking for Gemma, but she’s vanished back into the house. He takes my hand in his and strokes it, and my skin feels like it has a hundred slithering snakes crawling beneath the surface. All I want to do is rip my hand away, but infuriating him would be dangerous.

“I just thought I’d let you know that I’ve considered the possibility of you coming to work for me when you turn eighteen—next week, right?” He touches my cheek with the back of his lotion-scented, smooth hand, his fingernails immaculately manicured.

I close my eyes and try not to let the revulsion show on my face.

“I wanted to let you know that, Heidi.”

I nod and smile, although my smile probably looks more like a frown.

“You are at liberty to leave.” Then right before he closes the door, he adds, “Oh, and say hello to your father for me. He’s such a wonderful man—righteous. Honorable and God-fearing. It was his idea that you come and work for me. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.” He slams the door in my face.

I blink. This isn’t what was supposed to happen. Gemma was supposed to come with me...and...and...we were supposed to...and my father? What is he thinking? Doesn’t he see through Master Douglas? Maybe he does and that’s exactly why he recommended I come here—to punish me. Get the devil out of me. For a moment, it feels like my heart is sinking into a bottomless pit, and I am unable to take a breath. I should leave now—I delivered the medicine—but my feet feel as if they’re fused to the cobblestones beneath.

The Unifer grunts at me, startling me back to reality. Forcing my feet to move, I drag myself away from Gemma, swallowing again and again, stuffing the tears deep down. I pick up my bike, and passing the Unifer, I nod to show respect. Even though there is none. Just as I exit the gates,

the delivery truck pulls up and parks in the middle of the driveway.

Chapter 3

Pausing outside the gates, my eyes sweep across our deep valley, the soaring mountains surrounding it, and the glistening river that I've swum in countless times. It must have been an amazing country when it was free.

After the S1-P1 virus killed ninety percent of our inhabitants, an army of Unifers arrived in their blue and green uniforms. Unifers, as everyone knew, were soldiers from the Eastern Republic, a super nation comprised of most of Asia, Russia, and Europe—a society built around goodwill, liberty, and peace. However, the Eastern Republic didn't send the soldiers; these soldiers were a rogue Unifer army led by the power-hungry General Volkov, looking for a land to make their own. Finding us in a defenseless state, they immediately seized control. General Volkov Sr. was elected president, our nation was renamed "Newland," and citizens were categorized into three classes: Laborers, Advisors, and Masters. That was sixty-six years

ago, and now, President Volkov Sr.'s son, President Volkov Jr., rules the nation.

I discreetly place the knife back into the basket, reenter the woods, and return to the same spot I was earlier. After I park my bike by a tree, I kick the trunk a couple of times.

Plan B.

I lean my back against the rough, damp bark, and stare at the pale wall. Climbing over it and getting into Master Douglas' property won't be a problem. Not getting noticed will. Suddenly, I hear Master Douglas yelling obscenities from the other side of the barrier. I grab the knife, quickly climb the tree, and carefully peek my head over the edge of the wall. My blood boils when I see Master Douglas hauling Gemma outside. By her hair.

"I've told you before, you little tramp. I don't want you talking to anyone who comes to the door. What do I have to say to make you understand?" He lets go of her hair, but grips her arms instead, shaking her so roughly that her head bobs. "I'll kill you, you little rat, and I'll get another one just like you who is smart enough to comprehend and follow my rules!"

"I'm sorry, I was just..." Gemma says.

Master Douglas' daughter comes outside wearing her swimsuit. "Dada, I want to go swimming now."

“Hi sweetheart. Go back inside while I punish Gemma,” Master Douglas says, his hands still clasping Gemma’s arms, his tone of voice like the purr of a cat.

She pouts. “But I want to go now.”

“Do as I say, child. Gemma needs to learn her lesson, even if I have to beat it into her.”

Master Douglas’ daughter stomps back inside and slams the door shut. I can’t get over how indifferent she seems to how her father is treating Gemma, though I hardly should expect anything different from the offspring of such a man.

“You don’t deserve to work here.” He tears Gemma’s shirt open, exposing her shoulders and breasts, and then he throws her to the ground so she lands face down. When she lifts her head, blood flows from her mouth and she’s crying. The white floor has spots of red. He undoes his belt buckle, draws his belt out of his pants and strikes Gemma with it. The belt makes a sharp cracking sound as it hits the skin on her upper back.

“Please, please,” she pleads, lifting her arms to cover her face. But he keeps whipping her.

Something snaps inside of me. Without really thinking, I hop the fence, and charge toward Master Douglas. What I’m about to do goes completely against the laws in our society where Laborers must at all times—even in life or death

situations—maintain respect and remember their inferiority to their superiors.

I don't care.

He doesn't see me coming until the knife is already raised above my head. But before I stab him, I hesitate. I don't want to kill him, just injure him enough so I have time to take Gemma with me. I jab the knife into his shoulder, and quickly pull it out. But it's not enough. He grabs me by the shoulder and slams me to the ground, my head hitting against the marble surface. I drop the knife.

"Heidi," Gemma says, her mouth gaping open.

Master Douglas clamps his hand around my neck and squeezes tightly so I can't breathe. I kick my arms and legs, trying to free myself, but he only pushes harder. I start to see stars in front of my eyes.

Suddenly, I hear a thump, and the next thing I know Master Douglas falls on top of me. I gasp a few times to catch my breath, and then with all my might I push his lifeless body off me. There stands Gemma with a rock in her right hand.

"Is he...dead?" she says.

He moans.

Still feeling the pressure from his hands around my neck, I stagger to my feet and pick up the knife. "Let's go." I grab Gemma's hand and pull her with me toward the wall. But there's no tree to climb up on this side. I head for the

mansion instead—desperately hoping the delivery truck hasn't left yet. If it has, then the gates are closed. "The front door—now."

We sprint through the sliding doors, across the living room, and into the foyer with the marble floors. Frantically, I open the front door. Outside, the truck driver is talking to the Unifer, waving his hands and laughing.

Clutching the bloody knife, my eyes steal to the gates. Relief washes over me when I see them wide open. I take Gemma's cold hand in mine and we slip behind the truck. The truck's door slams shut and the engine starts with a roar. Exhaust spews out in front of me just as we pass the back end and out the gates. Once outside, I curse myself for leaving my bike behind the house. But even though it will take an extra minute to get it—and those few extra minutes might be what will make or break my plan—we need the bike to have any chance of escaping.

I pull Gemma behind the hedge, the leaves scratching my arms. "Wait here." Tearing into the forest, I get my bike and throw the knife in the basket. Before I know it, I'm pedaling hard, zigzagging my way among the trees, adrenaline coursing through me like a fiend, my body rising into a frenzy.

Gemma steps out from behind the hedge with fresh tears on her cheeks. She's gripping the front of her dress, gathering the material where Master

Douglas ripped it apart. The right side of her mouth is even more red and swollen than before, but it's not as bad as the despairing expression in her eyes. I help her get on to the back rack of the bike, and within seconds, I'm in my seat and we're flying down the hillside, the wind straining against my body. Only a few moments later, I hear a dog barking.

"He has dogs?" My throat is dry—parched. I've never heard them before, despite having been there hundreds of times.

"Two!" Gemma yells.

The Rottweiler catches up quickly, running alongside us, barking and snarling. Its gums are peeled back from his teeth. I pedal faster, and Gemma's thin arms clutch harder around my waist.

Suddenly she lets out a loud shriek.

"What?"

"The dog bit me!"

The dog snaps its teeth at me, and I swerve quickly in an attempt to get away from it. The sudden shift in direction feels unnatural with the extra weight of Gemma. When I hit a thick branch—the road still slick from the rain—I lose control and crash into the ditch. I feel sharp pain several places on my body. I have no time to really feel it because the Rottweiler dives toward me. I kick the animal in the snout, but just as soon as it falls to the ground, it springs back onto

its feet. My father's kitchen knife lies on the ground right next to my foot, and just as the dog charges toward me, I pick up the knife and stab it in the chest. It keeps growling, so I pull the blade out and stab it in the chest again. And again.

Finally, it whimpers and retreats down the road, falling lifeless to the ground.

There's blood smeared across my hand and my whole body is quaking. Still clutching the knife, I notice that my palm stings. I open my hand, letting the bloody knife fall to the ground, and when I look at my palm, I see blood and grime compressed beneath my skin. My right knee hurts, too, and the hole in my pants has blood around the edges. There's no time to sit here and cry.

"You okay?" I ask Gemma. She's still on the ground and has twigs tangled in her blonde hair and dirt on her white dress.

She doesn't answer.

I help her to her feet, and we hop onto the bike again.

"Come back here! Or I'll send my Unifers to shoot you dead!" Master Douglas bellows. He must really think I'm an idiot if he believes I'll do as he says. I start pedaling.

Speeding forward, all the way down the hill, I keep looking behind me, afraid that Master Douglas will come after us in one of his fancy transporters.

Chapter 4

The shortest distance to Sergio's is of course straight through downtown Culmination. I'll take my chances. Riding by the lavender field, we come to the fresh food market that borders on downtown—canopy tents with tables lined up along Main Street. These shops are owned and operated by Advisors, like so many other small businesses in town. The main differences between Advisors and Masters are that they can't vote, they can't hold political positions, and they can't own property. Most Advisors run businesses like these, become teachers, or work in the service or hospitality industry.

Riding past the Culmination Justice Building—a structure built to emulate the Parthenon, but constructed entirely of glass—I see Savage Run protesters camped out on the stairs. I recognize several of them—Masters I have delivered medication to at one time or another.

Laborers shadow their Masters, carrying groceries or their Masters' personal items. Just as we approach Michelangelo Street, we bike past a Master beating her Laborer with a Palka—a short, flexible iron rod commonly used to remind us of our place. Another Master Douglas. I feel the iron against the palms of my hands, but like everyone else passing by, I don't interfere.

I steer down a dark side alley: our first safe place. I can hear glass breaking beneath my tires, but it's difficult to avoid. The overhang darkens the whole passageway. We pass an abandoned transporter, and I jump when I think I see a rat scuttling deeper into the darkness. The closer we get to the dumpsters, the stronger the smell of rotten fish and moldy bread becomes, and the harder it is to see even the large pieces of trash in my way.

Gemma's muffled sobs echo against the gray concrete walls. Once I reach the dumpsters, there's a narrow ray of light shining from above. I stop the bike and hop off.

"Your hands," Gemma gasps, climbing off the bike. "And your leg." I look down and the bottom half of my black pant leg is saturated with blood.

"I'm fine." I stoop down beside her to look at her wound. The dog bite isn't too deep; I've seen much worse than this one at the hospital. From the looks of it, she probably won't need stitches. Not that we'd be able to find a doctor for her

anyway. “We just need to clean it, or it could become infected. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

She shakes her head as she wipes a tear from her bruised cheek.

“We’ll be fine,” I say with a thin smile.

“No, he’ll kill us.” She buries her face in her hands and moans.

I wrap my arms around her, noticing that she’s a mere ghost compared to before, so thin, so fragile, so weak. When Gemma lived at home with her mother, she was sturdier and wore a constant smile on her face. Her hair was thick and golden, but now it’s thin and matted and her cheeks are sunken—pallid. “The worst is behind us.” But I get a sinking feeling that we’ve only seen the first of many evils.

I open my mouth to tell her what I have planned but words fail me. Gemma has always been the type of person who knows exactly what to say—just like how she knew what to say when we first met.

That day I had been delivering medicine for my father. I was ten, and new to the job. And I didn’t really understand all the crazy long codes or colors or different types of bags. Although my Pharmaceutical Scantron did help a lot. Don’t get me wrong, the training was extremely thorough—a Master would never send out anyone to another Master without it being up to standards. Impossibly high standards. Keeping up with all

the biking and never receiving enough food to have the strength when I needed it, I felt like I was falling farther and farther behind. Yet, there was simply no choice other than to keep moving and hope—pray—for the best. If I asked too many questions, I'd receive an angry reprimand from my supervisor. If I, heaven forbid, was late for a delivery and my father heard about it, he'd bring out his Palka the second I walked in the door and use it on me, the iron stick thrashing against my ten-year-old palms. He would deliberately hit the insides of my hands so that no one else would see. "Can't be looking like that delivering to our superiors, now, can we?"

On the day I met Gemma, I had been working at the hospital for six days. It was in the dead of winter, and the snow was coming down like a solid white curtain. Biking around kept me from freezing to death, but my knuckles and toes were numb. I had just finished dropping off thirty-one deliveries—the most I'd ever had. I returned to the hospital well after dark. The snow was coming down hard, my legs felt like overstretched elastics, and all I wanted was to sink myself into bed and get warm. But just as I was leaving to go home, an emergency delivery came in on my Pharmaceutical Scantron for Mistress Johansen—the chief surgeon's mother. Of course I couldn't go home, but I wanted to, oh, I wanted to. Dragging my feet to the

pharmacy, my PS stopped working—I think the battery ran out. I told the apothecary I was there to pick up the prescription for Mrs. Johnson. Coincidentally, there was a prescription there for that very person. Since the names were so similar, and I was exhausted and hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, I didn't notice that I had pronounced the name wrong.

The apothecary said she knew about the delivery, and she handed me the prescription. I rode all the way to the very uppermost house on Mount Zalo, delivered the medicine, and returned to the hospital with the old lady's signature. When I came back, there was a different apothecary. He noticed the mistake almost before I had walked through the door, and contacted Mrs. Johansen right away.

Thankfully, she hadn't taken the drugs yet. Not that it mattered. It would only have knocked her out for the night with no damage done. The apothecary was nice enough about it, letting me off with only a few harsh words.

I hopped on my bike and headed home. But the closer I got to the Laborer sector, the stronger the nervous gnawing feeling grew in my gut. I knew that my father would find out sooner or later, if he hadn't already. I waited outside the entrance to our sector, tall steel gates guarded by Unifers twenty four seven.

I couldn't go home because I knew what was in store for me, and I thought it might be better to stay outside and die than to face what was coming. But a Unifer noticed me hiding behind the bush and fired a couple of shots in my direction so I'd come out. He didn't hit me, but it scared me half to death. Grabbing me by the arm, he escorted me home.

Walking through the narrow mud-packed streets to our trailer, I passed a woman I had never seen. She smiled at me with an encouraging and warm expression before vanishing into a trailer close to ours. Approaching home, I saw my father waiting at the front door, beating the Palka in his hand. He thanked the Unifer and apologized profusely on my behalf for being such a defiant, ignorant child. I still remember watching as the Unifer walked away, and wishing that I could go with him. Instead, I forced myself to walk inside, terror coursing through my veins. Had I just had some strength left in my legs, I would have run away, but my legs didn't have an ounce of strength left in them.

The physical punishment wasn't as bad as I imagined, an angry fist in my face and a few dozen Palka lashes in my palms. But there are some punishments that last so much longer than physical pain. With each whip, my father repeated over and over, how all these years, he wanted a boy, but he only had me. A girl who had

murdered the love between him, and the woman he loved. Murderer! Murderer! He shouted again and again as the lashes slowly drew out the blood from my palms.

At age ten, I wasn't mature enough to realize that I didn't murder my mother. That the circumstances that led up to her being dragged away by the Unifers weren't my fault. Nothing was. All I knew was that he believed it was true, so I did too. I didn't have the wisdom to see the lie he was telling me. And himself. I couldn't see how much he was hurting, and that the only way he could find relief was to put the blame on others. After that night, my father threw the Palka away—I think he felt bad about what he did, though not so bad that he didn't get another one later.

After lying in my bed awake for hours, pressing my cheek against the expanding wet spot on my pillow, I decided to run away. I climbed out of my window, found a secluded spot in the woods, and tried to figure out a plan. When Gemma walked by, it was well past midnight. My fingers and toes had frozen stiff, and I had grown weary of watching the white vapors of breath rising from my mouth. The first thing she said was that she liked to walk outside at night to watch the stars—it made her feel connected, as if everything had purpose. Her comment took me off guard. Purpose? There was no purpose to this.

She asked me if it was all right if she sat down next to me, and I nodded. Sitting so close she studied my face for a moment. I know she saw the bruise on my cheek, and by the way her face warmed with compassion, I even think she had her suspicions about what had transpired between my father and me. But she didn't prod—just stated that she was so glad she'd found someone to talk to.

She explained that she and her mother had just moved to our street that day from another Laborer sector right off the East Coast. Several had been relocated because there was simply no more room. The Unifers went through the city and handpicked the women and children to be sent to Culmination. The oil rigs don't need pretty faces, they had told them, but the cultural hub of Newland does. When they arrived, the Unifers crammed her and her mother in with the Porter family. They were nice enough—a little too involved in the neighborhood gossip, but decent folks.

After telling her story, Gemma invited me over to her home, and her mother offered me a cup of peppermint tea and a bowl of rice and lentils. Ruth was the same woman I had passed on the streets earlier, and I wondered if she had sent Gemma out to me after witnessing my father waiting for me with his Palka. This made me feel embarrassed, but they didn't bring it up at all. Not

once. Sitting up until three a.m., we exchanged stories about our lives and laughed until my cheeks cramped. At the end of the night, Ruth said she would be my substitute mother since I didn't have one, and ever since that night, she would ask how my day was and how things were at home. It was that night of kindness that made me think that maybe, just maybe, there's some purpose to this crazy life after all. That it might be worth living for a few rare moments of bliss. Although my father never found out about that first night, he did catch me sneaking out a few months later. That's when he barb-wired my window. But even though he had taken so many things from me and continued to do so over the years, he could never touch the part of me that holds my most cherished memories.

But I am not Gemma and I don't have a velvet touch when it comes to difficult conversations. I just lay it all out in one clear, unapologetic statement.

Just as I'm about to tell her my plan, she points at my bike. "You have a flat tire."

My heart misses a beat. In all my planning, I hadn't planned for this. I look her straight in the eyes. "I don't have time to fix it. We're going to register for the Savage Run." My lungs constrict as I wait for her reply.

Gemma's eyes widen. "This isn't the time to joke around."

“Sergio can get us fake IDs.”

“Who?”

“Never mind, it’s a long story. Will you do it?” I ask.

“Wait—you’re serious?”

I pause a moment before I answer.

“Completely.”

“But they’re not going to let us register.”

“If we get new IDs from Sergio, they will,” I say impatiently.

She shakes her head and her hand hits her temple. “This is so bad. Totally illegal. If they discover us, we’ll be outlaws. Or they’ll take us to Skull Hill.”

“Well, we kind of already are,” I remind her.

She gives me an annoyed look. “And—what—we’re supposed to pretend to be guys?”

“Yes.”

“But...we’ll just...die in the Savage Run. Haven’t you heard that the obstacles are deadly?”

“Well, they estimate that around seventy-five to eighty percent of the participants will make it.”

She pauses as if to think. “I can’t do it.”

“We’ll die if we stay here.” My pulse quickens. Surely, she must see that?

“Was this your plan all along?” Her tone is accusatory.

“Yes.”

“But it’s crazy.” She breathes erratically and paces back and forth. “I should just go back to

Master Douglas and beg for his forgiveness before he kills me.”

“This plan is way better than returning to Master Douglas. This way we have a chance to be free.”

Her body goes rigid and she glares at me. “Don’t you remember the time you convinced me to climb a tree and I fell and broke my arm?”

I do and I felt really guilty for pressuring her into doing it. But she’s older now and must be at least a little stronger. “You were twelve.”

“All those dangerous obstacle courses—I don’t have a chance.”

“You do have a chance, and besides, wouldn’t you rather die trying than...just die?”

“I don’t know, Heidi. I remember we joked about something like this before, but I didn’t think we’d actually be considering it.”

I groan and let my head fall back. “Well, do you have a better plan? If we go back to your mother or my father, Master Douglas will find us.”

“What about living in the mountains? I could fish and pick berries.”

“Where would we live? In the trees?”

“I don’t know. But we could work it out.”

“Gemma...”

“We could just move to another country where everyone is free.”

I had thought about it, but in all reality, where would we get the money to travel? Or eat? We would still need fake IDs to get out of the country, and what would we do once we arrived somewhere else, unfamiliar with the language? I figured the chances of making it were much greater if we sign up for Savage Run.

“I don’t want to die.” Her hands flail for a moment before she buries her face in her palms, sinking to the ground, her back against the dumpster.

The ground is covered in trash and is damp from the rain, but still, I sit down next to her.

Her hands drop into her lap and she exhales at length. “Isn’t there any other way? There has to be.”

“Listen, I don’t want to rush your decision, but we have to get going if we’re going to make it. The registration ends at noon.”

She takes a deep breath and remains still for a long time, chewing on her bottom lip.

“We’ll do it together,” I say. “I’ll help you. You’ll help me.”

She pauses for so long that I think I might rip my hair out. Sitting up a little straighter, she says, “Fine. I’ll agree to do it if you promise you’ll stay by my side the entire time.”

“Promise.” Pressing my lips together, I notice that my shoulders relax a little. “Let’s go to

Sergio's." I grab the bag of clothes from the back rack of my bike, and we're off.

Chapter 5

Sergio's place presses up against the back side of a massive abandoned factory and is situated across from a transporter scrapyard. The wooden shack has tinted windows and a slanted aluminum roof—a perfect place for unlawful dealings.

I hand the bag of clothes to Gemma and knock with a leaden hand. Closing my eyes, I touch my locket, asking for some help with just this one thing. I listen for movement inside, but all I hear is the sound of metal clanking from the scrapyard. Pressing my hands against the filthy, water-stained window, I glimpse inside, but other than the shadows, it's completely dark.

It was an accident how I found out about Sergio. A few months ago, I had been ordered to deliver prescription medication to him, but when I arrived, no matter how many times I knocked, no one answered. Knowing I couldn't return to

the hospital without a signature confirming the delivery, I stepped inside. To my surprise, I found an open trap door in the floor. Stressing about making my other deliveries before time ran out, I decided to risk descending the stairs. The light bulbs along the stairwell were lit—even though it was well past seven o'clock in the morning. We Laborers have electricity rationed to us from five to seven a.m. daily, and the government is infallible at keeping the electricity shut off the rest of the day. When I reached the bottom of the staircase, I overheard someone talking about counterfeit IDs.

And that's when it all came together and the idea of registering for the Savage Run first came to me.

I stopped breathing at that point and quickly decided to make the other deliveries first. When I came back to Sergio's place, I found him eating lunch. I've made two deliveries to him since then, and each time I brought a bottle of my father's beer and smiled as I listened to him complaining about his ex-wife. I never brought the whole fake ID thing up to him, but he's definitely some type of underground rebel, which is just the type of man I need.

I knock again—harder and longer this time.

Be home, please be home, I plead quietly to myself.

Suddenly the door flings open. Sergio's dark blond, curly hair is messy and he has bags under his green puppy-dog eyes. "I did not order medication," he says in a thick Eastern accent, a frown on his lips. He's holding a beer bottle and smells like he hasn't showered or changed in weeks.

Although I had this entire refined speech memorized, I can't remember a single word of it. Instead, I just blurt out, "I'm not here for that. We're here for fake IDs." I inhale and hold it.

His right eyebrow twitches once. He grabs my elbow, pulls us inside, and slams the door shut. The room is a dark, stuffy, beer-smelling cave.

Pointing his index finger right in my face, he says, "I don't know what you talking about, but talking like that is trouble for you and me both. Now get out of here."

"No! I rescued my friend Gemma from a cruel Master. He said he was going to kill her, and he'll kill me, too. The only way to get out of this mess is if we join the Savage Run. And for that I need my ID card to say that I'm a guy."

He runs his hands through his hair before studying me for a moment. "I don't know what you even talking about. I don't have such fake IDs." His tone is more nonchalant than before, flippant even.

I take a step toward him, my heart like a drum. "I know what you do. You have a trap door

below that rug there.” I point and continue to say, “And if you don’t help us, I’ll notify the authorities.”

He frowns. “You do not have any proofs, little pteetsa.”

Pteetsa? “Then I’m sure you won’t mind if the Unifers search your house.” I grab the rusty doorknob, silently praying he’ll buy my bluff.

“Wait,” he says, hitting my hand away from the doorknob. “Ah, stupid girl. How you pay me?”

I repress a smile. “Your payment is that I won’t give you away.” I expect him to go ballistic on me, knock me unconscious or pull out a gun to get me to leave. He seems like the type of guy who doesn’t take any crap from anyone, especially a young Laborer girl without money or influence. “And if I survive, I’ll...remember you and send you money. And more beer.”

He starts to laugh, softly at first, increasingly louder until his round shoulders roll. “You survive Savage Run? You never will survive and I never will get pay.”

“But at least I’ll go to my grave with your secret.”

He pinches his upper lip, huffing loudly. Then, his eyes fall upon the locket around my neck and his eyes narrow.

“You give me necklace, I give you IDs.”

I reach up and curl my fingers around the smooth golden surface. My mother's locket? Just thinking about giving it up makes me feel as if I'm parting with a piece of myself. But there is no time to waste and it has to be done. Ignoring the ache in my chest, I yank the chain from around my neck and hand it to Sergio.

"You are stupid girl for doing this. In few days when you die, I shed no tear."

"Then you will have lost nothing." My voice is dull.

Sergio bolts the lock on the front door, and then peels the rug back, exposing the trap door. Gemma grabs my arm when she sees it. "Come, my little pteetsas." He lifts the circular latch and pulls the trap door open.

"What does pteetsa mean?" I ask when I pass him.

"It mean... 'bird.'"

Chapter 6

I step down the metallic spiral staircase, steadying myself on the wobbly rail. I'm not particularly fond of dark, confined spaces—as a matter of fact, I hate them—but having Gemma here helps put me at ease. The room's walls are made of rock, and the floor is an uneven slab of concrete. I get the distinct feeling that I'm in a forbidden place where hundreds of illegal transactions have taken place over the years. Oddly enough, it doesn't bother me at all.

Sergio presses the button on the old laptop and sits down on a creaky wooden chair. He drums his fingers on the desk while he waits for the computer to warm up.

“How is it that you have electricity right now?” I ask.

He stares at me for a second, his eyes as icy as his frown, and I prepare for a lecture on how I should shut up and just be grateful that he's helping us. “Have you heard of generator?” He cocks his head to the side and slumps back into his chair.

“Yes,” I say, having seen gigantic ones at the hospital. We used them whenever there was a power outage.

He nods toward a small beat up machine in the corner, its hum so low that I hadn't noticed it.

“I build it with my bare hands.” He lifts his beefy, oil-stained fingers so we can see them.

“And you’re from the Eastern Republic, right?” Gemma asks.

“You dead soon so I tell you story. I kill a man in government because he kill my sister. He murder her in front of my old mother’s eyes. The government coming after me after I stab the man dead, so I get on boat and come here. If you tell anyone, I kill you.”

“Oh,” is the only sound I manage to produce for a second. “We need the IDs today.”

“Fine, but it take me few hours to hack into system to add your new IDs to list.”

“No, you need to do it sooner than that!” I yell, my hands flailing. “The Savage Run registration ends at noon, and we have to be in the governments database by then.”

He looks at me like I’m growing a third eye. “If I rush, it won’t work.”

“If you don’t rush, we’ll die,” I reply.

“Well, I already tell you, I don’t care if you die.” He slumps back in his seat and lights a cigarette, inhaling deeply and blowing the white smoke out by the side of his mouth.

“I don’t care that you don’t care. We need to get into Savage Run,” I say.

“I not sacrifice my whole operation so you can die.”

“Well, if you don’t, I guarantee that you’ll be caught.” I feel kind of guilty for blackmailing him, but at this point, if I don’t, my entire plan

will crumble to pieces and Gemma's and my fate will be in the hands of Master Douglas.

"You worse than Masters," he says with anger crinkling his heavy eyebrows.

I've pushed him to the limit, but I'm banking on him not killing us because deep down, I think he has a soft spot for outlaws. Why else would he be in this business? "You'll never hear from me again after this—I promise."

"Finally, one thing I looking forward to," he says as he types something into his computer. "Okay, okay, I make it happen. I need to take picture of you and you." He studies us both for a while. "We must make you look like boys."

"I brought clothes," I say, lifting the bag from where Gemma placed it on the floor beside the desk. "And a pair of scissors to cut our hair."

Gemma immediately wraps her hands around her long, blonde braid.

I lift the scissors out of the bag. "I'll go first." Pulling the elastic out, my thick black hair cascades down my back. I hand the scissors to Gemma and sit down in a brown, leather chair. I can't explain why the thought of cutting my hair brings a tear to my eye—it's only dead protein. It's not like I'm nervous Gemma will do a bad job. And even if she does, who cares?

"Ready?" Gemma says.

I nod. When I hear the scissors snap and feel the tickling of my roots as Gemma slices off the first chunk, I don't cry. But I do ache.

"Have you pick out name?" Sergio asks. His eyes are glued on the screen.

I think for a moment and settle on my father's least favorite person from the Bible. "Joseph." My father says he was an unrealistic, arrogant, self-righteous man who thought too highly of himself. But in the end, as I recall, Joseph triumphed over everything. And everyone.

"You, other girl?" Sergio draws a deep look at Gemma.

"How about George?" she says, still cutting away at my hair. "It's not perfect—a little too long and shaggy around the edges. It will just look like you haven't had a cut in a few weeks."

"There's mirror upstairs in bathroom. With different clothes and make-up you look like pre-puberty boy." He smiles grimly at me. "What is word? Sissy boy?" He laughs dryly.

I narrow my eyes at him, letting him know that I don't appreciate the sarcasm. And with that, I stand up and head upstairs with a change of clothes in hand.

At first, when I enter the tiny bathroom, I avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror. I head straight for the faucet and slide my palms beneath the running water. The water stings my raw flesh and turns the sink red. I stifle a cry and

pant instead. I grab a washcloth from the cabinet, wet it, and wipe the blood off my knee and leg. The gashes aren't too deep, but they sting like crazy. Rifling through the bag for my shirt, I catch a glimpse of myself in the cloudy, cracked mirror. The short haircut accentuates my pointy chin and pouty lips, and my slightly slanted, dark brown eyes look huge, as if I'm trying to make out something in the dark. There are plenty of young men with those features, aren't there? However, my neck looks way too thin to be a guy's. My hand touches the place where my mother's locket used to hang. I feel so bare, so exposed without it. But despite how difficult it was handing it over to Sergio, using it to get the IDs was the right thing to do.

I make a few serious faces and furrow my brows in an attempt to look like a fierce competitor. I release a sharp breath. It's useless. They'll never let me sign up, and even if they do, I'm sure the other participants will suspect.

What am I doing? I must have lost my mind. I can't fathom why I thought this was a good idea; clearly, I hadn't thought this through. Because if I had, I would have...I don't know. I feel so lost. So many changes in a few hours, and it's all coming down on me at once. I realize there's no turning back now, but am I a complete idiot for having done this?

No.

I can't start to believe that about myself now. But, what if my father is right? He has told me countless times that I'm a good-for-nothing, weak-minded, and irrational being. What if my sanity has withered away after having angry, hateful words directed at me for so many years? What if I have lost my ability to think straight? What if I never had the ability to think straight? Only a crazy person would do this, right? Or a desperate one. One desperate enough to voluntarily register for a life-threatening obstacle course. Yet, what if I make it? What if I actually win my freedom? Goosebumps tingle my neck and arms. If I register, at least there's a chance. At least I'm living life on my own terms and not being forced to be a Laborer without any choices. Better to be dead than a coward fearing my dreams.

I wrap my chest tightly with gauze and change into the black t-shirt and faded jeans I stole from my father. With the last piece of gauze, I loop it through the belt holes and double-knot it. Once I get back downstairs, Gemma's hair is already cut, thanks to Sergio.

"Computer thinking," he says as if to justify why he cut Gemma's hair, instead of letting me do the honor.

The short hair brings out Gemma's heart-shaped, rose-red lips and high cheekbones. Her eyelashes reach all the way to her light eyebrows

and her small, thin nose sits like a button in the middle of her face. This will never work.

“Do I look bad?” Gemma asks.

“No, I’m just...worried...” I let my voice trail off.

“Me too,” she says.

After Gemma changes into her clothes—a gray long-sleeved shirt and hunter green cargo pants—Sergio takes our pictures. While he continues to work on the computer, he says there’s water upstairs. Parched, I climb the stairs and head to the kitchen. Gemma excuses herself saying she needs to use the restroom. When she doesn’t return after I finish a whole glass of water, I press my ear against the bathroom door. I hear her silent sobs.

“Gemma...?”

Pause. “Just a minute.”

I hear her blow her nose and flush the toilet. She opens the door—her eyes red. “I just want to go home to my mother.”

The word ‘mother’ makes me immediately reach for my chest where my necklace used to hang. Instead I find nothing but bare skin.

I suppose I would want to go home, too, if Ruth were my mother. She’s the type of person who makes sure you’ve had enough to eat, asks you how you’re feeling, and really listens to you when you speak, never asking anything in return. In fact, she’s the closest thing I have to a mother

since mine vanished sometime shortly after I was born.

“Just think, if we make it through the course, you can visit her anytime you want.”

The left side of her mouth rises a little—it almost looks like the beginning of a smile. “That would be nice.” She sits down on the edge of the tub. “I just want to thank you for risking your life to help me. I’m sure he would have finished me off if you hadn’t intervened. He kept saying it every time he would become angry with me—that one day he’d get so angry that he’d kill me.”

“Of course I couldn’t just leave you there.” I sit down next to her.

She takes a deep breath. “Master Douglas is a horrible, horrible person.”

Dare I ask her about what she’s been through? I decide that it might help her to talk about it. “What did he do?”

She glances at me briefly before looking away, seemingly ashamed and not sure whether or not to tell me.

“You know I would never judge you. What happened isn’t your fault.”

Gemma bites her bottom lip and heavy tears tumble down her cheeks. “He drugged me...and beat me...and...locked me up...” Her voice fades lower and lower as she speaks until it’s barely even a whisper. “Raped me...” She buries her

face in her arms, uncontrollable sobbing juddering her body.

“Shhh...” I don’t really know if she wants me to stroke her back, but it’s the only thing I can think to do. “I’m so sorry. It will never happen again, you hear?”

I listen to her cry for a while, and all I can think is that I should have done something sooner. Much sooner.

Gemma snuffles, lifts her head, and wipes her nose with her forearm. “I think I would have killed myself sooner or later if I had to stay there.”

“Oh, Gemma...” All this time I made deliveries to Master Douglas, at least once a week for the past year, I saw her eyes deaden a little more each time. I suspected he was being cruel, but raping her? Drugging her?

“You didn’t know.” She puts a hand on my shoulder. “Just promise me we’ll do this together.”

I nod. “Every step—all the way.”

Sergio enters the room and hands us our new IDs. They look identical to the ones the government issues—electronic chips, 3-D Newland emblems and all. My name is Joseph Wood and Gemma’s is George Washington.

“Seriously?” Gemma says after reading her new last name.

“You don’t like?” Sergio asks with a wry smile.

“Well, don’t you think that it’s a little too obvious?” she says.

“It popular to name sons after former president of the home of the brave.” Sergio nods. “And when you think of name during obstacles, you remember, you are brave.”

I don’t know whether he’s being a complete jerk or if he’s being sincere. My guess is a little bit of both and definitely a smartass. I notice he changed my birth year to two years later than my actual birth year without me having to tell him to do it. I smile. If there’s anyone who knows how to trick the system, it’s Sergio.

There’s little time, so we head out into the living area to say our goodbyes.

“Just—don’t die right away, okay?” Sergio says as I open the door.

“I’ll do my best. Thank you Sergio.” I hold my hand out and he takes it. We shake.

He smiles a little and then crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Now get, get.”

Chapter 7

“Life,” my father would always lecture me, “isn’t meant to be lived in the shadows of timidity. Man has a spirit of hope and faith.” I’m sure he would vehemently disagree with how I’ve interpreted his statement.

Gemma and I elbow our way through the crowded streets toward the registration booth, clenching our fake IDs in our fists. The wind blows through my short hair, and the sun warms the back of my neck where my ponytail used to fall. It’s a few minutes before noon, the time the registration will close, but we should be able to make it just fine.

Soon I see Pavlova Yard. The square cobblestone-paved area is enclosed by a large wrought iron fence, and dozens of Unifers stand at attention guarding the premise. There’s a canopy and above it waves a red flag with an abstract, yellow saber-toothed tiger head. There are two registrars that I can see. The woman—maybe in her forties—looks like she’s from the East, with slanted eyes and black hair. She has wide shoulders, strong legs, and a flat chest. From the look on her stern face, I can only imagine that she’s had to fight her way to every promotion in this male-dominated field.

The other registrar, a young man—probably in his late teens or early twenties—has tan skin and chestnut hair. He wears an expression of serenity, and I get the feeling that I've met him before. School? No. I'd remember him from there. Maybe I made a delivery to him at some point.

Three sturdy boys—undoubtedly the last of many here today—stand in the registration line, ready to gamble their lives for a chance at a better future. They're handing the registrars their ID cards and signing something appearing to be a waiver or contract. I wonder what circumstances drove the boys to come here today—and if any of them are as desperate as I am.

Then I notice—at the end of the line stands Arthor, a boy from my primary school class. He still has the fiery red hair, but now it's longer and curlier. Why did he have to be here?

Then I realize why. Several years back, Tristan, Arthor's older brother and an extraordinarily strong Laborer, competed in a regional Laborer obstacle course in hopes of winning food rations for his family. Every Laborer in our city cheered for Tristan, whose presence in the race somehow brought hope that good things could still happen to the subordinates of Newland. But he didn't make it. Tristan drowned after falling from a hundred-foot cliff. His family was devastated—as were we all. Right after finishing school, when we still kept in touch,

Arthor used to tell me how one day, he'd find a way to honor his brother's memory.

This is very bad for us. If he sees me, then he'll blow my cover.

"What?" Gemma asks when I don't move forward.

"Arthor," I whisper.

She gazes into the yard. "Oh, no."

"The only way around it is to wait until he leaves."

She nods.

Once in a while, by passers stop to see what's going on inside Pavlova Yard. A few haven't moved from the fence since we got here. Looking closer, I recognize one of the lingerers as Arthor's mother. She's clenching the iron rods, pressing her face between the gaps in the fence, her red, swollen eyes fixed on her only living son.

Eventually Arthor signs the paper and starts to walk away from the registration booth. Behind us, a throng of protesters enters the streets, waving their anti-Savage Run signs and chanting: "No, no to Savage Run! Keep the classes separate!"

Taking advantage of the distraction, I say to Gemma, "Let's go." Walking toward the gates, I reach up to touch my locket, but when my hand is halfway up, I remember how it's no longer there. I lower my hand.

We approach the Unifer guarding the gate and hand him our ID cards. My heart beats so hard that I think he might hear it. Looking at us with haughty eyes, he hands us the cards back and tells us to proceed. Moving ahead, I glance at Gemma. But instead of a confident façade, her face is fallen and ashy and she's white knuckling her ID. With no time to spare, we pick up our pace and run toward the booth.

Out of nowhere, a Unifer pummels me to the ground and presses himself on top of me so I can't breathe. The attack is so sudden that I don't even register a single thought before I react. I scream, and somehow manage to wiggle my leg free, kicking the Unifer in the groin. He rolls over, moaning and grabbing his crotch, his face contorting in pain. As quick as a cat, I hop back onto my feet and look for Gemma. To my dread, I find her pinned beneath two of Master Douglas's Unifers, and they're holding her at gunpoint.

"Gemma!" I shriek, my heart jumping into my mouth.

"Heidi, run!" she yells.

The Unifers look up at me and my initial thought is to flee the scene—abandon my mission. Save myself. One of the Unifers points at me and commands the other one to get me. In a split second, a moment so condensed I feel like the bubble of time might burst, I have to make a decision. Do I continue to run toward the booth

and save myself, and maybe Gemma, too, by declaring that we both want to register? Or do I turn back and try to help her? The Unifers are so large, and they carry firearms, so I have absolutely no chance against them. But I can't desert Gemma! Although if I continue toward the booth, I might be able to save her also by announcing she wants to register. If I try to help her, we'll both be taken into custody and back to Master Douglas. Some seconds are so decisive that they have eternal repercussions.

"Heidi, run!" Gemma yells.

I spin around, hoping amnesty sets in the moment I declare that we want to register, desperate that I made the right choice. Instead of sprinting forward, I run into someone's chest, and that someone grabs my shoulders.

"What's going on here?" a deep, direct voice says.

I look up into his face and see that it's the male registrar. Our eyes lock for a split second, but I look down quickly, afraid he might be able to tell that I'm a girl, disguised as a guy, trying to register for the Savage Run. A split second is long enough to recognize that he carries an aura of confidence and power—this is a man used to taking charge and staying in control. He's built like an athlete: tall and muscular. Then, it hits me like a brick from the sky. The registrar is

President Volkov's son—Nicholas. I'm so done for.

"I...we're...we...we came to register for Savage Run," I stutter.

"Sorry—the registration just closed," he says.

I take a step back and look into his eyes again, pleading. "Please...just let us join. I know we're a few minutes late, but this is a matter of life and death." I glance over my shoulder and see the Unifer making his way toward me, and Gemma struggling against the others.

"First of all, a scrawny guy like you shouldn't be in this obstacle course. A stiff breeze would knock you over," he says.

I try not to grimace. If he only knew. "My friend and I, we have to join the program and you have to let us—it's the law."

"Mai, come here," he says.

The female registrar makes her way over to Nicholas, her eyebrows lifted, and her lips frowning. She's wearing plenty of makeup and smells heavily of roses.

"No, no, no," she says, her dark brown, slanted eyes looking at me like I'm a lost kitten.

"No, we have to register today." I hear Gemma's screams behind me and Nicholas looks in her direction.

"What's happening over there?" he asks.

Unexpectedly, Arthor steps up beside me. I can tell he recognizes me by the way his eyes

nearly pop out of their sockets. “Hey, what are you doing here?” His smile reaches all the way up to his green eyes, a touch of confusion in his brows.

I feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach, but somehow I manage to give him an angry look, hoping he’ll know not to reveal who I am.

“You’re coming with me,” I hear a raspy voice behind me say, as a strong hand grips my wrist. “You’re under arrest.” The Unifer grabs both of my arms and starts to haul me off.

I turn to Nicholas, and in a last-ditch effort, I plead with him. “Please...” His blue eyes flicker for a split second, and then he squints. I know I’ve already lost, and now I’ll be handed back to Master Douglas.

“Wait,” Nicholas says. “This young man has declared that he wants to register for the Savage Run.”

The female registrar’s eyes flinch as her pouty mouth drops open, but no sooner than she loses her composure does she have it back.

Master Douglas marches toward me with another Unifer in tow. I stop breathing.

“She’s mine,” Master Douglas growls. By passers stop and stare and the crowd outside the fence is growing larger by the second.

A piercing blast rings through the air. I jump at the loud bang, and try to wring myself free to look for Gemma, but I can’t budge free. “What

was that?" Master Douglas' lips bend into a devious smile, confirming my deepest fear.

"Murderer!" I yell—my arms and legs thrashing—and the noise that escapes my lips sounds like the cry of a wounded animal. Everything I've worked so hard for doesn't matter anymore. Not if Gemma's dead.

"He's signing up for the program," Nicholas says.

Tears spill out of my eyes and in a daze, I say that I am, though the words don't seem to be my own, only someone else speaking for me. "And my friend—"

"This girl is under my jurisdiction," Master Douglas says.

"He's not a girl," Arthor says. "He's a friend of mine from primary school."

"And he's here to register," Nicholas says. "Plus, his identification clearly confirms it." He grabs the card from my clenched fist and flashes it toward Master Douglas. "With all due respect, sir, you're making a mistake."

"Don't play me for a fool," Master Douglas spews. "This girl is my housekeeper's friend—she stole my housekeeper from me just earlier—I saw it—and she's coming with me. You know the laws of the land, don't you?"

"Every last one," Nicholas says through gritted teeth, his blue eyes turning black. He

grabs my arm and pulls me toward him, away from the Unifer.

“The laws clearly state that once...” Mai interjects.

“I know the laws,” Master Douglas says, grabbing my other arm and pulling it hard. “Obviously you don’t know the laws pertaining to the Savage Run because you’re about to sign up a girl. And even if she were a boy, he hasn’t signed up yet.”

“Once a Laborer has declared that he wants to register, he’s considered the property of the Army of Newland.” Nicholas’ face turns red and he jerks me behind him so Master Douglas loses his grip. My arms hurt.

Master Douglas’ eyes go livid, but Nicholas steps between the Unifer and me. “We have a reporter from the Daily Republic over there who’s taking pictures of today’s events.” He nods toward the photographer leaning up against one of the flagpoles, snapping shots of our interaction. “All the images will be going back to my father. I know you used to work for him and were dishonorably discharged. If I have to report to him that you caused problems for one of our participants, making a scene at a Savage Run registration, it might not be such a fortunate thing for you.”

Master Douglas scowls as he glares at me.

“Don’t think you can threaten me, boy,” Master Douglas says, reaching for his handgun, strapped around his waist. “Just because you’re President Volkov’s son doesn’t mean anything when it comes to the finite laws of this country.”

“Rory, I need security here immediately,” Nicholas says into a small device clipped onto his shirt collar.

Half of the Unifers guarding the fence run toward us and surround the registration booth, pointing their machine guns directly at Master Douglas and his Unifers.

“I’ll be sure to tell my father what you said,” Nicholas says sarcastically.

Master Douglas balks. “The second I get home I’m going to notify President Volkov of your illegal actions and I’ll have you discharged from your position as registrar faster than you can say mercy. Mark my words.” He storms off with the two Unifers in tow.

Chapter 8

When I see them walk away, and that Gemma has vanished, I start to walk toward where I last saw her. My hands shake uncontrollably. “But my friend. He wanted to register, too. They took him.” I turn to Nicholas, my mouth hot and dry, my tongue sticking to the roof of it. “They took him, and—”

“Your friend is dead.” Nicholas places the registration papers into boxes.

Did he see her get shot? “We don’t know that for sure.”

“I do. Now what do you want to do? Register or leave, it’s up to you.”

“Then I’m out,” I declare.

He looks up at me, his dark eyebrows scrunching in the center, but not angry. “I wish you the best.”

“But my friend—”

He interrupts me. “Dead.”

His words sink deep down into that part of me where there’s no return. It’s where the hope of my mother being alive lives and where Gemma’s and my friendship lives.

“Where did you get this?” Nicholas asks, examining my ID.

“From the government.” My voice is as hollow as my chest. “I think I want to sign up anyway.”

“I don’t think you should.” He looks at me and raises his eyebrows.

“I’m signing up, okay?”

“Then you’re in,” Mai says. She grabs a stack of papers and waves for me to follow her.

“We’ll talk later,” Nicholas says to me. It sounds more like a threat than a suggestion.

Arthor places his hand on my shoulder and gives me a sympathetic nod. “I’m heading to the airport.”

“Thanks for vouching for me,” I say.

“Yeah, what are friends for?” He waves as he walks away. Outside of the gates he embraces his mother. All the way from here, I can see her entire body shaking.

I look back to the spot I last saw Gemma, and there’s a red splotch of blood on the flat gray rocks. I’m a horrible friend. If I hadn’t convinced Gemma to come with me she would still be alive. If I hadn’t chosen to run toward the booth instead of toward her, she might still be...

Mai tells me to come and sit down by the table. Without really wanting to, I walk over and take my seat in front of her.

“I’m Mai, and both Nicholas and I will be your representatives from now on.” She holds out the contract with page upon page of fine print. She doesn’t read it, only explains that if in the very unlikely event I complete the obstacles in Savage Run (she sighs heavily when she says it), I will be considered a Class-1 Master citizen of Newland, with all the rights and privileges as

outlined in the Master Citizen Handbook, and I will be considered a free citizen until the day I die of natural causes or relinquish my rights to them, whichever comes first. There are three ways out of the obstacle course, period. The first one is by dying, which a few of the participants most likely will, maybe even up to fifty percent.

I interrupt her. “Fifty percent? They said in the paper that only twenty to twenty-five percent might die.”

“The obstacles are a little harder than initially publicized. Only the strongest individuals will be allowed into the Master Class.” She continues to tell me that the second way out of the course is by quitting, in which case I will be brought back to my city of residence and expected to live out my days as a Class-3 Laborer citizen. And the last one is by completing the obstacle courses in their entirety.

“Raise your right hand,” she says. I do. “Do you consent to joining the Savage Run of your own free will and do you understand all the risks involved?”

“Yes.”

“And do you understand that your family has no right to any compensation on your behalf?”

“Yes.”

She explains something about the top three contenders, but I hardly hear a word she says

because I start to think about where they took Gemma.

Mai taps me on the arm, waking me up from my reverie. “Do you have any immediate family?” she asks.

I look over at Nicholas who seems to be listening in on our conversation. “No.”

“Well, as a male Laborer, I suppose if you don’t have family, you don’t have much to live for,” she says.

I nod and think of Gemma, the tears pressing. “Something like that.”

“Any questions?” she asks.

“No.”

“And you are certain that you understand the dangers and still want to proceed with signing up for the Savage Run?”

“I said yes.”

“Very well.” Mai’s eyebrows rise. “Sign here, here, and here.” She points her hot pink nails to the lines and I sign. “This is your uniform. Extra Small. It will probably be more than baggy on you.” She hands me a shiny, black box with a golden Savage Run logo on it. “You have to be at Culmination airport in thirty minutes. You can go change in there.” She points to a row of white stalls.

How will I get there? The airport is at least an hour and a half biking distance. And walking? I lock myself in one of the booths and open the

Savage Run box. Inside lies a neatly folded, black Savage Run uniform identical to the one Nicholas and Mai are wearing. The only difference is that mine has a gray collar and doesn't have the registrar badge with my name on it. The shoes are sleek, black, and lightweight, and when I slip them on it's as if I'm not wearing anything at all.

I wash my hands in the sink and try to remove some more of the gravel that's embedded beneath my skin. My father makes me wash my hands at least ten times a day before I leave the house in the morning, between each delivery, and the second I walk in the door at home. After what I've done to my father, it's strange how I feel no sense of loss. No sadness. No guilt. No regret whatsoever. I'm abandoning him. All I'm worried about is what my father will think when he reads my letter. Surely, he'll go raging mad and believe I need to repent from this ungodly, lunatic behavior at once. I can already hear him saying that a woman must know her place in the sight of God and in her community, and that she's required to submit willingly. Maybe he'll think I've turned to cross-dressing—now that would drive him completely over the edge. The ridiculous thought makes me chuckle, but my laugh is more of a desperate attempt to drown out the feeling of panic rising in my chest than an expression of humor. What will he really do when he finds and reads my letter? Will he turn

around and reveal my identity to everyone? Probably not—that would mean he'd be putting his own life and reputation in jeopardy, which is something he would never, ever do.

I throw my clothes in the trash and head outside. Should I go back to the booth? Try to find a way to get to the airport by myself?

Noticing that I'm still hanging around, Nicholas says, "You need a ride?"

"Uh...yes," I say.

Nicholas bobs his head to the side and I trail after him. Immediately, two Unifers follow after us. We arrive at the red, yellow, and white Savage Run transporter, and they get into the vehicle behind us. My door opens automatically and I get inside. This is a brand spanking new model, and probably has more bells and whistles than the other newer models. The dashboard has illuminated blue, yellow, and white buttons.

Nicholas enters on the other side. Sitting so close to him, I notice his strong jawline and dimples. He's not stunningly handsome, but I can see why other girls might find him attractive with those blue eyes, chestnut hair and well-defined lips—not to mention his broad shoulders beneath the black, silky Savage Run shirt. I've seen him in the papers quite a few times—always with a different girl on his arm. Whatever. The heavy gold chain around his neck and wrist catches my

eye. In the back of my mind, my father's words echo: "The root of all evil."

"Why did you do something so stupid?" he growls.

His sudden change in mood makes me tense up.

"Do your parents have any idea about what you've done?"

I look down at my fingers in my lap, hoping he doesn't notice how my dirty, scraped-up hands can't seem to find a comfortable place to rest.

"No."

"Do you really think you're serving them by doing this?" His voice is harsh.

"No, and in fact, I'm sure my father will hate me for it." There's no use in trying to explain any of this to him because he wouldn't understand.

"Please, don't..."

"And your mother?"

More uncomfortable questions. My father explained it like this: When my mother went into labor, she hid in the Lavender fields from the Unifers sent to exterminate the elderly and female infants. The "cleansing" was a method President Volkov Sr. used to control the Laborer population to prevent them from becoming so numerous they could overpower the Masters. The Unifers seized the babies and threw them in the icy Culmination River, and the aged were burned in gigantic furnaces right outside each city. My father said he

went to notify her that the Unifers were gone. She informed him he had a son. I can imagine my father was proud. Three days later, when her maternity leave ran out, my mother vanished without a word, leaving me—a good-for-nothing girl—with my father.

But what I say is, “My mother left when I was a baby.”

“Listen,” he huffs, “I didn’t want to blow your cover in front of everyone back there, so I let Mai sign you up. But I can’t let this madness continue. I don’t know where you got your fake ID or the idea to dress up as a guy and sign up for the Savage Run, but I need to put a stop to this.”

“Fake...ID?” I try to laugh, but no sound comes out.

“I know about Sergio, and listen, I know a girl when I see one.”

He probably does. Images of all those girls in the newspapers pop into my mind. “I’m a boy.”

“I’m not stupid. And even if everyone else believes you, which may or may not be the case, there’s no way you’ll ever make it past the first phase. These obstacle courses are deadly. In fact, I think we should just delete your registration and...”

I sit up straighter, my back like an erect board. “No.”

“Listen.” He leans in a little, and I hold my breath, finding his presence overwhelming. “I

want to help you because I don't think it's right that you should be the victim of a man like Master Douglas. When he used to work for my father as his deputy advisor, I saw him destroy girls like you. But I have to tell you, to continue on this path is suicide."

"You don't know what I'm capable of." I stare boldly back at him—I won't be treated like a subservient any longer.

"It doesn't matter; I know what the obstacles are made of." He runs a hand through his thick, dark hair and his cologne stirs into the air. A privileged individual like him would never understand the desperate circumstances that forced me to do something like this. He breathes heavily for a moment, and when he speaks again, his voice is low. "How did you get in trouble?"

I might as well tell him everything. "It was like Master Douglas said. I helped Gemma escape because he was beating her up...I couldn't just leave her there."

He pauses for a moment, and it feels like his deep eyes see right through me. "Of course you couldn't."

He agrees with me? I'm not used to someone validating me and don't quite know how to respond, so I look out the window.

"There must be some..." he starts.

I place my hand on his arm, and it's as if the tension in the air surrenders. "I'm not asking you

to help me. All I'm asking is that you keep my secret."

His gaze goes from my hand to my eyes. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"I'll take my chances," I say, although having learned that the obstacles are more dangerous than I initially thought, I'm not as confident as I was just a few hours ago. And with Gemma dead...I stop myself from finishing that thought. Nothing good will come of it.

"Fine, I'll let you continue. And I'll keep your secret. I just hate to see you give up your life so easily."

So easily? He doesn't know me—how exhaustingly obstinate I can be once I put my mind to something. "Thanks."

"Maybe I can help coach you a little, and..." He shakes his head without completing the thought and commands the transporter to the airport.

Chapter 9

The airport runway is crawling with reporters and curious citizens. The protesters are here, chanting that same chant as loudly as ever. I'm surprised President Volkov hasn't had them arrested yet.

I wipe my hands on my silky pants and close my eyes, trying to think of something that might calm me. When no such thought emerges, I reopen my eyes. The vehicle slows down and forces its way through the crowd. People plaster their faces against the transporter's windows as we pass.

Mai stands on a platform in front of the red, white, and yellow Savage Run aircraft. Is it the same one I saw earlier today up at Master Douglas' house? I wonder how Mai managed to get here before us because when we left Pavlova Yard, she was still packing up all the registration forms.

Eighteen participants are lined up behind Mai. Seeing how some of their necks are as thick as tree trunks, their arms as broad as my waist, it causes me to shrink in my seat. Arthor is one of the strongest Laborers I've met, but he looks like a wiry twig next to some of these guys. I don't even want to imagine what I'll look like beside one of them. Other than Arthor and me, the rest of the participants look like they're Advisors—a Laborer would never receive enough food to grow those kinds of muscles.

At first thought, it doesn't make sense to me why a Class-2 Advisor would risk death when his life is already pretty good. I suppose if I were an Advisor, I'd still feel trapped by not being able to own land, vote, or run for office.

One second. That's exactly how long it takes the reporters to swivel around after Nicholas has stepped out of the transporter. But he doesn't even blink an eye, just walks calmly around the vehicle and waits for me to get out. The two Unifers that followed us here—I'm now convinced they're his bodyguards—walk on either side of us up to the podium.

Mai reaches her arms out to greet me and pulls my ear to her lips. "My, don't you look like you need some happy pills..." she whispers. "Cheer up; this event is for champions and you certainly don't look it." She places me at the end of the line, next to the tallest, most muscular guy here, and gives me a stern look. I pull my shoulders back and try to fit in.

Nicholas steps up to the stand, and the gathering—even the protesters—calms into a low simmer. "Welcome citizens of Culmination to the very first Savage Run," he says. "I'd like to share with you a silly story, if you would be so kind to indulge me. As many of you know, I spent a few summers on a ranch right outside of Culmination. My favorite thing to do was to play outside—to swim in the lake beside our home and play in the

woods, chasing after squirrels and harassing hedgehogs.”

The gathering laughs.

He continues. “But my favorite memory from there happened one spring morning when I was ten. My father had sold the ranch and it was the last day before we moved to Asolo. Before my father could tell me no, I headed to the lake to swim.”

I smile a little.

“There was a chickadee that lived in the oak tree right outside of our door. She was constantly feeding her youngsters, their hungry beaks opening and closing, accepting the nourishment from their mother. That day, one of her chicks had fallen out of the nest. I saw the poor little creature abandoned on the ground, chirping, and left to die from starvation or to be eaten alive by a predator, anticipating life to end in the most excruciating way. Not thinking much of it, I helped the bird back into its nest. Later that day, I saw the bird I had helped fly away.” He pauses and grips the side of the podium. “That’s what these young men must feel like now—like that little bird must have felt. Waiting. Waiting for someone to help them. For someone...to pick them up and give them wings to fly.”

The gathering cheers.

“As you know, this Master class recruitment program is closed to the media and the public.

However, I will personally inform you of the results after each of the three phases directly following the completion of each phase. Now without further delay, we must bring these savages to Volkov Village. Thank you.”

The gathering claps and Nicholas steps away from the podium.

One by one the participants climb the stairway that leads up to the aircraft. Nicholas stands at the bottom of the stairs waiting for me, the last contender to board. Just as my foot touches the first step, I hear someone yell my name.

“Heidi!”

My heart plummets into my stomach when I recognize my father’s voice. My hand twitches and almost reaches for my locket. But I’m on my own now.

“Heidi, don’t do this!” he yells.

I’ve never heard him this desperate. A lump forms in my throat. I shouldn’t turn around, but since everyone else is doing it, they probably won’t suspect that I’m the one he’s calling for. My father is tripping over his legs to get to me and some of the people in the crowd shove him and laugh as he stumbles to the ground.

“Heidi, don’t leave. I’m sorry I messed up!” He climbs back onto his feet, his gray hair sticking to his sweaty forehead.

Seeing what’s happening, Nicholas sends a couple of Unifers in my father’s direction. Once

they arrive, they pull their clubs out and beat my father against his head and abdomen until he collapses to the ground. With every blow, I feel the pain deep in my stomach. My father covers his head to protect himself from the assaults. I want to yell out for the Unifers not to hurt him, but I hold back, too afraid it will give me away. Maybe more afraid that my father might think I care.

“Do you know that guy?” Mai asks me.

My eyes are glued on my father, and pity overwhelms me when I see blood coming from his nose. To me, he seemed to be the strongest man alive. Now, with the Unifers pounding down on him, he appears weak and helpless, not even a man. “No, I don’t know him.” One last time, I look back at the person I have called father my entire life and feel like I’m betraying him by pretending he’s a stranger. But he has betrayed me countless times by treating me the way he has. I owe him nothing.

I turn my back to him. Each step toward the plane is another step away from my former life and the former me. Trying to fit into his mold never worked. And it never will. I clutch onto the handrail and run up the stairs.

Chapter 10

The cabin hostess waits by the open door and smiles at me as if I'm the most important person in the world. Entering the aircraft, I see the other participants pausing to size me up. Some of them laugh. A few nods greet me with sincere expressions, but most frown and scoff, rolling their eyes as I squeeze by them.

“Welcome aboard, young man. Let me show you to your seat.” The cabin hostess beams and guides me to one of four black, inward-facing, leather chairs. Mai is already sitting in one of them, holding a small mirror, and applying red lipstick. Next to her sits a black-haired muscle head. He stares at me as I sit down. Each seat has its own set of buttons to select movies or listen to music, and the cabin hostess proceeds to show me which button to push to make the chair open up into a full-length bed. “And if you need anything at all, press this button.” She gestures to a red knob above my seat.

I thank her, and she walks to the back of the aircraft.

“Just get me out of this godforsaken place,” Mai grumbles to herself more than to us.

I'm about to ask her why she would call Culmination a godforsaken place, but the guy sitting across from me says, "Couldn't get a job shoveling manure?"

I squint my eyes. "What?"

"You think you have a chance against all of us out there?" He pops a grape into his mouth, the juice squirting out as he bites down on it.

Mai rolls her eyes, but remains silent.

"No, I just..."

"Good, then we agree." He pops another grape in and chomps on it with his mouth open, the smacking sound unbearably irritating.

Nicholas takes the seat next to mine and nods to the grape guy. "Johnny, this is Joseph. Joseph, Johnny. I trust we'll be able to have a pleasant flight together?" His eyebrows rise.

"Doubtful," Johnny says at exactly the same time I say, "Of course." I sink in my seat.

"The flight to Volkov Village is just over two hours. Let's make it a pleasant one." Nicholas straps himself in, and seeing that I have problems figuring out how to fasten my seatbelt, he reaches across my lap and secures the buckle. His forearm brushes mine, and his skin is surprisingly warm. The captain announces that we'll be taking off shortly, and before I know it, the aircraft speeds down the runway. I dig my nails into the armrests, my stomach tightening as we lift off the

ground. I feel dizzy. As the bumpy ascent calms, my grip loosens a little.

“The numbers are in, and there are two thousand and thirty-nine contenders in the Savage Run,” Mai says, reading a report on an electronic device. She glances at me, I think with pity. “Well, I’m exhausted.” She puts a cheetah-print sleeping mask on and pulls a blanket up to her shoulders. Johnny extends his seat into a bed and shuts his eyes.

I rest my forehead against the window and look outside. I can’t see anything at all, only bright whiteness. I wonder what happened to my father, if the Unifers imprisoned him or let him go. I don’t really know why he came after me; I was always in the way—eating too much or not doing enough. Lazy. Ungrateful. But, he wasn’t all bad. Occasionally, he would compliment me about how well I was doing my job or tell me I had exceeded his expectations. I savored those words because pleasing him used to be everything. In time I came to learn that whenever he was friendly, he wanted me to do something for him—give him a back rub, or fetch him something across town, or deliver a message to one of the people he counseled. Praise was never just given for its own sake. There was always a long string attached.

Nicholas nudges me with his knee. “You should get some sleep, too.”

I'm tired, but I don't think it will be possible for me to sleep—too many memories are creeping to the surface. I sit in silence for a while, but what I really need is something to distract myself from my thoughts. I try to think of something to ask Nicholas. I don't want to give the impression that I want special treatment, so I stick to safe personal questions. "So, does anyone ever call you Nick?"

"No."

What a conversationalist he is. "So...have you ever participated in an obstacle course?"

He glares at me for a moment. "I'm sorry, but I'm not here to be your friend."

I feel a flush of blood rise to my cheeks.

"Besides, you really should get some rest. There won't be much time for that once the obstacles have begun." His lips squeeze into a thin smile.

"Fine." I nod as I turn toward the window, hoping he won't notice my red face. But then I catch myself. I'm just acting as my old Laborer self: a mindless, obedient sheep. I sit up straight, search through the side pocket of my seat and find a magazine, leafing through it without really paying attention.

After a minute, Nicholas looks over at me. "What in the world are you doing?"

"Reading." I keep turning the pages.

He puffs. “Let me clarify. Why aren’t you sleeping? You really should be...”

I interrupt him. “I can’t, so instead, I’m distracting myself while reading about...” I hold up the page that I landed on and see the red lingerie on the model, pouting her glossy red lips, standing in a very uncomfortable pose.

Nicholas’ eyes widen for a split second, but then a hearty laugh escapes his lips. “Joseph, I didn’t know you liked that kind of girl.”

I quickly close the magazine and return it to its holder, my face hot. “Not really, but I hear that you do.” I say accusingly, as a desperate attempt to have something to say. Stupid.

“Yeah, that’s what most people believe.” The playfulness in his eyes turns solemn.

“I’ve seen you in the papers, you know.” I need to stop talking now.

“Oh you have, have you?” His eyes stare me down, but they’re not angry, only confrontational.

“Yes, with different girls...”

“And...your point is?” His voice is flat and stern, but he smiles like he doesn’t care. “Not many people know me, and since I’m the president’s son, everyone has their own opinion of me. You included, it would seem.”

I hate to be lumped together with everyone else.

“I’m going to take a nap now.” He leans in closer and whispers, “Heidi.” Sitting up straight

again, he says, “And if you’d like, you can do the same. Or not. It’s completely up to you.” He presses the button on the armrest, transforming his seat to a bed.

I pull the blanket close up to my head. I don’t want anyone to notice how flushed my face has become.

Chapter 11

It takes me some time, but I’m finally able to relax. Somewhere between sleep and consciousness, I hear the captain announce that we’re on our final descent into Volkov Village. I bring my seat back up and stretch my arms above my head, yawning.

“Good nap?” Nicholas asks, already awake.

I force a smile, not quite sure how to act toward him after I offended him.

Mai pulls out her toiletries and freshens up her make-up again.

“Why didn’t you just stay home, Imp?” Johnny stares at me from his seat.

“Imp?”

“Yeah, you’re imp...eding us from focusing on what’s really important about the program,” he snarls, and then proceeds to snort a laugh.

“And what is that, exactly?” I ask.

Johnny scoffs. “Honor and might—the motto of the Savage Run.” He rolls his eyes.

“I’m curious to know, how is he impeding that?” Nicholas asks.

“Thanks to him, the program has become about something else entirely: giving allowances to the weak. Problem is, Petunia, who will they love once you’ve died three minutes into the first obstacle? The answer is someone who is strong and exemplifies what the Savage Run and the Master class are all about. Someone who entered for honorable reasons.” Johnny picks his teeth with a toothpick.

“And what honorable reasons are those?” Mai asks, powdering her forehead.

“Well, I don’t know why anyone else entered, but I entered so that I could support my sickly grandmother—provide her with a better life these last few years she’s alive,” Johnny says.

“Honorable indeed, but everyone is an equal participant with equal rights.” Mai’s voice is monotone.

Johnny huffs. “That’s not true. He’s detracting from the integrity of the event.”

“What is your problem, exactly?” Mai snaps.

“My problem?” He unbuckles his seatbelt, stands up and yells, “Am I the only one who takes this seriously? Am I the only one who sees how this cream puff is making Savage Run into a gag show?” Johnny points at me.

It turns so quiet that I hear nothing but the hum of plane engines.

“Sit down at once or I will...” Mai starts, but Nicholas places a hand on her lap.

“If you feel that threatened by Joseph, then how can you expect to do well compared to the other participants?” Nicholas asks.

Johnny gets a sour expression on his face. “I’m not threatened; I’m sickened. And I’m just speaking what everyone else is thinking.”

“I wasn’t thinking that, were you?” Nicholas asks me.

I can’t help smiling a little. “No.”

“Me neither,” Arthor says behind me, squeezing his face between Nicholas’ and my seats.

Johnny huffs loudly and turns to Nicholas. “Just because you and that bitch Mai don’t see what’s going on doesn’t...”

He can’t finish his sentence before Mai shoots to her feet, wrings Johnny’s arm behind his back so it makes a cracking sound, and pins him to the floor with her foot on the back of his neck.

“Awww...” he wails.

“Rule number one,” Nicholas says bending down toward Johnny. “Never, never, never upset Mai.”

“Say you’re sorry,” Mai insists, pulling his arm back harder. “Say it.” Many participants are out of their seats, their eyes glued to the scene.

“Sorry...sorry,” Johnny’s barely able to whimper.

Mai flings his arm to the ground, gets back in her seat and proceeds to apply make-up as if nothing ever happened.

Without a word, Johnny climbs to his feet, walks down the aisle, and locks himself in the bathroom stall.

While everyone else starts to laugh and talk amongst themselves, Nicholas leans over and whispers, “Once you get out into the obstacle fields, stay away from him.”

“He’s not allowed to hurt me, is he?” I whisper back.

“Out there, there will be no telling whether you died from one of the obstacles or at the hands of another. It’s survival of the fittest—and meanest—and Johnny fits into both of those categories.”

Arthur pokes his head between our seats again, his red, unruly hair clinging to the fabric. “I’ll help you, Imp,” he whispers.

Although I don’t approve of his comment, it immediately puts me at ease. “Seriously? You’re

going to call me names, too?” I turn toward him and produce a generous frown.

“No, sorry. That was a bad joke,” Arthor says, his eyebrows crinkling.

“Good, because if you’re not careful, I can come up with some pretty crazy nicknames for you, too.”

“Oh, really? Like what?” he asks.

“Farty Arty.” I grin.

He grumbles at the unwelcome reminder of the primary school nickname. “I see how it is. Tit for tat.”

“Gotta stand up for myself.” Peering out the window, I see Volkov Village. From what I’ve read in the Daily Republic, the floating city will house the participants in Savage Run and travel around to different continents where the obstacle courses will be taking place. The perfectly round oceanic city used to be gray, with oil stains around the edges and on the docks, and made up of squat, iron buildings. It was the very city that brought General Volkov and his Unifers to our country sixty-six years ago. A few years later, after President Volkov Sr. had completely restructured our society, it was turned into a cargo ship carrying crude oil, goods, and Laborers to different parts of the world. When the rest of the world rejected the notion of tiered societies shortly after, they put pressure on President Volkov Sr. to conform. He flat out

refused and immediately made it illegal to trade or do business with any other nation. President Volkov Sr. had structured Newland to be one hundred percent self-sufficient, so it didn't affect us. And when President Volkov Jr. took over, he continued on as his father had done before him. However, the leaders of the other nations were dependent on Newland's supply of oil—the only known oil left on the planet—and asked him to reconsider. He told them to go to hell.

Now, the city is quite changed from what it used to be, with skyscrapers in the middle and shiny metal buildings gradually shrinking the closer they get to the outer edge. In fact, it looks like an upside-down spinning-top.

But there's something I hadn't expected to see around the city on the water. Barges and tankers—ships that carry crude oil—are leaving the docks. "Where are the ships heading?" I look at Nicholas.

"Thanks to Savage Run, the hosting countries will have their share of oil for an entire year."

"Why did he create the Savage Run, exactly?"

Mai interrupts and points. "Volkov Park, named after...I'll give you one guess."

I wonder if her intrusion was intentional. Do they think I'm asking too many questions? I look at a bare steel area at the edge of the city. In the center of the park, there's a statue of a man holding his right arm out in front of him. The

statue must be gigantic, since I can see it all the way from here.

The aircraft flies past the city and does a U-turn, after which it descends rapidly and lands on the water. After the plane touches down, it glides for a while before arriving at the front of a dock. The captain turns off the seatbelt sign. I take a deep breath and try to ignore the butterflies attacking my stomach.

Chapter 12

The moment we step off the aircraft, I climb into one of four oversized transporters, making sure I don't get into the same one as Johnny. It's a quick drive to the gated facility where we are to spend the night. A long row of Unifers stands at attention outside the walls, gripping their firearms, and they all carry the same hateful expression, like everyone around them is an enemy, a suspect to ward off.

We drive in through shiny steel gates with a "V" on one gate and a "V" on the other. Am I entering another prison? Another world in which

President Volkov can control me? What will really happen if I survive this program? Ruth said that trusting him is like digging your grave with three sticks of dynamite. What did she really mean by that?

Passing through the middle of two long rows of Unifers, I see a huge banner above:

Those who trade in essential freedom for fleeting security deserve neither freedom nor security. Welcome, Savages!

We drive by a few office buildings, and a cafeteria. My stomach rumbles—I haven't eaten since this morning and I feel weak. Will they be providing us with food? The transporter stops in front of a huge roundabout. The place is already crawling with participants and their representatives. Busses zoom past us, their exteriors plastered with red, yellow and white saber-toothed tiger heads. Being here feels all wrong because Gemma should have been here with me. The plan was that we make it together. Now who will I have at the end of all this? Who will be there if I succeed? Ruth is still alive, unless Master Douglas has gotten to her, too. My chest tightens. A Laborer can never be safe. Never. Even if she's alive and I do make it, then she'll want nothing to do with me when she discovers that I killed her Gemma. She'll be able

to read in my eyes that I made the choice to run. To abandon her daughter. And if she can't, then I won't be able to stop myself from telling her. I rub my hands over my eyes to make it look like I'm trying to force the sleepiness out of them—not stop the tears that are threatening to come. I can't start to cry now. They'd all have yet another reason to think I'm a weakling and a Laborer who should never be a Master. Who doesn't deserve to be a Master. Quick, focus on something else. Anything!

When I open my eyes, I see that I'm alone in the transporter. This helps me to redirect my thoughts. I climb out of the vehicle, counting the steps on my way out to keep my mind off Gemma.

Once outside, we stand in a group and wait for Mai and Nicholas to exit their transporter. To keep my mind busy, I scan Volkov Village and let each detail soak in. But what catches my eye isn't inside the village, it's right outside of it. Beyond the fence is a large, blue and green glass structure with a bar, a band, and a dance floor inside. I've biked by dance clubs in Culmination many times, my eyes lingering on couples entwined as one. I've often wondered what it feels like to be in love, as the Masters call it. Just once, I would like to feel that magic, as they call it. Once before I die. I always knew that it was

never for me. Laborers are required to accept the mate their Master chooses for them.

Standing here so close to the rest of the participants, it's glaringly obvious how much smaller I am than them. The shortest guy besides Arthor stands a whole head taller and must have at least seventy-five pounds on me. And it's not just that. They have this aura of confidence—fearlessness—that a Laborer never would have. Advisors are taught that they're important, almost as important as the Masters, and it's drilled into them from the time they're born. They're not the scum of the earth like Laborers, but free individuals who can own businesses and create the lives they desire. Just the way their eyes don't lower to the floor when spoken to—that alone sets them miles apart from us. And they know it. Many Advisors I have come in contact with are worse than the Masters—more arrogant, more proud. I have a theory about it. I think deep down inside their souls they know they're not completely free, and it eats away at them. They fight hard to keep up the façade, proving to the world how much they matter. Well, at least I'm fast, and I have developed pretty good endurance riding around the mountains and hillsides of Culmination all these years. At least I have that.

When Mai comes out, her eyebrows are gathered low over her eyes, and as she walks by me, she glances at me, like I'm her archenemy.

“They’re coming for you,” she whispers in a voice so low that I’m sure no one else could hear.

My stomach feels as if I just swallowed a gallon of poison. Coming for me? Who? Wait, does she know I’m a girl? Did she tell them, whomever it is that’s coming? I look around to see if they’re here—the Unifers. It has to be Unifers, I’m sure of it. But before I have time to locate my pursuers a Savage Run bus pulls up in front of us.

“This is our bus,” Nicholas says.

I quickly elbow my way to the front of the line so I can get on first. Not that I think it will matter much having someone after me. I’m sure they’ll find me no matter where I am.

“Easy there,” the guy with the shaved head and eagle tattoo on the back of his neck says. “What’s the hurry?” He laughs a little. “So you’re Joseph?”

I don’t want to talk to someone at the moment, but since I’m stuck here in front of the closed door, I answer. “Yes. Hi. You?” I glance over my shoulder and around the front of the bus to see if anyone’s coming. My mouth is so dry that my tongue sticks to the roof of it.

“Danny. Pleased to meet you.” He holds out a hand.

I bang on the door a couple of times, and when it opens, I get on at once. I run to the back and sit down, slumping in my seat and leaning

against the window, looking out. From the corner of my eye I see others get on the bus and find their seats.

“May I sit here?”

I look up and am relieved when I see Arthor. “Sure.” I start to chew on my nails.

“Nervous?” he asks. The bus starts to drive off.

I lower my fingers from my teeth and look down at the floor. I’m not going to tell him someone’s after me. “Bad habit—I know.” It’s one of the reasons my father makes me wash my hands so often. Scrub the impurity from them.

“It’s okay.” He looks out the window. “We’re all afraid. Some of us just hide it better than others. Some of us pick on unsuspecting imps.” He nudges me.

His comment almost makes me smile. “Johnny?”

“Yeah.” We curve around the compound to the back, passing Unifers marching in perfect synchronized rhythms. None of them appear to be after me.

A little more relaxed, but still gawking out the window, I ask, “So, why are you here?”

His brows furrow. “It would make my parents proud of me and give them something to look forward to.”

“So they supported you in coming?”

He hesitates. “They don’t really support...much about me. Well, my mother does, but not my father.”

I remember how his mother had waited for him outside the fence when he was registering, how despairing her eyes were and how white her knuckles were, clutching the fence.

“But hey, it’s boring talking about me. Why are you here?” His eyes widen.

I glance around nervously. “Maybe not right here...”

He nods.

Shortly after the bus stops in front of a blue and green Nissen hut—Unifer housing composed of sheets of metal bent into half a cylinder. They’re identical to the ones I’ve seen in newspaper articles about Unifer training camps with a garage door for the entrance and tiny barred windows on the sides. I didn’t think housing could get any uglier than our trailers back home, but these take the cake.

Before stepping off the bus, I thoroughly inspect the area. A huge Culmination flag waves in front of the structures, and the gold and red bee mascot looks fierce against the black background. There’s still no sign of anyone who looks like they might be after me. Was Mai just messing with me? She doesn’t seem to be concerned at all, but then again, maybe she was the one who ratted me out. But how did she know? Nicholas.

Like the others, I huddle around Nicholas and Mai.

“Tonight each of you will sleep in your own room,” Nicholas says. “In your room you will find a bed, a sink, a hole in the floor to do your business, and a Savage Run uniform for tomorrow. Dinner will be delivered to your room at 8:00 p.m. sharp and breakfast will be delivered at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. Speaking with or communicating with any other participant is prohibited. Leaving your room is prohibited, and if discovered, you will be disqualified from the program and sent home. Strict obedience is required at all times.”

Mai takes over. “Later tonight, Nicholas and I will visit briefly with each of you, so don’t go to sleep until we’ve stopped by.” She reads off a list, stating what room number each participant will be sleeping in. She doesn’t read my name.

“Everyone is to meet back here at seven a.m. sharp tomorrow morning, dressed in your Savage Run uniform, after which Nicholas and I will escort you to the Conference Center for the Opening Ceremonies. If I hear of any...any disturbances tonight, you’ll be crying for your mamas to come get you. You are all free to go.”

Nicholas pushes a button on the outside of the hut causing the garage door to slowly screech open.

“Wait here with me,” Mai says. I do as I’m told.

Once everyone enters the hut, Nicholas closes the garage door. “You got this?” he says to Mai. Mai nods and he looks at me. “I’ll be back soon.” He starts down the road.

“Come.” She heads across the street to a townhome and I follow after her. We walk up the stairs to the second floor. When she arrives at the top, she inserts a keycard into a slot. The door vanishes, leaving an open rectangle for us to enter through. Knowing that Nicholas also knows something about what’s going on makes this whole situation a little less scary, though my stomach still feels like it’s been wrung over.

Stepping inside, I see that there’s a simple kitchen, two bedrooms, a small bathroom with a shower, a living room, and an entertainment room with a screen embedded into the wall. Everything is tight and small—compact, but clean and modern. I remove my sandals, place them in the barely-there entranceway, and step onto the cold tile floor.

Even before I get past the entrance, Mai says, “It was stupid of you to come here. It’s a fool’s quest—one that will destroy you from the inside.”

I’m so stunned that I can’t speak. Did Nicholas tell her about me or didn’t he?

“You think you’ve come for freedom, but you will only find your fears. And death. Take

Nicholas' offer and go home. Don't waste your life on this...mirage."

I scramble to find something to say. "Living as a Laborer isn't living at all," I squeak. I don't know why, but for some reason I don't feel like I can speak freely around Mai. Maybe it's because of what happened between her and Johnny on the aircraft. Maybe it's because she's a woman and I'm not used to answering to women or for a woman to be anything other than soft-spoken and demure.

Mai's phone rings and she vanishes out onto the balcony. I make my way over to the window. Tall buildings are everywhere, and since it is dark, most of them beam rays of different-colored light into the sky. It's nothing like back home in Culmination, where once the night has fallen in the Laborer section, it becomes pitch black. The difference is, at home I can see every single star in the sky. Here, only the moon is visible, and it's not pure and white like back home. It's an orangey-yellow.

Before Gemma was sent to work for Master Douglas, we used to go stargazing at least a couple of times a week. I'd sneak out of my father's trailer, and we'd climb the small, grassy hill next to our subdivision and lie down in the open field. We'd gaze for hours and talk about things like freedom and what it would feel like to fall in love with a guy. I look up into the sky in

search of a star. But there are none. I reach for my mother's locket, but just like Gemma, it's gone.

Mai slides the glass door open and steps inside.

"That was President Volkov again. The reason he's been calling is because Master Douglas called him."

I feel all the blood leave my face. "Oh..." My arms suddenly feel like they weigh a hundred pounds each.

"He says there's a problem with your ID."

"W...what?" I try to act surprised, but it's hard to act surprised when I feel terrified.

"He's sending a couple of his Unifers to confirm your identity."

Confirm my identity? What does that mean? "When?"

"Right now."

I run my hands through my short hair and begin to pace; back and forth, back and forth.

"Heidi," Mai says, grabbing me by the shoulders.

It takes a second for me to register she used my real name, but when I do, my first thought is that she's going to maul me like she did Johnny.

"Fortunately, Nicholas already talked to me. About you." She looks at me, her eyes softening just enough for me to notice. Then she chuckles. "I'm sorry I'm laughing. There's nothing funny

about this, but...I was so relieved because I'd never in my life seen such a hopeless case." She looks around the room as if searching for something, and then she stares at me for a moment. Wrapping her arms around me, she squeezes me so tightly that it becomes difficult to breathe. As if trying to contain herself, she takes a step back and looks up into the ceiling, her hands on her narrow hips. Then, she buries her hands in her face and lets out a long moan.

The way she's acting, I think she's having a nervous breakdown. "What did President Volkov say?"

Her hands drop to her sides. "Don't worry. You'll be just fine, I promise. Nicholas is seeing to it at this very moment."

But my shoulders refuse to relax. Unifers are on their way over here right now. For me. What am I supposed to do if they want to see me naked? I mean, it would be the easiest and quickest way to verify my gender, right?

"Nicholas told me about your friend, too. I'm so sorry."

All of a sudden I can't take a breath. Gemma. Unifers. The way Mai is acting. I reach for my pendant, but it isn't there. In order to keep breathing, I dash out onto the small balcony and grip the railing. My hands hurt from when I fell down helping Gemma escape, but I squeeze the railing harder so I can feel that instead of the fear

tearing through me. Gemma. My throat swells and even out here, the air feels thick and unyieldingly harsh. It's like the past and the present are colliding, and I can't manage to keep them inside of me and still exist.

Mai comes out and leans her hip against the railing, facing me. Her voice is gentle, cautious, like Ruth's. "Sometimes, no matter how hard one tries to forget...about losing someone, it's impossible. I'm sorry. It wasn't professional of me to mention your friend."

I produce a few shallow breaths, and finally my lungs open and I can breathe again.

She places a hand on my shoulder. "Listen, I can't tell you what to do. If I were in your shoes, I'd probably do the same. But you should know what you're up against. These obstacles are meant to kill. They're much more brutal than I think you realize. Than any of the participants realize."

"I just...I can't go back."

Looking across the valley, she says, "I suppose I'll have to respect your wishes. Now, back to the phone call. I told President Volkov that your ID looked authentic so don't worry. I'm not going to rat you out."

My eyes question her comment.

"I have my own reasons. I'm sure you can, with a little discernment, figure out what some of those reasons are."

The first reason that comes to mind is that she's a woman and would like to see more women doing what she does.

"Besides, Nicholas made me promise. And I never break a promise."

"So, do you think President Volkov suspects?" I ask.

"Not really. Sending the Unifers here is just a precautionary measure."

Nicholas comes in through the door holding a cup of black coffee. "Did you tell her?"

"Yes."

He turns to me, his eyes intense. "Listen very carefully, Heidi. I passed the Unifers on my way here. Whatever you do, don't panic. When they arrive, just listen and answer their questions in as few words as possible, understood?"

"Okay." I feel my pulse in my forehead. Someone bangs at the door and when Nicholas opens it, two Unifers stand there, gripping their firearms.

Chapter 13

The Unifers are polar opposites, one as pale as the moon over Culmination and the other as dark as night. I feel like I'm in a nightmare where I'm trying to get away from my assassin, but instead of moving, I'm shackled—immobilized—by some unseen force.

“Good evening, Sir, Ma'am,” the pale one says, and both salute Nicholas and Mai by lifting their right fists up to their right eyebrows.

Without any further niceties, they step toward me. I half expect them to rip off my clothes to verify that I'm a guy, and it takes every last ounce of resolve not to retreat to the balcony or bring my arms up to my chest.

“Are you Joseph Wood?”

“I am,” I say in the deepest voice I can muster.

“By command of President Volkov, I need to see your government-issued ID,” the dark-skinned Unifer says.

Nicholas hands him my ID card and steps back, briefly glancing my way.

The Unifer holds up a small hand-held device with a bunch of buttons and a green light on the bottom. He inserts my card into the feeder, but as it comes out on the other side, the machine beeps and the lit button turns red. “Looks like this ID is illegitimate...” He gives me an accusing glare.

“Try it again,” Nicholas says flatly.

I clamp my jaw so tight that my teeth hurt.

The Unifer gives Nicholas an irritated look, but does as he is told. This time when he runs my ID through the reader, the light turns green. “Strange...” he remarks, looking puzzled by the blip.

Wanting to get them out of here as quickly as possible, I say, “Will there be anything else?” I can’t believe I’m talking to a Unifer like that, my eyes not dropping to the floor.

“No, that will be all. Thank you for your cooperation.” He bows his head a tad and they’re both out the door. The second they leave, it’s as if the oxygen in the air suddenly returns.

“They think they’re so high and mighty,” Mai says, scoffing.

I’m surprised by her blatant aversion toward them, especially in front of me.

“But I can’t believe you fooled them. Unifers are trained to spot deception. But with that haircut and those clothes, your chest flattened to nothing...you really do look like a boy,” Mai says. “You had me fooled all along. What do you think, Nicholas?”

I touch my hair, not really feeling like a guy, yet no longer a girl. It’s strange how I have come to associate with my gender so much, and how pretending to be the opposite one makes me feel like I am no longer me.

He glances at me for a moment. “I still think she looks like a girl.”

I look down. I don’t like them talking about me as if I’m not even here; it makes me feel like a child.

“What makes you say that?” Mai presses.

“She just has that natural, feminine...glow to her, I suppose.” His eyes linger on me for a moment, and heat rises in my cheeks. Why am I reacting to him this way? It really bothers me.

“Heidi, I’m not supposed to give you any advice, but, oh well. When you’re in the fields, try not to stand out from the rest of the group. President Volkov already thinks that Master Douglas is a nutcase, and if there aren’t any more accusations or events that draw attention to you, then the allegations will dissipate into thin air.” She takes a few deep breaths and then faces Nicholas. “You got this? I want to catch up on what’s going on in the world.”

“Let’s go,” Nicholas says, tilting his head to the side for me to follow him. I do as he says, but just as we’re about to exit the door, I hear a news reporter say my name. I walk back inside and into the entertainment room and see a close-up of my face on the screen. My cheeks fill with blood.

“So why is this young, unqualified, pre-adolescent boy in the Savage Run?” the reporter questions, and adds, “Have the standards of the elite stooped too low?” The image shifts to a

newsroom, and another reporter takes over. “Now onto the Savage Run Survival Pole. Citizens of Newland have nominated Johnny Poltinger from Culmination as the most likely to place in the top three in Savage Run.” A diagram of the top ten participants appears on the screen, and Johnny’s name is at the top, followed by someone named Cory, and a guy named Jared. “And here is the list of the least likely to complete any of the obstacles. I’m sure it comes as no surprise that Joseph Wood is the last man—or shall we say boy—on the list.”

Whatever speck of confidence I had from being in shape riding around on my bike all these years vanishes. I mean, who am I kidding? Now I see nothing but a stupid girl who doesn’t even know her own limits.

“Don’t watch that trash,” Nicholas says.

Mai mutes the TV and crosses her arms in front of her chest. “You’re an easy target, Heidi. The media will go after you, but you have to ignore them. Besides, they don’t know anything.”

“How do they even know about me?” I ask.

“Drones,” Nicholas says.

That’s what the media uses to get the pictures they want.

“And there’s not much we can do about it. Not even during the obstacle courses themselves, I’m afraid. Anyway, let’s get you settled, shall we?”

At the Nissen hut, he opens the garage and we step inside the hallway. The garage door closes in a clangor behind us, making me jump. On either side of it is a long row of doors without handles, and blue tube lights hang in the ceiling, stretching all the way to the end. It makes Nicholas' face look pasty. The corridor is completely quiet, so much so that I wonder if anyone is here at all. When we get to door number nineteen, Nicholas pauses for a moment.

“Listen,” he states, “just because you're small, doesn't mean you don't have a chance.” He peers down at me and gives me half a smile. “And I can imagine biking around Culmination all these years has made your legs strong.”

Did I tell him what my work is? I can't remember at the moment. “Thanks,” I say, for a lack of anything else to say. And for some reason, my heart beats a little faster.

He inserts the keycard into the slot. Nothing happens. He flips it over and tries again. Still nothing. He keeps trying, in every possible direction, but no matter which way he puts the card in, it doesn't work. “Let's go down to the office and get a new key.”

Chapter 14

We exit the hut and walk side by side toward the office. The cool breeze plays against my cheek as the moon shadows us down the path. Passing Unifers, every one of them salutes Nicholas. I can't imagine what it would be like to command so much veneration or power. And it's strange to be treated with regard by someone who does. Is it all part of his plan to get me to trust him so I am in his debt? Of course it's a ridiculous thought because there's not a thing he would need from me, is there? Yet, why is he acting so kind toward me, almost friend-like, if it isn't to get something from me? Use me in some way? There can't be any other explanation.

Walking down the hill, we pass other participants along the way. I want to sink into the ground when they whisper and shoot me disapproving glances.

"Just ignore them," Nicholas says.

I didn't realize he noticed how uncomfortable their looks make me feel, but at least it confirms that I'm not crazy and making things up.

“So tell me again why you decided to break the law and then break the law again by signing up for the most dangerous obstacle course known to mankind,” he says.

“Well...I...uh.”

“You don’t need to hide anything from me, Heidi. What we talk about is between us.”

Precisely what a Master would say to make me open up, and later use what I say against me. Does he really believe that I’ll trust him just like that? Besides, it’s not like I even know what trust is; I’ve never lived around it or seen it in action, only fear and anger, and blame. Always the blame. Well, that’s not completely true. Ruth and Gemma I could trust, yes, but to think I could get to that level of trust with President Volkov’s son is outright ludicrous. Trusting a superior is something foreign—a mythical concept that doesn’t exist. A dangerous road riddled with pain.

When I look at him, I see that his eyes are trained on my face.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asks.

“No.”

“I’m President Volkov’s son again, aren’t I?”

I feel a tinge of guilt like when we were on the aircraft. I brace my arms in front of my chest.

“When I become president, I plan to restructure our entire society. No more hierarchical classes.” He studies my face as if trying to read my reaction. Is he just saying that

to hook me, to trick me into trusting him? What does he want in return? If I'm not careful, I might fall for it—he seems so genuine. “That’s...great. Rather ambitious going completely against your father and grandfather like that.”

“Ambitious. Now there’s one thing my father did right; he raised me to believe I can get whatever I want. I suppose I’m rather exhausting that way.”

“That explains a lot.” The words just jump out before I can think. Nicholas seems to have that effect on me—making me speak my mind even when I don’t mean to. It’s both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. But mostly terrifying. “I mean...”

He starts to laugh. “Most people try to impress me or get something out of me. It would seem that neither of those are on your agenda.”

I don’t hear any anger in his voice, but it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. “I’m sorry. I should be more respectful.”

He stops walking. “Don’t change. Your candor is one of the things I appreciate most about you. Dealing with politicians these days, you never know where anyone really stands. But you’re not like that.”

My father took most of my comments as insults although I rarely intended them that way. “Maybe if I were free like a politician, I’d be different.”

“Freedom doesn’t change a person—only makes them more of who they already are.”

I wish I were free.

“You know the first thing the Unifers bombed when they started taking over your country?”

“No.” We didn’t learn much about our country’s usurpation in primary school.

“The Statue of Liberty.”

“What’s that?”

He smiles a little. “It was a statue of a robed female figure—an icon of freedom.”

“Oh.” Of course it would be the first thing to go.

“Freedom, I have found, is an illusion. Once you think you have it, you’ll realize that you’re still not completely free; no one is. It’s a perfect ideal never to be had.”

I shake my head. “I think freedom is a gift, and what you choose to do with that freedom is what makes us completely free.”

He shakes his head. “It’s okay—you don’t understand.”

All of a sudden, I get the feeling I’m back around Master Douglas with his haughty demeanor. “Just because I’m a Laborer doesn’t mean I can’t figure things out.”

“That’s not at all what I meant.”

“Then what?”

“That you’re still so pure and unspoiled from all the politics and corruption that soils our

society. All I'm saying is that sometimes, it's better to not have a choice—all that responsibility," he says.

Something occurs to me. He must feel the pressures of being the next in line for president. "Are you saying you're afraid of responsibility?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes the burden is so great..." He pauses and glances at me, then exhales before continuing. "...and when mistakes inevitably are made, the one at the top is the one to blame."

"But it's so much better to at least be free to make those mistakes."

"Perhaps to some extent." The muscles in his jaw tighten.

If he knew anything about a Laborer's circumstances, then he wouldn't be saying that. Is he completely ignorant to the way a Laborer lives? To how we have absolutely no say in our lives? Before I can say anything further, we've reached the office. The front doors part as we approach them, and Nicholas walks in ahead of me. After we get a new key, a Unifer drives us back to the Nissen Hut and Nicholas opens my door without a hitch.

He stands aside. "Mai and I will be back later to brief you about tomorrow."

I step inside the room, and the first thing I notice is the wooden bed—completely bare except for the thin pillow. Where's the mattress?

Even at home I have one. Not a very comfortable one; I can just imagine the feel of the boards pressing against my back before sleep takes me. And the toilet—a hole in the floor just like Nicholas said. Back home I have a toilet. The room stinks of urine and it's cold. Goosebumps appear on my arms. I hadn't expected my living standards to decrease when I signed up for this.

“I know the accommodations aren't exactly ideal.”

“I'll be fine.” I'm already shivering.

“There's a blanket under the bed. Mai and I will be back in a couple of hours for the briefing.” He closes the door and I'm left to myself.

I should try to get some sleep. I lie down on the bed and squeeze my eyes shut, the boards cold and rigid against my back. My hands move to my chest, and I imagine my mother's locket being there. If it were, then I'd caress the smooth surface, and it would send me to sleep. A few minutes pass and my mind is processing like a high performing computer. The thought of the computer reminds me of Sergio—stupid Sergio. Now I can't get his Eastern Republic accent out of my head. Pteetsa. If only I were a bird, I could fly away. I wonder why he agreed to make those IDs for Gemma and me when he could easily have kicked us out and been done with it.

Gemma. From the very innermost part of me, I wish I could go back to that moment, the very moment when I made my decision to run—the moment that killed her. I hear her voice screaming for me to run. Run, Heidi, run! I wipe a tear that runs down the side of my head toward my ear. I shouldn't have run. There, I finally can admit it. A faint cry escapes my lips. She always sacrificed herself so I could get what I wanted. I knew that. Innately. And this time was no different. Just like the time she fell out of the tree and broke her arm. She was terrified to even get up in the tree. I could see it in her eyes and in the way her fingers trembled.

But for some reason I had to have her climb with me. It was always this way—me needing her more than she needed me. To do things with me—the one who gave me courage—meaning. And in the end she was the one who gave the most—not me. I selfishly just took it. Until there was no more to take. I feel another tear trail down from my eye. I made the wrong choice. I made the wrong choice! Why did it have to turn out this way? Why did I have to make that decision?

I sit up. I can't think about her right now; I need to remain emotionally stable—strong—the strongest I've ever been, like Ruth always told me. Never tire, she would say. If you tire, you die. But she doesn't know what I've done. I'm sure she wouldn't give me that advice now. I fall

to the hard bed, pound my fists into the wood, and scream into my pillow.

I can't lie here anymore, driving myself crazy like this.

I stand up and start to pace around the small room. I continue on with the mindless pacing for hours—I think. I can't really tell, and I don't bother to check the clock. At some point the door opens and someone slides a plate in, but I don't eat it. I know I should, but I can't. Instead, I try to figure out what I could have done differently. There must have been some way I could have saved Gemma and me both. But the conclusion is always the same. If I die, she dies. If she dies, I live.

When Nicholas opens the door, my eyelids feel thick—swollen. I turn away so he won't see me like this.

"I'm here to brief you about tomorrow." He closes the door and the room smells faintly of cologne. "Heidi."

I swivel halfway toward him.

"Is everything okay?" His voice is low, a hint of concern in his tone—or maybe it's disgust.

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"Where's Mai?" I ask, wanting the attention off me.

"We ran late and President Volkov needed to meet with her."

I sit down on the bed, my eyes lowered, my hands stuffed between the wood and the back of my thighs. “So what’s it like, exactly, to be President Volkov’s son?”

He seems to acknowledge that I need something—anything—to distract myself with. “What’s it like?” He moves deeper into the room and pockets the key card. “No one has ever asked me that before.” He gazes out into the air and his face goes stiff. “It’s always a power struggle. And I never feel like I’m truly free. Restricting.”

What? I never thought being a Master would be restricting. And it sounds completely ridiculous when he states he’s not free. Our eyes connect for a moment, but I quickly avert mine.

He continues. “It would be so freeing if I didn’t have to play by his rules anymore. But being his son, there’s no escape.” He sits down next to me on the bed. “What’s it like being a Laborer?”

“No one’s ever asked me that before.” When he smiles, I smile. “It’s restrictive, too. Way more restrictive than it is to be a Master. I just feel... I mean...you know, don’t you?”

“I have yet to visit a Laborer compound or associate with your class. You’re actually, believe it or not, the first Laborer I’ve spoken with—like this.”

“You don’t have Laborers working for you?” I ask.

“They’re all Advisors or Masters. Only the secondary Masters have Laborers working for them. Once one reaches a certain level, one only associates with Advisors and Masters.”

I had no idea there were lower class Masters.

“Well, Mai and my father are waiting for me. So I need to brief you about the obstacle courses. Each obstacle has a shortcut or a safe zone, and if you uncover it, the obstacle will become much easier. Some of the shortcuts are easy to find, others nearly impossible. But I can’t stress this enough for you, Heidi. Find those shortcuts.”

“What specifically am I looking for?”

He exhales. “These obstacles are created to evaluate you in three areas; intelligence, physical aptness and emotional endurance.” He sounds like he’s reciting a memorized message. “These obstacles are meant to kill—that’s why I didn’t want you to join. I hardly think even half of the contestants will survive. If you can manage the physical aspect of the obstacles, Heidi, I don’t think you’ll have any problem qualifying for Master Status.”

If...that’s all I have? A great big ‘if?’ And aren’t the physical aspects of the obstacles like ninety percent of it? All I can think is how unfair this is—completely misrepresented. I should have scrutinized the Savage Run rules before I set out on my journey. Before I risked my life. And took Gemma’s.

Nicholas stops by the door before he exits. “When you become free, what’s the first thing you want to do?”

I noticed he said ‘when.’ Right now, it doesn’t feel like ‘when.’ It feels like ‘never.’ But even so, my mind wanders toward the possibility. The opportunities would be endless, at least compared to the possibilities I had before as a Laborer. And it’s kind of scary, like there’s no safety net holding me back. I’ll be able to experience my first kiss, and have children if I want, and even have my heart broken—not that I’d ever allow any guy to get close enough to break it. “I’ve always wanted to...go dancing.”

The right side of his lip twitches. “Well, good night then.” He closes the door.

After I get back in bed, I lie awake, my mind churning with the question Nicholas asked before he left. What will I do first? And to that, I fall asleep.

Chapter 15

It takes me a moment to register that there's an alarm clock going off. Opening my eyes to a dark room, I turn my head toward the sound and see red symbols reading 6:30 a.m. Where am I? My body feels sore and I'm lying on a hard surface. Slowly, it starts to come back to me. I registered for the Savage Run, Sergio took my locket, my father was furious... Nicholas... Arthur... and... Gemma. Remembering that she was shot makes me gasp and I feel like I'm going to be sick. Was it real? Is she dead? I desperately yearn for it all to just be a nightmare. But it isn't.

I close my eyes and sit for a long while, finally coming to the conclusion that I have to find a way to control my emotions. The only way I know how to do this is to pretend I don't care. Like I've done so many times with my father. Gemma didn't really mean anything to me. She was just another person who I brushed shoulders with, and I can live just fine without her. I stuff the pain down, deeper and deeper and tell myself that Gemma was a good friend, yes, but I'll be just fine like I was before I met her. The only person I need to care about is myself. I can't let one friendship lost ruin my life. I have to be rock solid; stronger than anyone, and the only person that can make it happen is me.

Once I feel like I have a hold on my emotions, I sit up. My new Savage Run uniform is lying on the floor. I pick it up and place it back on the bed.

I undress, retie the gauze tightly around my chest, and then slip into the uniform. The pattern is the same as the one the Unifers wear, but the suit is tight fitting and made of stretchy material. A few minutes pass. The door opens and a plate of scrambled eggs and toast is slid into the room, next to the untouched one from last night. I pick the plate up, stuff the eggs into the toast, and eat it.

At a quarter to seven, my door opens. I step into the hallway and trail after the others all the way to the outside.

When I come outside, I see Nicholas, Arthor, and—ugh—Johnny standing together and conversing. I don't go over to them. Hundreds of participants are making their way to the Conference Center for the Opening Ceremonies. Some guys are walking with their heads down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Some are running down the street with their city's flag, screaming at the top of their lungs. Others are speaking loudly, the excitement in their voices over-exaggerated.

Mai approaches me and studies my face for a while before saying, "You know, life doesn't always end up the way one imagines."

"Good morning," Arthor says with a grin, patting me on the back.

“Hi, good morning,” I say. “Nice outfit.” His matches mine exactly, though he fills out his suit much better than I do.

“Sleep well?” Johnny asks.

He must have followed Arthor over here. Is he talking to me—actually being civil? “Uh...yes.” I wait for his next sarcastic remark. But it doesn’t come. I remember Arthor’s comment yesterday, how he said that ‘everyone’s afraid.’ Maybe Johnny is afraid, too, and he becomes nice when he is fearful. That knowledge could be very useful during the obstacles.

A guy with bleached white hair struts past us and pumps his fists into the air. He’s chanting, “I’m a savage. I’m a savage.” He moves in a jittery way, like he’s downed one too many coffees or something. Maybe nerves—might be his way of dealing with what’s about to transpire.

Another registrar walks up to Nicholas and I step a little closer to listen in on their conversation.

“I have some pretty ambitious participants. You?” the registrar says.

“A few.”

“What about that Joseph of yours?”

“He’s a good guy.”

“But how come you let him register, I mean...you don’t really think he’ll make it, do you? All you can do is feel sorry for the little guy.”

Nicholas catches me looking at him, but he doesn't break eye contact. "He may be little, but he's smart. And he knows that all the things he needs to succeed are within the obstacles themselves."

I should look away, but there's something about looking into his eyes that makes me not want to.

"Well, smarts will only get you so far," the registrar refutes. "That's Cory, an Advisor from Asolo." He points to the guy with the white hair. "Cory's Master father fell in love with an Advisor and they had him. He wants to make his father proud and complete the Savage Run so he'll be a Master, too, and after this he's planning on running for office and working for President Volkov."

"Interesting. Excuse me," Nicholas says to the registrar and walks toward Mai. "Mai, will you escort everyone to the Conference Center? I'll be right there with Joseph." Mai nods, and they start walking down the road, merging with all the other participants. We start to walk after the others, but at a much slower pace. "Mai insisted I tell you that during the first obstacle—the marathon—the landmines are rigged to go off at one hundred and fifty pounds. She thought it might help you feel better about everything."

"Mai said that?"

"Yes."

It's strange that she'd insist on that. But then again, she is a woman. "Taking orders from her now?" I tease.

"Not usually. But I thought it would be a good thing for you to know," he says.

I weigh one hundred and five pounds, and he must know this from my fake ID card. It was one of the things Sergio didn't change. So why is he telling me...oh. If I team up with anyone else, I could be blown to bits if the other participant steps on a landmine. Most likely, I'm the only one here who weighs less than a hundred and fifty pounds. If I run alone, I'm pretty much guaranteed that I'll make the first obstacle.

I tuck an imaginary stray hair behind my ear. "I don't think it's fair that you're telling me this."

"Nothing in life is fair. You are free to use the information anyway you want. I know it may not be completely fair, but things are complicated." He opens his mouth to speak, but closes it again. Then he opens his mouth again. "I don't like anything about Savage Run or the creators of it. My father sells it as an opportunity for freedom, when in reality, it's just another way to gain control."

Whoa, what does that mean? I slow down a little. His comment almost makes me think that he's planning against his father. Should I believe him? "So why did you choose to work as one of the registrars if you're so opposed to it?"

He exhales at length. “It’s the only way I can help.”

“Help?”

“My father wanted me to be the venture manager, but I would have shown my disgust for the program too openly, so I declined and told him I’d rather work in the trenches getting to know the participants—the lower classes.”

Either he’s really great at lying or he’s actually telling the truth.

Chapter 16

We stop in front of the Conference Center, a huge white, glittering dome. Hundreds of participants and their representatives are making their way in through different doors.

Nicholas' eyes turn intense. "Listen, I...I think you just might have a chance to make it through the first phase. The way that it's set up, one doesn't have to be strong to survive—only smart. Strength will only get you so far; intelligence will get you all the way."

He thinks I'm smart?

"And stay away from Johnny if you can help it. I don't trust him," he says flatly, his eyes scanning the crowd.

Yeah, he hates my guts.

Once we enter the dome, Nicholas and I press through the crowd of young men until we catch up with the others. The dome ceiling looks as tall as the heavens, and hundreds of voices echo off the walls. I decide it's safest to walk next to Arthor, and he smiles at me when he sees me. Passing other participants, I'm certain a few of

them look at me with disdain, but I throw the thought from my mind. I'm just being overly paranoid. I'm hardly important enough that they would be thinking about me right now; they're probably just stressed about the long days ahead.

"I get the feeling imps receive extra perks," Johnny sneers, appearing out of nowhere. He walks uncomfortably close to me, shoving me just enough so I lose my balance and stumble.

He does have a point. Nicholas did give me unfair information.

"Why are you trying so hard to make yourself look stronger and superior?" Arthor asks Johnny.

"I'm not trying to make myself look stronger and superior. I am stronger and superior. Thing is, it makes me angry when another participant gets an unfair advantage over me," Johnny says, shoving me a little harder so I go tumbling toward the ground. Fortunately, Arthor catches me.

"Come on, man," Arthor says, helping me find my balance. "Give him some slack."

"Slack? Are you serious? Are you on the imp's side? Don't you see that Joseph is receiving preferential treatment?"

"Just drop it," Arthor says.

"Hey, I'm just speaking up for everyone," Johnny says. "This is ridiculous. Seriously..." He huffs, but thankfully he shuts up and walks ahead to the front of our group.

We take our seats in the tenth row, with me sitting between Arthur and Nicholas. There are ten chairs on the stage and a stand where I'm sure President Volkov will speak from. The hall fills up quickly as participants funnel in from every direction, their voices so loud I can't hear what Mai is trying to say to me even though she sits right next to Nicholas.

When the clock on the wall reads 7:30 a.m., a trumpet march blasts through the speakers. I almost swallow my tongue. I recognize the upbeat melody as the one they played before each Savage Run pre-event newscast. The apothecaries would be glued to the radio whenever I came to pick up medicine.

My father wouldn't be caught dead listening to it or reading about it in the paper. But I do wonder if he's watching now, cursing my name, or if he's rotting away in some prison, cursing my name. Surely he must hate me so much more after what I did to him. I never did anything to deserve his contempt more. And I'm to blame, of course.

The music fades and a representative with silver hair and an athletic build walks onto the stage, taking his place behind the stand. "Welcome to the Savage Run," he says. "My name is Otto Jensen, or O.J., and I am the official host of the Savage Run. On this premier day of this event, we have put together a small audiovisual of the ten most memorable moments

in Newland obstacle course history that inspired the obstacles in the Savage Run. I hope it will motivate all you participants here today. Enjoy.”

The lights fade and a projection pops up right in front of my eyes, accompanied by a dangerous tune. The first contender, a fierce-looking golden-haired boy, appears on my screen. Screaming, he wrestles an alligator to the ground with his bare hands. Finally with one snap, the boy cracks the alligator’s jaw open, splitting it in two. The image melts into the next one. A boy with black hair and skin appears on my screen. The boy is one of many, clinging onto a tightrope above a glacier, inching himself forward. Bodies lie frozen below, their lifeless, blue faces staring up into the heavens. I close my eyes to escape the image, feeling my stomach churn with nausea. The images continue, each one more disturbing than the next and I have a hard time keeping my eyes on the screen. The ninth image is of a grossly muscular boy, nothing like I’ve ever seen. The boy runs alongside other competitors in a jungle. But then the boy does something unexpected. He finds a sharp stick and starts stabbing the others in the stomach with it, their blood running down their abdomens and legs. Tigers attack out of nowhere, drawn to the scent of fresh blood. Fast-forward and the muscle-bound boy runs ahead and crosses the finish line first, his arms raised in victory.

Is this the kind of thing I'll be up against? That I'll have to revert to so I can stay alive? I look over at Nicholas who isn't even watching the screen directly in front of his face. Instead he's looking down at his hands in his lap.

The final top ten episode appears on the screen and I immediately recognize Tristan, Arthor's brother, as the boy climbing a snow-covered cliff. I glance over at Arthor again whose lips draw to a line and he looks away from the screen. He knows what's coming. This is the moment his brother died. I look back to the screen, not really wanting to watch, but unable to tear my eyes away.

Climbing the steep cliff, Tristan finally arrives at the top with the Culmination flag in his hand. A redheaded participant makes it to the top, and seeing Tristan, he immediately lunges for him, punching him again and again until blood flows from his mouth and nose. Why would he be doing this and why is this clip being shown? I close my eyes for a second and when I open them, somehow Tristan has flipped the boy onto his back, straddling him. The boy kicks his feet against the back of Tristan's head and they roll to the edge of the mountainside, the redheaded boy ending up dangling over the edge, above the icy water one hundred and fifty feet below. The boy screams, and for a moment, Tristan hesitates. Then he reaches his hand out to help the boy and

hauls him up, but this act of kindness, of complete selflessness, costs him everything as the boy pushes Tristan off the cliff into the water below, sending him to his death.

My screen closes and the lights in the hall turn on. I look over at Arthor again and he has his eyes closed. Instinctively, I reach for his hand, but before I touch him, I withdraw it. I'm not sure if he sees it, but his eyes open.

“Savage Run was designed with these events in mind and to challenge both the body and the mind so participants are adequately tested, proving that they are suitable to join the superior Class-1 Master race. I believe every single participant here today has the seeds of greatness deep within him. It is the responsibility of each of you to bring that greatness out in yourself. Just remember, we created this program because we believe in you. And now, finally, for the moment you have all been waiting for,” O.J. says. “Please welcome President Volkov and the representatives of the official participating countries, the generous benefactors of the Savage Run.”

The crowd erupts into applause and I clap along with them, but not because I'm excited. My thoughts are still on Tristan and how with one decision, his life was over. Hopefully, I don't meet his fate, too. I want to say to Arthor that his brother did the honorable thing, and that that's

what was most important. But he's dead. Is doing the honorable thing really the most important? Or is doing whatever it takes to stay alive?

President Volkov strides onto the stage, his bald head catching the light of the follow spots. He welcomes us brave souls, telling us we should be so proud to be the few who still believe in the ideal of liberty and strength. This opportunity, he says, was made for us and for anyone who ever had a dream in their hearts.

I look over at Nicholas and when his eyes find mine, they are full of quiet bitterness. Seeing him in such close proximity to his father, it becomes obvious to me that he wasn't lying about how he feels. I can see it in the way his whole body tenses and in the way his eyes smolder. To anyone else, he might just look tough and proud—it's easy to miss the subtle contempt in his eyes. But it's there. Very much so.

“Before I reveal in which nations the obstacles will be taking place,” President Volkov says. “I'd like to personally thank the leaders who voted in favor of hosting my program. Most politicians know that sporting events rarely produce a financial gain, which is unfortunate. However, when a country becomes involved in supporting an event such as this one, research shows that there is a measurable increase in happiness among the nation's citizens. The excitement and partying will infuse fun into the otherwise dreary,

day-to-day routine. And who isn't looking for more happiness in life?" He pauses and ambles across the stage.

And oil, is all I can think.

"Most people don't really want true freedom because it requires a hundred times more than living in bondage. But you Savages, you know what freedom costs, and you aren't afraid to embrace it. And now for the grand reveal."

The moment of truth. When all will be revealed to me. But there's someone missing, and I feel weak without her. Afraid. Alone. Gemma should have been here with me now—she deserved it more than anyone. Why do some lose it all? I chew the inside of my mouth until I can taste blood—anything to keep my thoughts from going back to Gemma.

Chapter 17

I don't know how in the blink of an eye my throat got so dry and how extremely difficult it has become to sit still and not fidget. The entire room has become so quiet. If I closed my eyes and didn't know where I was, I would think that I was alone.

“The first phase of the Savage Run will be held in the Nation of Normark,” President Volkov announces. The spectators burst into applause—the rest of the participants from Culmination and myself also clapping dutifully—but I sense that some of the enthusiasm displayed by the other participants is more to drown out their fears than from any real excitement. Three women and one man enter the stage carrying Normark's flag—a green flag with a white and blue cross through it. They eventually make it to their seats and sit down.

President Volkov continues. “Normark, as you all know, has never been part of any republic or united order. They could be labeled loners.” He laughs, and the gathering joins in. “As an independent nation, they have done very well, and we salute their leaders for holding to the traditions of the old world. Normark is, in short, famous for its beautiful soaring mountains and gorging fjords, and it is in this dramatic environment that you will begin your journey to freedom. In the first round of phase one, you will run a marathon—twenty-six point two miles—

across a landmine-speckled field. In the second round of phase one, you will swim ten miles in econda infested waters—a genetically altered anaconda that is capable of generating one thousand volts of electricity.”

I’ve never been a good swimmer, or a fan of any type of water predator, but President Volkov continues to talk before my mind comes up with all the scenarios in which I’ll drown.

“Last, but not least, in the third round of the first phase, you will climb Devil’s Cliff, and complete phase one by jumping into the fjord two hundred feet below. For those of you who don’t know, Devil’s Cliff is the deadliest cliff known to man.”

I look over at Arthor, wondering how he feels about jumping off the cliff. Arthor’s face is composed—ashen—making me think there’s a storm brewing inside.

“Is it even possible to survive a two hundred foot fall?” I whisper. No one answers.

“The second phase will be held in the Republic of South Newland,” President Volkov announces. Two men and two women step onto the stage, parading around with smiles on their faces, waving the Republic of South Newland’s flag in the air. Finally, they make their way to their seats and smile, nodding to the leaders of Normark.

“The Republic of South Newland has a plethora of caves and waters.” President Volkov greets each of the leaders with a handshake, his smile coming across as a forced grin. After they sit down, he continues speaking. “During the first round of phase two, you will find yourselves balancing across floating disks, high above Black Valley. During the second round, you will literally be elevated to new heights, and during the third round, you will encounter a surprise obstacle course. Finally, the third and last phase will be held in...” he waits for the crowd to grow anxious. “Do you want to know?”

“Is he seriously asking us that?” Arthor whispers. I stymie a despairing laugh by clasping my hand over my mouth. I’m so nervous that my hands feel like icicles and they’re trembling.

“I can’t hear you. Do you want to know?” We cheer, though we are far from enthusiastic.

“The O-Region. And the Eastern Republic will be benefitting this program.” Murmurings go through the crowd while the final four leaders—all men—parade the stage with the Eastern Republic flag waving above their heads. Like me, many of the Laborers in Newland still consider the super nation traitors because they didn’t send help when the rogue Unifer army usurped our country. I don’t understand why the Eastern Republic didn’t stop the rogue Unifers, but my father says it was because the rogue army had

grown so big that the Eastern Republic was just glad to be rid of the threat of attack.

“The Outer Region?” Arthor says, his mouth dropping open.

Eastern Republic scientists were commissioned to recreate extinct beasts like the saber-toothed tiger and some of the more fearsome dinosaurs. When that succeeded, it was rumored that the scientists had also begun to create new creatures based on old mythologies, like dragons and sea monsters.

After President Volkov greets the four men, he continues. “During this part of the event, you will cross Magma Island, find your way through the Caves of Choice, and finally encounter Savage Jungle, where the most vicious beasts—not known to the average man—live.”

Johnny must have seen my worried expression because he leans over and says, “Don’t worry; you won’t make it that far.”

“Don’t worry, neither will you,” Arthor says without looking at him.

Johnny scoffs, but sits back in his seat.

“Now, let me talk about prizes. Participants who complete the Savage Run in its entirety, and score high enough in the appropriate areas, will be granted Class-1 Master citizenship. But the top three fastest will receive extra perks. The third fastest participant will receive one million Newkos.”

The gathering gasps. One million Newkos is enough money to maintain a very comfortable lifestyle for many years.

President Volkov continues. “The second fastest participant will receive five million Newkos.”

I feel the energy build in the room.

“And the fastest participant, the ultimate Savage of all, will receive ten million Newkos.” He pauses, letting it all sink in.

“And now, for our very special guest. A jewel so rare he stands out like a solitary star on a black night. A boy braver than any other here—a dreamer in his own right. A young man who possesses all the Savage Run was founded upon—the courage to have faith even when all the odds are against him. Please welcome to the stage, Joseph Wood.”

It takes me a moment to grasp that President Volkov invited me to join him on the stage; I’m not quite used to responding to my new name. I look over at Nicholas, who looks just as surprised as I probably do, and then I catch a quick glimpse of Johnny—whose face has turned beet red.

“Don’t be afraid, young man,” President Volkov says. “I heard how horrible the press has been toward you and I wanted to reward your valor publicly, among the bravest. While they may see you as foolish, I see you as a young man

destined for great things.” He reaches his palm toward me.

Somehow I manage to stand up and Mai takes my arm and escorts me to the stage. If only my knees would stop knocking and I could breathe I might be able to make a good first impression. He could have my head if he wanted to so I had better figure a way to keep my wits about me.

Once up the stairs, I join President Volkov at the stand. From this distance, I see all the wrinkles that line his face—the grooves of an angry man.

“What a handsome fellow.” He takes my hand and raises it up with his, high into the air. About a third of the audience cheers, so my guess is that many of them aren’t very glad that I’m here. Or they feel so sorry for me that they can’t muster the strength to cheer for such a sad scene. By the time President Volkov lowers my hand, all the energy has been sucked out of the room, but it doesn’t deter President Volkov at all. He doesn’t seem to be a man who cares what others think.

President Volkov wishes me good luck and tells me to go sit back down again. On the way down the steps, I trip, almost landing on my face. Now everyone will think I’m a klutz, which I’m not usually, of course, just when thousands of people are watching me.

The ceremony continues and each of the representatives of the hosting countries take the

stand for a few minutes, speaking of how privileged they are to be part of something so grand. Even though the countries backing the Savage Run don't subscribe to our hierarchical society, they seem happy enough to support it. And of course they can when they're receiving oil in exchange.

O. J. takes over from there. He says that phase one is not about how fast one completes the obstacles. If you survive it, you move onto phase two. If you quit, you're sent back home and if you die, well, no need explaining that.

"But it gets harder," O. J. says. "To move on beyond phase two, participants must be in the fastest fifty percent. The slowest fifty percent will be sent packing. Everyone who completes the third phase and qualifies according to Master standards will be granted Class-1 Master citizenship." Of course he doesn't mention what those qualifications are, and I have a feeling I will never know. He continues, "No one is allowed to kill or harm anyone."

Strange. During the highlights, they showed several participants who did exactly that.

"Once the first phase is completed, the survivors will be brought back to Trollheim, the capital of Normark, for a benefit gala to raise funds for the survivors of the Savage Run." Then he goes over the penalties. "Participants who veer off any course will be disqualified and

participants who start ahead of the clock will receive the severest of penalties. Other warning signs and prompts will be given along the way.”

Does this mean they’ll be imprisoned? Killed? I sure don’t want to find out.

“I wish you all the very best, my friends, and may your strength last you all the way to the end, and may honor and might be with you every step, every stroke, and every decision,” O. J. says. “Now the time has come for the first obstacle course to begin. Registrars, remind your participants about the shortcuts. Participants say farewell to your registrars and exit through these doors.” O. J. points behind him to the right of the stage to the gigantic steel double door. “Registrars, please wait until your participants leave, and then proceed to exit through the doors you came in.” The Savage Run anthem blares through the speakers again.

“You ready?” Arthor asks me.

“No,” I say. And I’m not—not even close, but I still stand up. Mai comes over to me.

“Did Nicholas tell you?” she asks, her eyes demanding.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll see you on the other side.” She turns away from me, but not before I notice how she closes her eyes and exhales.

Nicholas finishes saying farewell to the others, and then he approaches me.

“Remember what I told you,” he says. “Just look for the shortcuts and safe zones; they’re everywhere. But if you don’t find them, just keep moving. Not all rounds have short cuts or safe zones.” He turns to the rest of the participants from Culmination. “For the last jump, make sure you jump feet first, no interlocking of the fingers, close your eyes and plug your nose.” He hugs me like he did Arthor before me, patting me on the back and whispers in my ear, “When you get back, maybe we’ll see about that dancing.”

Suddenly my ears feel hot and I find myself not wanting to let go. I don’t understand why. Maybe it’s because he’s been kind to me or maybe it’s because I’ve started to feel safe around him. And safety is what I need right now since I feel like that little chickadee, fallen out of my nest, waiting for the end. Waiting for the predator.

Except...there’s no one who will come and save me. I’m completely and utterly alone in this. If I am to survive, I have to save myself. I have to trust my every instinct.

Yet, unlike the bird, I have the ability to get up and run. And I’m the one charging toward the predator, hunting it down, challenging it to do its worst

Chapter 18

I step onto the Savage Run bus with Arthor, making sure Johnny is nowhere in sight. Making my way to the back of the bus, I inhale. The hot air sticks to the insides of my nostrils, and it reeks of sweat and exhaust fumes. Most of the participants appear clean, but after sitting through the Opening Ceremony, watching how others were slaughtered—and how they're likely to be slaughtered, too—undoubtedly, most of them have produced buckets of perspiration.

Arthor finds us an empty row in the back and we sit down. “Stay with me and you’ll be safe,” he whispers.

He wants us to run together so he can protect me. I want to tell him I’ll be safe no matter what during the marathon; I don’t weigh enough to make the landmines go off. But if I tell him, he’d probably only get upset due to my huge advantage. How do I explain that I don’t want to be around him if he sets a landmine off? I know it’s a horrible thing to think, but I need to stay alive.

Twenty or so minutes later, the bus drops us off by an underground autobahn—a thermal-

protected titanium capsule that moves through a tunnel with the assistance of a vacuum. Cramming into a twelve-man capsule with Arthor, I get into my leather seat and strap on the five-point harness. I've heard that riding in a capsule in the autobahn feels like being ejected into space in a rocket. Obviously, I've never been ejected into space, so I don't have anything to compare it to. All I know is that this is probably the easiest part of the Savage Run, and I can't understand why my insides turn to liquid.

"Doors closing," a female voice says over the speakers. The capsule starts to vibrate and hum. "Prepare for departure," the female voice says.

The moment the capsule takes off, it's as if I'm falling from the sky. My stomach does a series of summersaults and my brain feels like it's whirling inside my head. I close my eyes. My hand is getting used to not reaching for my locket. My head spins for a moment longer before it finally stabilizes enough to where I can open my eyes. I look over at the other guys in the capsule and their faces appear just as relaxed as before we took off.

"Have you ridden in one of these before?" I ask Arthor, who also seems unaffected.

"No, but Tristan wrote to me and told me how much he would love it if I could experience it someday," Arthor says.

The boy sitting on the other side of me groans loudly and hurls into a bag. He's a lot smaller than some participants—maybe just a little larger than Arthor's size, which makes me think that he's a Laborer, too.

"Come on, man. That's gross," one of the guys says.

"I can't help it if I get motion sickness," the boy defends himself.

"I never get motion sick, but I do get nauseous when I'm nervous...or afraid," I say, trying to help him feel better.

He reaches out his hand. "I'm Clark, pleased to meet you Joseph."

He must remember me from the embarrassing moment when President Volkov had me come up on stage. I lift my hand and wave, pretending the reach is too far. Does he really expect me to shake his hand that has slime on it? "So is this your first obstacle course?" I ask.

"I've completed three other national obstacle runs, but they were much shorter than this one. You?" Clark says, wiping some leftover saliva onto his sleeve.

I force myself not to squirm in my seat. "I have to admit that this is my first one."

His right eyebrow rises. "President Volkov is right. You are brave."

"Or stupid," I mumble.

Arthor nudges me. "Brave."

I hear a guy snickering at the end of the capsule, and when I look at him, he's staring at me. Obviously he disagrees with the last comment. Then it dawns on me: maybe he suspects I'm a girl? My eyes scan the capsule and as I look at each person, they look away. They're all gawking at me. Do they know? I forget about having wrapped my chest and I briefly look down, just to make sure the gauze hasn't moved out of place, which it hasn't. My chest is still as flat as a board.

As the capsule projects forward, there's not much as far as a conversation goes. Although I'm not tired, I close my eyes, pretending to be sleeping in order to ignore all the questioning faces and prying eyes.

It seems like forever, but finally, after a forty-five minute ride, the female announcer says, "Approaching the country of Normark." The capsule slows gradually until it eases into a complete stop. "Please disembark with caution and welcome to the land of the midnight sun."

Exiting the capsule, I file out into a white underground tunnel and follow the flashing arrows that point to the left. When I get on the revolving stairs, they're already packed with hundreds of young men. I feel like a piece of krill in the midst of whales, just hoping to go unnoticed. There are no visible lamps in the

tunnel, but the walls themselves give off light, making it easy to see everyone's tense faces.

Once at the top, I exit the tunnel and continue to follow the hordes of teenage boys making their way over to the start line.

When I notice that Arthor is nowhere to be seen, my chest tightens. I don't want to run with him, but I'm not prepared to be separated yet, either. I turn around and scan the masses. The current of participants continues onward, one participant after another shoving me backward as their shoulders collide with mine. When I see Johnny approaching, I quickly swivel around. Arthor probably thought that it was best for us to run separately, too. Losing each other in the crowd is the best way to avoid any awkward conversations.

Moments later, I arrive at the start line—a red tape strung from one post to another, roughly the length of the aircraft that brought me to Volkov Village. Ahead of me is a wide dirt path and on either side of the path stands a ridge of mountains that continue into the distance, far beyond what I can see.

The sky is overcast and gray—perfect for running a marathon—and the mountains remind me of the ones that enclose Culmination, specifically the very one's by Master Douglas' mansion. They also remind me of Gemma, and in an instant, my chest feels like it's going to

collapse. If I had turned back for her she might be here with me now instead of buried in some unmarked grave outside Culmination. It was a spineless choice; I was such a coward. I deserted her and left her in the hands of a monster who had no intention of letting her live. I close my eyes and dig my fingernails into my palms.

No, I can't think like that.

In reality, she probably would have been a huge burden. It's not like she would have been able to handle these obstacles, and I was an idiot to think so in the first place when I came up with my plan. Gemma was always the dainty, feminine one, the one who would get hurt and complain if things became too difficult. It's best this way so that I can focus on saving my own skin and not have to look out for her. I take a deep breath and brush a tear from my cheek. I'm such a liar.

"There you are."

I open my eyes and turn around. "Oh...I thought I lost you," I say flatly when I see Arthor.

"Never. We'll run together, okay?"

I haven't had time to come up with the right words to say about how I think we should run separately. "I...uh...we shouldn't...don't you think..."

"Don't worry. I'll help you."

"No, I..." Someone shoves me from the ground so I fall forward onto my hands and knees.

“That’s where you belong, Imp.”

“Leave him alone, Johnny,” Arthor says, shoving Johnny backward.

Another guy steps in between them. I recognize him from our group. He’s the tall, blonde one. “Dude, totally not worth it. Johnny, if you continue, you’ll have two to fight against.”

“Yeah, sure,” Johnny says. A Unifer walks by and Johnny moves farther down the line.

“Thanks, Timothy,” Arthor says. They clasp hands and bump their chests together. “Good luck out there.”

“Yeah, you too man. See you Joseph.”

“Yeah.” I stand up and brush the dirt off my pants and palms. Maybe I can wait just a tad before I separate from Arthor. We line up with the other participants and my pulse accelerates. I wonder if any of the guys here are nervous, or if any of them think they’ll make it, or if the ones who will die somehow know. I certainly can’t tell if it will be me who will lose my life today.

I see Clark at the end of the line and his face is like a stone. Above his head is a large electronic clock, presenting the countdown in red numbers, and it shows we have thirty seconds to go. I wipe my sweaty hands on my pants. For every second that passes, the tension grows thicker and I can feel the other participants’ nervous energy like it’s a part of me.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I see one of the young men slip underneath the red tape and sprint out onto the pathway. Does he actually think they'll let him get a head start? Wasn't he listening when O.J. said that there would be severe penalties to anyone who did such a thing? Before long, the young man stops running. He arches his back, and his hands flail out from his sides. I hear no gunshots going off, but he's moving like he's being pumped full of lead. He falls lifeless to the ground. My hand cups my mouth, stifling a cry—the first casualty of the Savage Run.

“A sniper,” Arthor says, his eyes glued on the young man.

I look around, trying to see if I can locate the shooter, but he's too well hidden. They must be all over the place ready to shoot anyone who doesn't follow the rules.

“They weren't kidding when they said severe,” he says through his teeth.

A hovercraft flies over the dead body and sends out a cone-shaped ray, disintegrating the young man's remains faster than my frazzled brain can register. This all happens so hastily; there's still five seconds left on the clock. The marathon is continuing on as if nothing happened, as if some young man wasn't just shot down—murdered.

“Tread lightly,” Arthor says to me, and with that, the piercing sound of the start pistol being fired rings through the valley.

Chapter 19

The sound of the start pistol brings me right back to that moment when Gemma was shot. And suddenly all I can see is her lifeless body lying there, slaughtered like an animal.

“Joseph!” I hear Arthor yell. “We have to go.” He pulls me by the elbow and I shuffle unwillingly after him. What am I doing here? I don’t belong here. It was a huge mistake to come here and now I’m suffering the consequences of my actions. There’s no way I can survive these obstacles and I was stupid to think that I have a chance. In the end, my father was right: I’ll bring shame to our family’s name.

“Joseph, snap out of it. We have to go.”

Suddenly, my cheek stings and I’m back at the start line with Arthor. I don’t know how long I’ve been away, but every last contender has left.

“Get your act together, Joseph.”

“You slapped me?”

“And I’ll do it again if it makes your feet move,” he says, shaking me.

I snap my arm away from his grasp and dash down the wide, rocky pathway—not so much to start the marathon, but more to get away from him—both because he slapped me and I don’t want to run next to him. Soon he catches up to me, though we don’t speak. I’m running so fast that we’re panting.

My legs are strong from having biked up the steep mountains in Culmination all these years and my anger from Arthur’s slap, combined with all that has happened over the past twenty-four hours, feeds my speed. My heart rate finds a steady rhythm, and as I continue to move ahead, inching closer to the last contender in front of me, I feel warmth spread through my body and beads of sweat gathering on my forehead.

Why am I doing this? When I planned this, it was to gain my freedom, yes, but it was mostly to help Gemma escape. At least that’s what I’ve been telling myself all along. However, if I’m completely honest, she never asked me to get her out of there. I just assumed it was for her best interest. I knew best. But I didn’t. I didn’t know anything at all. So why am I doing this?

I pump my arms and move my legs faster, passing a few of the other participants. Nicholas’

question pops into my mind. What is the first thing I want to do? If I survive, I will have to answer that question. And more. What are all of the other things I want to do? I realize Nicholas's question was exceptionally well placed. He must have known how down I was—how much I was struggling—and that I needed that question to move myself forward.

Arthor is the first one to break the silence. “Sorry I...slapped you. I didn't know...how else to get...your attention.” He's sucking wind.

I know he did it to get me going, but I'm still upset. Besides, I really wish he would figure out that running alone is the best and safest option. Do I have to spell it out for him? Maybe if I try the opposite and run a little slower, letting all the others pass, Arthor will get tired of waiting for me and move ahead with the others. I slow my pace, but he keeps on me like a pesky mosquito. I speed up, but again, he's right there with me. Finally, I run as close as I can to the barbed wires lining the edges of the pathway, thinking, surely, he won't follow me there—or at least he'll say something. But no.

Doesn't he get that if one of us sets off a landmine, we'll both be blown to bits? Doesn't he see that absolutely no one else is running together? They all seem smarter than this.

I hold my tongue a while longer, and instead of continuing to mull over how upset I am at

Arthor, I scrutinize the ground, searching for clues as to where the landmines are hidden. Then, I remember that there are shortcuts. But what shortcuts could there be in a marathon? Maybe there's a safe zone, a part of the path containing no landmines. I decide to look for the safe zone—maybe then I could keep running with Arthor.

I jog ahead, keeping at the tail end of the group with Arthor. Minutes pass, and I feel strong—like I could run forever. I thought for sure, by now, I would have heard or seen an explosion, but all I hear are the footsteps of the participants and an occasional shouted greeting between friends. After running for a good hour without seeing or hearing a single explosion, I relax a little. They never did mention how many landmines they had buried. Maybe there aren't as many as I had imagined.

“How far do you think we've run?” I ask, having almost forgotten that I was upset at Arthor in the first place.

“I'd say we're closing in on eight miles. You're doing really great, Heidi.”

I give him a mean look. “Don't call me that here.”

“Sorry. It just slipped out.”

As we continue to run, Arthor's face becomes increasingly redder. It seems like I'm not really perspiring since the Savage Run uniform absorbs the moisture right away. But I know from the

wetness in the nape of my neck, and the drops rolling down my forehead stinging my eyes, that I'm sweating like a pig. Once I become dehydrated, my performance will suffer—all of ours will—and the bad news is I don't think they will be providing any water or refreshments along the way.

We continue for a couple more miles in silence and my mouth slowly takes on the consistency of rawhide. The muscles in my lower body start to cramp; I'm used to biking, not running. It doesn't help that the clouds have evaporated and that the sun is scorching the skin on my face.

When I hear the first blast, my chest feels like it will implode on itself. The blast is far ahead, but I still see the smoke rise and hear the clamors. Now I can no longer fool myself into thinking that the road is safe and I can continue to run alongside Arthor.

Closing in on the place where the blast went off, I veer away as far as I can and keep my eyes glued forward. Still, my curiosity compels me to look, so I slow down, falling behind Arthor.

There's a crater in the road, about the size of my trailer back home—though nothing else. No body. No blood. No smell other than the scent of smoke. But the strange thing is that I didn't see or hear a hovercraft pass by. Was the landmine so powerful that it disintegrated the victim's entire

body, blood and all, not leaving a single trace of the poor guy's existence? When the rogue Unifers usurped our land, it is said they used bombs that completely evaporated anything they came in touch with. Are these similar to the ones they used back then?

I continue onward, trying to think of other things, forcing my mind to move beyond the shock. I see Arthor running in the distance and intentionally run very slowly so I don't catch up with him. The blast makes me even more certain that I absolutely should not be running with him. It will get me killed. But then the guilt sets in. He stood up for me when I needed, vouching I was a friend of his from school, telling me he'd help me if I needed it during the Savage Run. Slapping me...plus, he's here running with me now when he could be solely worrying about himself. I think of how I betrayed Gemma and how much I regret not running to save her. But this is different— isn't it? Out here we're on our own. Back there, I was in charge of her.

When a deafening blast goes off much closer to me, I cower at first, but then reflexively look toward the sound. A body flies through the air and lands with a bounce. I avert my eyes, but not before I recognize the boy as one of the participants from Culmination. I don't know his name. His body lies lifeless—dismembered—on the rocks and dirt. Then there's the god-awful

smell of roasting flesh. My stomach revolts, and I bend over when I feel the warm and acidic fluid rise up my throat.

“You okay?” Arthor rubs my back as I hurl.

I wipe the sides of my lips with the back of my hand, wishing I had some water to rinse the vomit from my mouth. “I’m fine.”

“Just try not to look or think about it,” he says.

“Yeah.” I glance back at the boy, but there’s no use in going over to him to see if he’ll make it. His body is beyond repair—shredded—and the expression on his face is vacant—dead. A hovercraft zooms down from the sky and beams a ray on his leftovers, causing them to disintegrate. All the guys dying in the obstacles, is this the burial they’ll receive? What will their families say when they find out?

Arthor runs ahead, but I intentionally wait until there’s ample distance between us before I continue to run. He stops and waits for me. As I catch up to him, I speed up. But instead of losing him, he’s right by my side. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

I have to say something. “It’s way more dangerous if we run together. Seriously, if one of us sets off a landmine, the other one will die.”

“Oh.” He thinks for a moment. “But I’m looking out for you.”

I huff. Why can't he just recognize it's a stupid thing to do?

"If you think it's..." he starts.

"Yes, I think so." I sprint ahead, leaving Arthor a good thirty feet behind me. Taking action is the best way to handle this situation—I mean, does he expect us to stand in the middle of the field and talk about emotions and how we should have each other's backs and all that stuff? Why do I have to be the rational one? Still, I can't help but glance back at Arthor and when I do, I see he's keeping his distance. I feel bad for him, especially since I'm only acting out of self-preservation. He's acting out of pure selflessness.

Chapter 20

The next few miles are uneventful as far as blasts going off close to me. From time to time I hear one or two in the distance, but once I reach the site of the explosions, there's nothing but a gaping hole in the ground or some blood.

I run on for a while—maybe five miles—and when I hear another landmine go off, I don't

initially react. However, when I hear a scream along with the blast, and continued wailing, I race toward the sound. I can't just let the guy lie there and die alone so I run to his side and kneel down next to him.

When I see him, I see that it's Clark from the capsule.

There's blood everywhere—on his clothes, in his hair and even between his teeth. He reaches a trembling hand up toward me, as if asking me to help him. But there is nothing I can do for him except watch him die.

“You did well,” is all I'm able to say before he closes his eyes and slips away. I exhale with him and don't remember to take a breath until Arthor shakes my shoulder.

“Come,” Arthor says. “You have to keep moving.”

I hit his arm off my shoulder. “This isn't fair,” I say. Arthor grabs me by the arm and stands me up. He nudges me forward, but my legs refuse to move on their own. Arthor shoves me again and somehow I'm able to move my legs one step at a time. He keeps on me, nudging me every time I slow down. But I can't keep going. I swivel around and lunge toward him. “Leave me alone, okay?” I take a swing at him, but he ducks.

Grabbing me by the waist and turning me around, he says, “Keep moving.”

“I don't want to. Take your hands off me.”

He wraps his arms around me and picks me up, leaving me helpless to do anything but kick my legs and scream. “You don’t have a choice, Heidi.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“I’m going to set you down now, so please calm yourself. I promise I’ll keep my distance as long as you continue to run. Will you agree to that?”

“Fine,” I bark.

He sets me down and takes three big steps away from me, holding his hands up, his palms facing me. “I’m just trying to help you. I don’t want to see you die out here, don’t you see?”

“I don’t want to continue.”

“You might be saying that now, but...there’s so much to live for. I mean...if we make it, our lives will never be the same again. Just hold that thought right there...” He lifts up his hand. “Right in front of you—like a beacon.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. I’ve seen how you bike up those hills in Culmination. Don’t tell me you’re not strong enough. And if you can work that hard for someone else, I think then you can manage to do the same when your freedom is involved.”

I can’t face him because he’s right. “You don’t know what I’ve been through.” Turning around, I sprint away from him. I don’t want his help; I never asked for it. I just want to be left

alone. But maybe I don't want his help since whenever I've received help in the past, so much more is expected in return. Yet, I can't deny that Arthor is different and doesn't seem to want anything in return.

As I continue onward, the muscles in my legs start to tremble. How much farther do I have to run? I still feel somewhat strong, but seeing these young men blown to bits is wreaking havoc with my mind. If I could just sit down and rest for five minutes to think, to process it all, I'd be fine. I just need a moment. To gather my thoughts. To make sense of it all. But I can't. If I stop, it's the same as saying I'm dropping out. So I continue—counting my steps. Just one more. Then another. And another.

True to his word, Arthor keeps his distance for the next few miles, only glancing back once in a while. Mile after mile, my mouth feels drier and drier. What I wouldn't give for a glass of water right now, and a shot of painkillers to dull the achiness in my feet. Biking is so much easier on the feet.

All of a sudden, I hear at least ten landmines go off back to back in the distance. I stop when I hear the cries of the wounded young men, and immediately I plug my ears. I can't listen to their screams because it's as if their voices bleed into my bones. From the corner of my eye, I see Arthor zooming past me. What is he doing?

When he's about a hundred feet in front of me, he slows down to a jog and glances back at me. I keep moving. Reaching the place of the massive blast, I see that there's nothing left. Nothing but craters and blood. No injured participants. No bodies. I suppose if one is too injured to continue, then one is taken to the hospital. For the sake of their families, at least I hope this is the case.

My feet are dragging to the ground now. Surely, I must be coming to the end of the marathon soon. I have to be. My right foot has gone numb and I need to pee, but there's no way I'm going to stop in the open area to squat to relieve myself. That's one thing that's unfair about this; the guys can just whip it out and do their business. My head has been pounding for some time, and I know I'm in danger when I stumble over a small rock in my path. Catching myself with my palms, I let out a cry. They are still sore from my fall yesterday, and the wounds reopen and start to bleed. I roll onto my back and rest my arm across my eyes to shield them from the sun. It feels so good to rest. Every last muscle in my body screams for me to stay down. But it's not long before I hear footsteps, and when I uncover my eyes, I see Arthor standing above me.

"Don't you dare," I say, holding my arm out in front of me.

"Then get up!"

"No."

“Five...four...”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Three...”

I stagger to my feet and brush the sand and rocks off my palms. “There, happy?”

“Yes. Now run.” He points.

“Since when are you my master?”

“I’m not your master. Just a friend.”

I know his intentions aren’t to boss me around or to hurt me; they’re to help me. But the way he’s doing it is driving me crazy. “Okay, okay, just run ahead. I’ll follow.” My voice is harsher than I intended, but I’m too tired to make amends.

We continue on like this for a while, him glancing back at me, me grumbling every time he does. From time to time, a landmine explodes—but instead of looking toward the explosion, I’ve learned to train my eyes on the back of Arthor’s head. Maybe having him here isn’t as bad as I thought.

The sun hangs high in the sky and every step has my legs screaming at me. What I wouldn’t do to have my bike here. In the near distance, a whole bunch of landmines go off at once—fifty, sixty, maybe more—startling me enough to get the blood flowing to my brain. I stop and lean my hands on my thighs, giving myself just a moment to recover. Then, I hear whooping and screaming

just beyond the gentle hill where Arthor is. He looks back at me, and his lips rise in triumph.

“We made it!” Arthor yells.

Chapter 21

My feet still ache, and I'm physically and mentally exhausted. I can hear the end of the marathon just beyond the hill, which gives my feet renewed strength. Go, don't stop. Go, Heidi. Cresting the hill, I see water. Blessed water. The sun reflects off the surface of the lake like a gold medal and a sudden surge of energy awakens my tired arms and legs. With every muscle in my lower body aching, I dash toward the lake and jump into it. I plunge my face into the cool water and drink deeply. I hadn't thought to ask if the water was safe, but everyone's drinking it, so it must be. Unless they want everyone to die at once, which would make the Savage Run a complete tragedy. It would do nothing for Volkov's popularity. I high-five Arthor, and his face is beaming.

“You made it,” he says.

“Yeah, thanks for pushing me back there.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

I roll my eyes.

“Just keep going, okay?”

“Okay. And if you need it, I’ll help you out.”

We sit down and I pull off the Savage Run shoes. I dig my feet into the wet sand and feel the grains rubbing against my sore toes. I’m sure if we stick together, there will be an opportunity to pay him back.

A cameraman wearing a Savage Run outfit films me from a mere six inches away.

“Why are you filming?” Arthor asks.

“This is for President Volkov,” the cameraman says.

I just ignore him. It’s not like I have any extra energy to give him. A few of the cameramen are out on the water in motorboats. They’ll probably be following us all the way, catching the gory details of the interaction between the e-condas and us. President Volkov wouldn’t want to miss seeing how his precious creations interact with the inferior class. I try to look for any short cuts. Nicholas said not every obstacle course had one, but I had almost expected that at least one of the two first would.

Watching the other participants brave the lake, wading forward into the unknown deep, I can’t help but dread what’s to come. They’ve probably starved the predators for days so the slithering

electrical monsters will eat anything offered to them.

Arthor and I relax for a few more minutes before delving into the second round, allowing our muscles to regain some strength before we put more demands on them. There's a flashing sign that reads if we wait longer than twenty minutes to continue, we'll be disqualified. This could mean a myriad of things including being shot like the young man who tried to get a head start in the marathon. The sign also reads to swim toward the setting sun, which would be westward. How long will it take me to swim ten miles when I'm exhausted, hungry, and find it hard to stay focused? At least four hours, I'm sure. My arms grow heavy at the thought.

If I were still back at home, I'd be riding around on my bike, delivering medicine right now, trying to sneak a peek of the Savage Run coverage between runs. But I don't want to think about the life I chose to leave behind. Nor the people I betrayed.

I wiggle my legs a little—the achiness in my joints is impossible to ignore. Sitting down, my body has decided to revolt and feels even stiffer than while I was actually running. But I don't have the luxury of time to sit here and rest and I must keep going before I grow too sore, unable to get a move on.

I look over at Arthor. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” Arthor says, his eyes void of their normal energy, his shoulders slumping. Instead of getting up, like I expect him to, he remains seated for a while longer. Eventually, he climbs to his feet and slowly tilts his head from side to side, loosening the muscles in his neck.

I wade out until the cool water reaches my waist, and stop to wait for Arthor. Unable to hold my bladder anymore, I relieve myself in the water. It’s totally gross, I know, but they can hardly expect me to hold it until I have completed the entire first phase.

Of the three rounds in this phase, swimming is my least favorite, one of the factors being that I never really was a strong swimmer. Soon, the water reaches my chest, and I gasp at how cold it is. Once I get moving, I’m sure I’ll build up body heat again. I grit my teeth, submerge my shoulders into the water, and start to swim. From the very first breaststroke, I think I felt something in the water—an e-conda?

“You good?” Arthor asks, swimming next to me.

“Yes. Just a little...nervous.”

“And you’re okay with me swimming with you?”

I can’t tell if he’s being difficult or playful. “That was only during the marathon.”

“Good.”

Unlike the marathon, the screams come right away. Ahead of us in the sunlight, I see a young man, his arms flailing, his voice screeching in pain. "Get away from me. Help! I withdraw! I quit! Help me!" He continues to scream for help, but no one comes to his aid. The Unifers in the boats just ignore him. Like me, everyone knows that if they swim over to help him, they're dead meat.

"This way," I say to Arthor, taking a long detour around the poor guy. If I think about it too much, I might panic. We swim on, stroke after stroke, and again, we hear screams. This time the screams come from a distance, so we don't see the person who's being attacked. It's a little easier to ignore these screams.

"Ah!" Arthor's eyes go wild with fear and he gasps. "I felt something."

For a moment, I'm unable to move. Arthor thrashes his arms into the water as his eyes search for an e-conda. All of a sudden, he lets out a shriek. "It shocked me!"

In an attempt to scare off the e-conda, I kick my legs as hard and as fast as I can. Then, as I feared, I feel a jolt, too, and a current rushes through my body, leaving my muscles immobilized. And everything throbs. Unable to move my arms or legs, I sink beneath the surface. Keeping my eyes open, I see dozens of thick, snake-like sea-creatures slithering below my feet,

just waiting to make their next move. I tell my legs to kick, but they won't. I try to scream for help, but below the surface the water drowns out my voice—no one can hear me. Even if they could, they still wouldn't come. The water muffles the sounds of the e-condas' sharp shrieks, making them sound like a deeper octave of my bikes' squeaky breaks. I need to take a breath soon; the air is running out. Kick stupid legs, kick. This time, my right leg moves, and within seconds, I can move both my legs and my arms. Soon, I'm able to command all my limbs, enough for me to stop sinking and begin rising. I have to get up quicker—the surface is so far away. I see light up above, and with each stroke, my body feels stronger. Once I reach the surface, I gasp for air. Even though I wasn't under for very long, the exertion of kicking and punching the water to get rid of the e-condas has made me breathless.

Arthor is still above water. "We have to continue, or they'll eat us alive!" I yell. A motorboat approaches us with a Unifer holding a camera, coming to feed off our demise. They think they're so safe in their vessels, but I bet the e-condas could tip the motorboats over with one flick of their tails, and they would be fighting for their lives, too. I almost wish one of them would fall into the water. It's not fair how we have to fight so hard for our freedom while they were born with it.

Arthor and I swim as fast as we can, cutting through the water, kicking our legs. Adrenaline courses through me and I feel like I'm on the verge of death. This must be it. The hope that I'd make it through the first phase has vanished into oblivion. All I'm left with is envisioning my dead body at the bottom of the lake with a gigantic snake wrapped around me. Or maybe the e-conda will swallow me whole, and I'll slowly suffocate in its stomach.

A few feet in front of me, there's another young man who appears completely incapable of lifting his limbs, and his head is bobbing in and out of the water. As I continue to watch him, I see the water is dyed with blood and he spews and coughs pink water from his mouth. A long, thick snake with a head twice as big as mine, spirals itself around the young man, causing him to scream louder. I hear a loud buzzing sound as the snake shocks the young man—a thousand volts of electricity streams through the poor boy's body. Before long, his screams melt into mellow whimpers, and he slides beneath the water's surface with the e-conda still wrapped around him, leaving nothing except bursting bubbles on the red water's surface. I become angry at once. How could President Volkov do such horrible things to young men?

Arthor lets out a cry, sounding like a cross between a scream and a sob. His arms and legs go

motionless and his head starts to sink beneath the water's surface. With the drama dwindling around us, the Unifers turn on their engines, preparing to move onto the next location. A thought pops into my mind, and though it's a stupid one, I'm willing to try anything at this point. "Swim toward the boat," I say. Arthor doesn't respond so I grab him by the collar to keep him from sinking farther beneath the gentle waves. I haul him with me toward the motorboat's stern. When I reach it, I grab hold of the edge with my free hand, staying as far away from the moving propellers as possible, trying to stay as low in the water as I can so that the Unifers don't see me.

Almost before I'm ready, the motorboat takes off with a jolt. I feel my fingers slipping, but I refuse to let this be the end of my short existence, and cleave on as we're hauled away. The water gushes against my body and my fingers feel like they'll be ripped off if there's any more pressure. Water sprays in my face so I close my eyes. After some time, the boat slows down a notch, and I open my eyes to assess where we are. We've cleared the area where several attacks have occurred, so I let go. Sinking into the water, we stop moving. My hand and lower arm feels spent, like the muscles and tendons have been stretched beyond their limits.

I look at Arthor. "Can you move?"

“Yes, thank you. I would have drowned had you not...”

“We’re not out of danger yet.”

He leans his head back into the water. “Are you okay?” He swings his head quickly to the side, the drops from his hair showering the glassy surface. “Did they get you?”

“A little, but I’m fine.” My legs sting horribly, but I don’t dare to look at them, afraid the e-condas have burned my flesh to the bone, and if I see the blood, I’ll lose my courage to keep going. If I bleed to death while swimming, so be it. “You?”

“I’m good. Let’s keep moving,” he says.

The next few miles are uneventful. Every time I think I feel movement beneath the water, I tuck my legs in beneath me, and silently pray it was just my imagination.

The clouds have returned, and as they turn to rose gold, a heavy fog rolls in. Now I won’t be able to see Devil’s Cliff in the distance—a hopeful beacon to swim toward. And with the fog there, it’s also impossible to tell if I’m swimming westward.

“This is ridiculous. We don’t even know where we’re going,” I say. “We could be going in circles.”

“Just keep moving. The fog must mean we’re close.” Arthor flips over and starts swimming on

his back. “They want to make it harder on us— not easier.”

“Maybe,” I give him. We swim on for another ten minutes before I say something. “How do they expect us to get through this fog?”

“They don’t,” Arthor says. “They only expect the elite to make it.”

I shoot him an angry glare. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

He shakes his head at me. “Don’t even ask me that.”

I want to rip his hair out, but I think it has more to do with the fact that I’m exhausted and hungry than that I’m upset at him. As we keep swimming, I start to think about how I haven’t even made it through the first of three phases, and how I’m already both physically and emotionally depleted. How easy it would be to give up and let myself sink into the watery abyss. I’m sure it wouldn’t take long for me to go unconscious and slip into a quiet death. While contemplating this, I feel a warm current against my body. “Do you feel that?” I ask Arthor.

Arthor stops swimming forward for a moment and treads water instead. “We must be close to shore.”

The new information makes me abandon the thought of my suicide operation. If we’re almost there, it means I made it through round two. Eager to be done, I kick harder. But when my

foot hits something hard, I immediately pull my legs close into my body and scream. It must be an e-conda, or worse, maybe there are a whole slew of them and that is why the water turned warmer. Unable to control my fear, I cry out and begin to thrash my arms and legs, sending the water in every which direction.

“It’s okay. It’s okay!” Arthor yells, taking my hands in his. “They’re rocks. We’ve reached the shore. They’re rocks.”

I pause as his words start to sink in. “Really?”

“Really,” he says with a broad smile on his face.

Chapter 22

Still not quite able to believe that we’ve reached the shore, I hesitantly stretch my legs downward. Soon the rocks at the bottom of the lake press against my feet—firm and unyielding. I exhale. Standing up, I gasp in relief; the water

reaches just above my waist. We have reached the shore.

Ecstatic that I have managed to live through two of the three rounds in this phase, I jump into Arthur's arms, whooping and screaming. "We made it!"

He squeezes me back, and we stand wrapped in each other's arms for a long time. Not until I start thinking about how he's got his arms around me do I feel awkward. It's not that I'm attracted to him, and I don't think he likes me in that way either. But standing so close to him, sharing this, not only physical, but very emotional moment, it feels so good to have someone who understands what I've just been through.

I let go. "Sorry."

"No apology needed," he says.

When I turn toward the shore, I see bushes and trees—foliage—but I can't make out any more than that; the fog is still too thick. Eager to get out of the e-conda infested water, I wade toward land, and the instant my feet touch the raggedy, stony shore, I lie down onto the rocks, my legs still in the water. I don't really care how they're stabbing into my back or how I'm cold and wet. I'm safe. And I'm alive. No more e-condas will come after me, and I don't have to worry that one of them might electrocute me or pull me down. How many young men lost their lives?

I press my palms to my eyes and release a laughing, crying sound, and with it, all the tension in my body releases. A moment later, it feels as if all my guts and muscles and bones have been scraped dry and pumped full of jelly. Though my survival has so much more to do with crazy luck than anything, the joy of having lived through the first two rounds is not any less.

When I finally resolve to open my eyes, I let my gaze wander up toward the sky, and there I see Devil's Cliff. It hangs over me like a bad omen. The mountainside is a jagged and vertical sloped monster of a rock, and it extends to the heavens like a pillar of fire—the height dizzying—the red surface looking like it could be something from Hell. Many participants are already climbing up the wall, their fingers and toes gripping onto the edges of the rocks. For the life of me, I can't see the top. The fog is still just as thick. Something tells me it could be much higher than what I dare to imagine. Or dread. How in the world I'm supposed to make it to the top of that mountain is beyond my comprehension. And with the sun soon to set, my muscles already way past spent, climbing Devil's Cliff at night will be impossible.

There isn't a single part of me that isn't achy or sopping wet, but I can't lie here all day. I scramble to my feet and look for Arthur. I find him standing at the base of the cliff reading a

sign. Walking over to him, I notice that my legs sting, and when I look down, I see that they're riddled with minor burns. However, all my pain is temporarily forgotten when I see the back of Arthor's right leg. Part of his calf has a chunk removed. And we still have a cliff—the tallest cliff I've ever seen—to climb. But what's even more mind-boggling is that he hasn't complained about it a single time. I pause behind him. Will he be able to climb the cliff? My heart drops. If he can't climb the cliff by himself, I'll either have to abandon him while I continue to press forward or help him climb to the top.

Arthor turns around and points to the sign.

Fifteen-minute rest stop max.

Without warning, there's a scream from above, and then a loud thud behind us. Instinctively, I turn to look—but stop myself—I know what I'll find there, and I don't want to see it. I never in my wildest imagination would have thought that I'd grow so callous about a dead teenage boy that I'd refrain from walking over to him and showing my respects. But I don't. And I hate myself for it. Instead, I tell Arthor to sit down, and after he complies, I rip off a piece of my uniform to tie it around his injured leg. He moans a little when I cinch it, but stops when I stare him in the eyes.

Should I leave him behind? My chest squeezes.

I study the wrap, and it seems to help control the bleeding. He's going to slow me down significantly, and most likely, he won't be able to make the climb.

“Ready?” he says, gritting his teeth.

“Will you be...?”

He interrupts me, and says angrily, “Don't worry about me.”

I force a smile, but suspect that it looks more like a pained frown. “Okay?” I walk over to the base of the mountain and press my palms against the red rock. When I look up, my stomach drops like I just swallowed a bag of concrete. Of course they had to put the hardest challenge last when we're thoroughly exhausted. A lump forms in my throat, but I force it down and put on a stern face. I lean my back against the cold, hard surface of my next challenge. I need strength, and I need it now. Glancing upward, I see a dozen or so participants ascending the wall, moving slowly, clinging to the mountainside like spiders. I study their movements—their strategies—to see if I can pick up on how to climb the cliff. When I try to survey the best route to climb, I happen to notice a strange pattern of rocks. I hear Nicholas' words in my mind. “All the things you need to succeed are within the obstacles...”

Every few feet there are protruding rocks—stepping stones up the mountainside. And all the guys climbing seem completely oblivious to them. I gasp.

“What?” Arthor asks.

I tell Arthor to come in closer and I show him what I see. The only problem is that the steps are just beyond reach of each other. Why would they go to such lengths to create those ledges if we can't even use them? Then, from the wall, I see movement; a ledge protrudes out from the mountainside as another vanishes just a few feet away. The steps appear and disappear at timed intervals. If I can just figure out the timing, we can climb all the way up.

Suddenly a ledge juts out right next to me. Arthor and I look at each other.

“Let's go,” he says.

Without hesitation, I climb onto it and offer my hand to Arthor. He takes it willingly. The ledge is about two feet wide, and protrudes about twelve inches—just large enough for us to fit. Clinging to the cliff with Arthor right next to me, I see the next step jut out a few feet away and about a foot above where we are. I spring across the divide and onto the next ledge. Normally I'd be able to land without a problem, but since my legs are rubber from running the marathon and swimming for miles and miles, I wobble a bit. Once I have my balance, I offer my hand to

Arthor. He takes it. We continue on like this for a while: me moving ahead, and then pulling him up. I notice that he's avoiding putting weight on his bad leg, which causes him to sway so much that I fear he's going to lose his balance and fall.

"You all right?" I ask after we've been going for some time.

"I'm feeling a little weak."

I look down at his leg and see the wrap I put on earlier soaked. "Just hang in there, okay?"

I turn to continue upward, but he grabs my arm. "Listen...if I don't make it...if I fall..."

"You'll make it. We both will," I say harshly. Unwilling to have this conversation now, I press onward. From time to time, I hear Arthor puff. I assume he must have put some pressure on his bad leg. But I don't stop. There's no time limit to complete this first phase, but we need to get back to civilization before Arthor loses too much blood.

We climb in silence, the shadows growing blacker by the minute. I wonder how dark it will get, remembering that in the northern countries, it supposedly stays light through the entire night. I see a drone hovering just by us—a camera—and then just as quickly as it appears, it vanishes. Nicholas said they'd be here, snapping illegal shots for the media. I just ignore them. As we hop from step to step, the space on each step seems to be diminishing. I don't mention this to Arthor,

not wanting to cause him to worry, but as we continue to move upward, my fear is validated. The ledges are shrinking in size, and where it was fairly easy to stand together before, it has now become very challenging.

“They’re smaller,” Arthor says, studying the ledge we’re standing on.

He doesn’t ask the next obvious question out loud, but I know he’s thinking the same thing as me: a little farther up will the ledges eventually vanish? “Yeah, I noticed that, too.” With an injured, or partially removed calf muscle, Arthor won’t be able to make it to the top.

“Let’s just keep going,” he says.

I nod, but for whatever reason, I look down at the ledge. The next thing I know is that my gaze focuses past it and all the way down to the bottom of the cliff. My head spins and I grab onto Arthor’s arm.

“Careful,” he says, steadying me.

I take a deep breath and go to the next step, but when my first foot touches the surface, it slips, and I fall. Somehow, I’m able to grab onto the ledge and hold on. With my heart in my throat, my fingers white-knuckling the edge, I scream.

“Hang on!” Arthor yells. He hesitates for a moment before leaping to the ledge I’m hanging from. Landing on both legs, he cries out in pain.

“Hurry, please,” I say, feeling my fingers slipping on the smooth surface.

He turns so that he faces outward. Clenching his teeth, he bends down and grabs onto my wrist. “I can’t pull you up alone, so you have to find a way to get one of your legs onto the ledge.”

I kick my right leg up, however, it slips off the edge and I end up dangling in the air. I scream. Desperate to hang on, I press the bottoms of my feet against the mountainside to try to find a ridge to hold onto. The surface is smooth like glass.

“Kick your leg up and dig your heel in!” Arthor yells.

I swing my leg up again. This time I drive my heel into the step and it remains there. When I push off with my heel, it gives Arthor just the leverage he needs, and he pulls me up so I end up standing on the ledge, squeezing onto him for dear life. We stand like that for a few seconds, as I gather myself.

“We have to move on,” Arthor says.

Somehow, I manage to push the weak part of me aside. Looking up, I see another participant a couple dozen feet above us. He is also using the ledges, but he doesn’t have to share the small surface with anyone. From what I can gather, we’re about halfway to the top—our method has worked. But now, we have to come up with a better solution than to climb together on the shrinking steps.

“We have to split up.” I’m not quite sure how to bring up the obvious dilemma of who will get to go first, so I wait a moment, hoping he’ll suggest something.

Arthor nods absentmindedly with his eyes half-shut. I think he’s in so much pain and has lost so much blood that any suggestion is welcome. “One of us will continue on, while the other waits for the next wave of ledges to emerge.”

I should be the one to stay behind; I’m not as wounded as he is. Yet, I can’t speak the words.

“Just be careful,” he says, his face taking on the color of snow, and then he reaches for and steps onto the next ledge.

At first, I can’t believe it. What is he doing? We hadn’t agreed on anything yet, and he just assumed he would be the one to go first. Not that I think I should be the one, but at least he should offer that to me. Shouldn’t he? Without looking back, he continues onto the next ledge, and before I’m able to say anything, I feel the ledge beneath my feet move. Quicker than lightning, my heart instantly galloping, I find a couple of grooves in the mountainside, and hook my fingers into them. Unable to find any decent ridges for my feet, I just press them against the mountainside as best I can. I have no idea how long it will be until the ledge beneath my feet returns, but this I know: I

will hold on and make it all the way to the top just so I can give Arthor a piece of my mind.

The groove between my eyes contracts as I watch him climb the next few steps. His movements are hasty and careless; he's not taking enough time to prepare for the next step before he leaps. It will indeed be a miracle if he doesn't tumble off the cliff. As for me, I'm stuck hanging until the next ledge appears.

After a few minutes, my forearms start to burn. It doesn't take long before my fingers go numb, which really worries me simply because numb fingers can't hold onto anything. I adjust my grip in the small crevice to try to relieve the pressure, but it only helps for a few seconds.

Arthor looks down at me and yells, "They're getting smaller. A lot smaller. I don't know about this, Heidi..."

"Arthor!" I yell, afraid we're being filmed or that some of the other participants climbing the wall heard him. He must really be losing it to call out my name so freely. Then a scary thought occurs to me: maybe he's out to get me and wants my secret to be discovered.

"Oh...sorry," he hollers.

"Just shut up, okay?" I want to vanish into the rock this instant, fully expecting the other participants climbing the wall to call me out, or for a hovercraft to appear out of nowhere, beaming me into oblivion. After waiting for a few

minutes for something to happen, I start to think maybe no one heard Arthor say my name and maybe no one's coming for me after all.

A drop of sweat rolls into my eye and it stings. And then it starts to itch. When is the next step coming? I could be hanging here until the morning when I'll fry in the sun and slowly die of dehydration. The gnawing feeling in my stomach has been there a while—I've just ignored it—and I'm weak. A moment of weakness could cause me to lose my grip or balance, and I would tumble to the rocks below. My achy fingers have held on way longer than I thought they were capable of and my right hand is cramping something awful. I breathe through it—pant—but I have to face reality: I just can't hold on much longer. There's no use in crying for help, for what good will that do? I look up again and see Arthor is at the top now. I should have been the one to go first. If he were any bit of a friend, then he would have offered to stay behind.

Trying to ease the cramp in my right hand, I loosen the fingers just a tad. Unable to carry the majority of my weight, my left hand slips. I drop toward the earth.

Chapter 23

I have heard that some people have their entire lives flash before their eyes right before they die, but this is not what happens to me. Oddly enough, when I squeeze my eyes shut, Mai's face appears, and she smiles softly as if telling me that everything will be okay. I believe her.

With a crash, my feet hit a hard surface. Knife-like pain radiates up my legs. When I open my eyes, I see that I've landed on a ledge. It wasn't the ledge I was waiting for—this one is farther down—but it's a ledge. I hunch down, and bring my clenched fists to my mouth, hyperventilating. I'm not going to die; I'm going to live. My mouth is dry, and my belly feels like it has been filled with gasoline and set on fire.

"Are you okay?" Arthor bellows from above.

"Yes," I say, my voice trembling as much as my hands. Focus, Heidi, focus. There's no time to sit here and cry. I need to continue on before this ledge vanishes, too. Locating the next one, I jump onto it. Still thoroughly shaken, I slowly make my way upward. Step by step, I continue on, and the farther up I get, the more confident I feel that I'll make it. As I ascend, the steps grow smaller, like Arthor said, and when I finally come to the last few ledges, they're so tiny that the balls of

my feet barely fit. Fortunately, they're very close together so I can easily get from one to the next. Stepping onto the last ledge, Arthor reaches his arm out to me and helps me up to the top of the cliff—a flat, square surface void of any vegetation.

Unable to contain my emotions, tears spring out of my eyes and run down my cheeks. I collapse into Arthor's arms, and there's nothing I can do to stop my emotions from coming out in loud, ugly sobs.

Once I have calmed myself, I pull away and brush the wetness from my cheeks. Glowering at Arthor, I shove him in the chest so hard that he falls down.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“You took advantage of me down there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Please—you went first and left me there to die.”

“But you nodded toward me. I thought you meant for me to go first.”

I think back to our exchange down there. “That's ridiculous. I didn't say anything. Besides, if you were a true friend, you'd at least offer to let me go first.”

“So what you said when we were sitting in the lake...?”

I open my mouth to speak, but I have nothing to say. Remembering how I actually had said that

I would help him if he needed it, I feel like a jerk. “Fine, whatever.” Not wanting to remain on the subject, I step past him and walk to the other side of the cliff, stopping about ten feet away from the drop off. Behind me is the lake; in front of me is the ocean. I don’t dare to look over the edge yet, but from where I’m standing, it looks to be way higher than two hundred feet.

Now that the fog has lifted, I see how the sun hangs low in the sky, hovering right above the surface of the ocean. The sky is a deep blue, the water below black, and the horizon golden. According to my father, the sun never sets during the summer in the northernmost countries. I never actually believed him until now. Looking to the right, I see a sign, and it says,

To complete Round 1 of the Savage Run program, jump off the cliff and into the water below.

I thought I’d feel like a champion completing all three rounds in the first phase, but now all I can think about is that I have two more grueling phases to complete.

“Will you take a moment with me?” Arthor sits down on the ground, reaches his hands behind his head, and looks up into the sky.

His suggestion takes me completely off guard and I wonder what he’s really suggesting here.

And besides, how can he be so casual about what happened? He didn't even apologize for leaving me behind or thank me for risking my life for him. I at least thanked him when he helped me. Doesn't he know that I nearly died and that he was partially to blame for it?

Too tired to argue with him, I lie down and glare up at the sky.

"I have something I've always wanted to tell you," he says. "I feel like I could tell you anything."

I hold my breath. Oh, no. I hope he's not going to tell me he loves me or something. But then I catch myself—what a ridiculous thought. If he cared about me in that way, or in any way really, he wouldn't have abandoned me the way he did—all too eagerly. Even if he did think I gave him the nod to go ahead.

"But if I tell you this one thing, will you share something with me, too?"

I hate confessions. Especially when they're forced out of me. I mean, I just completed three rounds of grueling obstacles—more like torture—and he wants to talk about secrets?

"Your deepest, darkest secret." He smiles at me.

Arthor must think he's going to die in this next leap and that is why he wants to get something off his chest. I look at him, his face pasty gray, his lips dry and colorless. My chest

aches for him. I look around to make sure none of the drones are filming before I say, “Okay, I’ll do it.” To my surprise, it only takes me a second to know exactly what I need to share. Something that’s been on my mind for years. Something I’ve never been able to speak out loud, not even to Gemma. And maybe, just maybe, it might help lighten the burden I’ve been carrying for so long.

“You want to go first?” he asks.

Of course he wants me to go first—now. “Sure.” My heart’s a nervous wreck, hopping all over the place. Why is this so hard to speak what’s on the inside? “Can I sit up and do it?”

He chuckles a little. “Of course you can sit up. You don’t have to ask.” We sit up and look over the side of the platform we’re supposed to jump from. The water sways and the sun reflects off the surface like an eternal flame.

“Ready?” I say.

“Yes.”

I inhale until my lungs feel like they’ll burst, and then I speak. “Sometimes I’ve wished I was a man.”

Arthor is quiet for a minute before he whispers, “You mean...like...you’re attracted to girls?”

“No, what are you crazy?” I punch him in the arm. It’s illegal to be gay in Newland, usually punishable by death. “It’s just...” My voice lowers, just in case someone is listening. “It’s just

so much easier for a man, you know. They have so much more power...and control. Sometimes it just sucks being a girl.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” I laugh a little.

“So that’s the deepest, darkest secret you have?”

“It is. And the most powerful one, too. Maybe it’s pathetic.”

“No, not at all.”

I hear footsteps behind us, and then panting.

“You guys ready to jump?” a deep voice says.

I turn around and recognize the boy with the white hair immediately. “Hey,” I say. “Cory, is it?” I’m surprised he’s here so late in the competition—I thought for sure he would be one of the first ones to finish.

Cory’s eyes narrow into slivers as he scrutinizes me, and I can’t help but notice that his tree-trunk sized neck is glistening with sweat. “Yeah. I remember you, too. I’m sure everyone’s surprised you made it this far.”

“Uh...yeah,” I say. He must be referring to the poll from TV where I was voted the least likely to survive. Or how everyone’s talking about me—I know they are.

“Seems you’re smarter than most to pace yourself—especially when there’s no real time limit on this phase.”

“Sure.” I shrug my shoulders. No harm in letting him think I was intentionally trying to be slow. Then something unexpected happens. A small bubble of excitement swells on the inside; I proved everyone wrong.

Cory continues. “But seriously, don’t listen to them. They want to put you in a box and keep you there.”

“I’m Arthor.” He reaches out his hand toward Cory.

Cory takes it, smiles, and they shake. “Pretty bad gash you got there.”

Arthor looks down at his leg. “I’ll manage.”

“Well, better be off so I can be done with this. Wanna join me?” Cory asks.

“We’ll be jumping in a minute,” Arthor says, eyeing me.

Cory salutes us, runs toward the edge, and hurls himself off the cliff.

I spring to my feet, rush over to the edge, and watch as he plummets toward the blue ocean. My chest feels like it contains a hundred bouncing crickets. When he hits the water, white blooms around him and he vanishes beneath the waves. Will he come back up? For every second that he remains gone, my breathing becomes a little shallower. I wait longer. No one can stay under water that long, can they? I scan the entire sea, but there are no bodies anywhere. And no hovercrafts to disintegrate the floating corpses.

Most likely, Arthor and I are close to being the last ones to jump, so surely some of the participants must have died. But where did everyone go?

After waiting longer than I deem any human could survive without a breath, I take a step back. If he didn't make it, there's no way I'll survive the two-hundred foot fall.

I look at Arthor, who's not breathing either, rather gawking at the water as if he's expecting Cory to suddenly appear. Trying to get my mind off Cory's death—and what his death means when it comes to my fate—I ask, “So, what's your secret?”

Arthor's lips draw to a line and he sits back down. “Will you promise me you'll still be my friend after I tell you?”

I sigh. If this is one of my last moments, I'm not going to waste it holding onto a grudge. “If you want me to.”

He nods. “Ready?”

I nod.

He leans in and whispers, his hand cupped to my ear. “I'm gay.”

I do everything I can to not react in any which way—not shocked, or confused, or disturbed, the very emotions I'm feeling at the moment. Shocked. I never suspected anything; he seems as straight as any other guy I've met. Disturbed. I always thought gays were so different— strange.

He must think I hate him, especially after how I reacted when he thought I might be gay. I have to admit, I don't really know a lot about the subject. Sometimes gay citizens are given the chance to join a rehabilitation program, which supposedly cures them. I've even heard President Volkov say there's no such thing as a homosexual person, but that homosexuality is a disease that can be developed from watching indecent programs. It doesn't sound quite right to me.

"No response?" he says, chuckling lightly, grabbing behind his neck.

"Well, I just never thought...er...I'm surprised," I say with all honesty. "But thank you for telling me." My father hates gay people, says they're the scum of the earth and that it states in the Bible that they're an abhorrence in the sight of God. I believe in a God, too, but somehow I can't imagine that a loving God hates any of his children.

Arthor sighs. "It feels good to get that off my chest."

"Have you told anyone before?" I ask.

He shakes his head somewhat sheepishly.

"Not even your parents?"

"No. Well, Tristan was the only one who knew. And my...boyfriend." He glances at me from underneath his eyelashes.

His boyfriend? Who could that be? I never once saw him with anyone I'd suspect of being his boyfriend. All these years, and I never knew.

"My parents suspect, I think, if they don't know already. My father seems to avoid me whenever he can."

"I'm sorry."

He claps his hands together and rubs them briskly. "Well, let's do this thing." Struggling to his feet, limping on his one good leg, he toes the edge of the cliff and peers down.

I stop him. "Wait...can I...hold your hand?" I don't know where that came from, but something inside me needs someone right now. And somehow, revealing to him my deepest secret, and him revealing his to me, it feels natural to share this defining moment with him.

He smiles. "Sure. On three?"

I stand up and walk over to the side of the edge, looking down on the same bottomless sea that just swallowed up Cory's body. My head starts to spin and my legs turn into two wobbly stilts. It's way farther than I've ever dreamed of jumping, and way farther than I can see myself surviving. Should I quit? If I pull out of the obstacles, I'll be sent back home—nothing would be worse than that. I just need to do this before I think about it any more or before I lose the little ignorance I still have left and change my mind.

Trying to get a hold of my erratic breathing, I think about what Nicholas said to me before I left the Conference Center: “And for the last jump, make sure you jump feet first, no interlocking of the fingers, close your eyes and plug your nose.”

Instead of reaching for my locket, I take Arthor’s hand in mine and clasp my other hand underneath my armpit. Don’t think. Just count. “One...two...” I can’t. I’ll die. Tristan. No—don’t think, just do it.

“Three!”

Chapter 24

There’s a time in all our lives when we come to the realization that no matter what we do or how we choose to spend the hours and days that are ours, death is the only outcome. It’s crazy really how we walk around as if that momentous day will never arrive—like it’s a myth or an illusion—avoiding thinking about that instant when we will no longer exist. Maybe it’s a survival instinct. If we truly understood that death could snatch us before we’re even aware of it, we

would be freaking out, desperate to avoid the inevitable, searching for a remedy that would immortalize our bodies.

Is it too late for me?

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