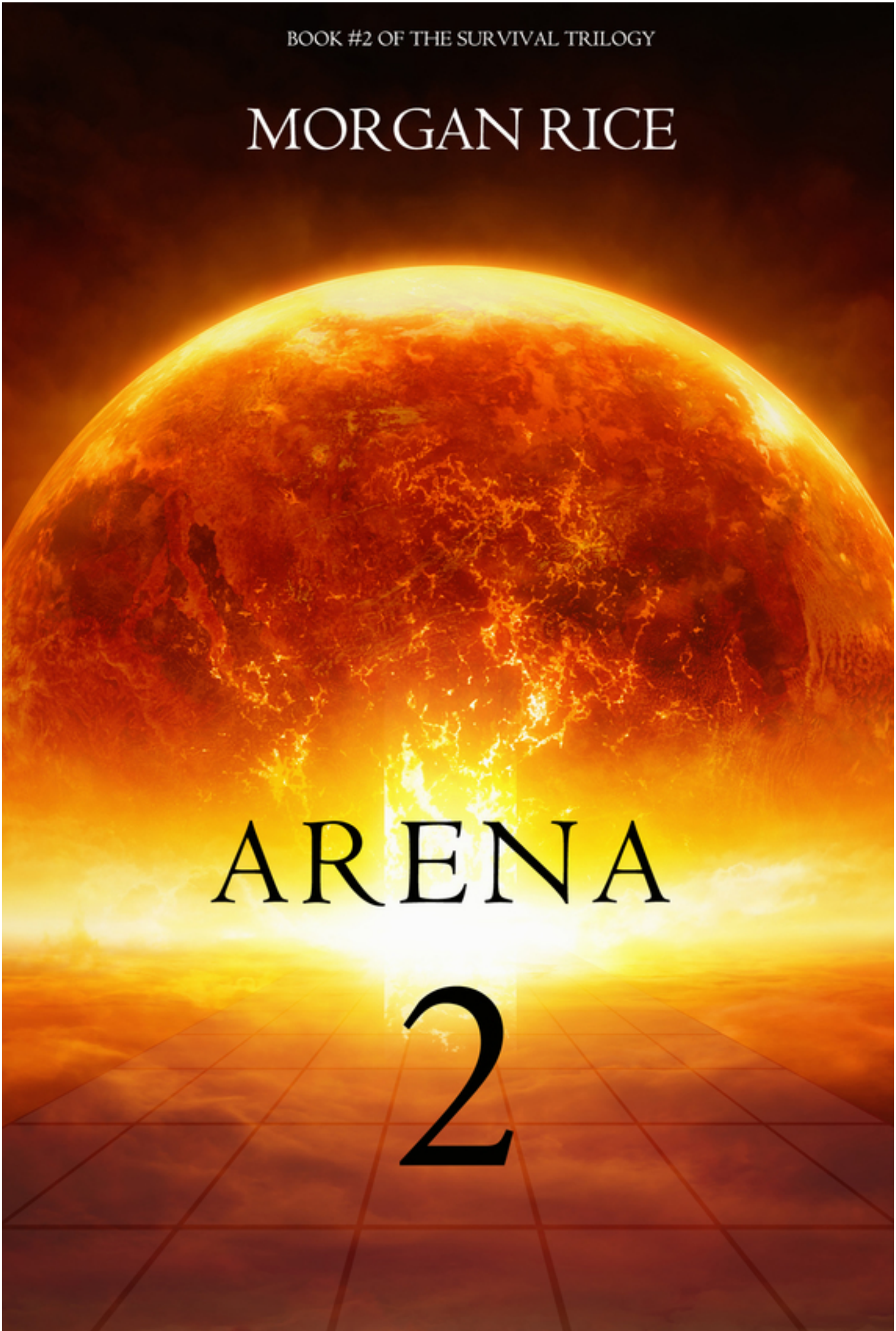
BOOK #2 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

MORGAN RICE



ARENA 2

The Survival Trilogy

Морган Райс

Arena Two

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2012

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Having just escaped from the treacherous island that was once Manhattan, Brooke, Ben, Logan, Bree and Rose make their way up the Hudson river in their stolen boat, low on fuel, low on food, and desperately needing shelter from the cold. On their tails are the slaverunners, who will stop at nothing until they capture them and bring them back.As they make their way upriver in this post-apocalyptic, action-packed thriller, on their way to try to find the mythical city in Canada, they will need to use all their ingenuity and survival skills to stay alive. Along the way they will encounter crazed survivors, roving gangs of predators, cannibals, wild animals, a desolate wasteland, and an unstoppable blizzard. They sustain injuries, get sick, and the Hudson freezes over as they do their best to salvage what they can and avoid the slaverunners' pursuit. They find a small island and think they have found respite – until events don't go their way. It is not until they board a mysterious train to nowhere that they find that things can always get worse.Along the way, Brooke's feelings for Logan intensify, as do her feelings for Ben. Torn between these two boys, caught between their jealousy, she is unsure how she feels – until events choose for her.As they find themselves thrown back into an arena, they are shocked to discover that Arena Two is even worse. Thrown into a barbaric fighting stage, equipped with weapons, pitted against other teenagers – and against themselves – Brooke and the others will be forced to choose what's important, and to make the most difficult sacrifices of their lives. Because in Arena Two, no one survives. Ever.

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Morgan Rice
Arena Two

"Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come."

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan's new epic fantasy series, OF CROWNS AND GLORY, will publish in April, 2016, beginning with book #1, SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“Shades of THE HUNGER GAMES permeate a story centered around two courageous teens determined to buck all odds in an effort to regain their loved ones. But the true strength in any story lies not so much in its setting and events as in how the characters come across, come alive, and handle their lives – and it's here that ARENA ONE begins to diverge from the predictable and enters the more compelling realms of believability and strength… ARENA ONE builds a believable, involving world and is recommended… for those who enjoy dystopian novels, powerful female characters, and stories of uncommon courage.”
Midwest Book Review
D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer

"I will admit, before ARENA ONE, I had never read anything post-apocalyptic before. I never thought it would be something I would enjoy… Well, I was very pleasantly surprised at how addicting this book was. ARENA ONE was one of those books that you read late into the night until your eyes start to cross because you don't want to put it down… It is no secret that I love strong heroines in the books I read…Brooke was tough, strong, un-relentless, and while there is romance in the book, Brooke wasn't ruled by that… I would highly recommend ARENA ONE.”
Dallas Examiner

Books by Morgan Rice

OF CROWNS AND GLORY

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)
RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)
THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)
A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)
A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)
NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)
A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)
A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)
A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)
A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)
AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)
A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)
A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)
THE GIFT OF BATTLE (Book #17)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
ARENA TWO (Book #2)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

TURNED (Book #1)
LOVED (Book #2)
BETRAYED (Book #3)

DESTINED (Book #4)
DESIRED (Book #5)
BETROTHED (Book #6)
VOWED (Book #7)
FOUND (Book #8)
RESURRECTED (Book #9)
CRAVED (Book #10)
FATED (Book #11)
OBSESSED (Book #12)

One

There are some days in the world that just seem perfect. Some days when a certain stillness covers the world, when a calm blankets you so thoroughly that you feel as if you could just disappear, when you feel such a sense of peace, immune from all the worries of the world. Immune from fear. From tomorrow. I can count moments like these on a single hand.

And one of them is right now.

I am thirteen years old, Bree is six, and we stand on a beach of fine, soft sand. dad holds my hand, and mom holds Bree's, and the four of us step across the hot sand, on our way into the ocean. The cool spray of the waves feels so good on my face, tapering off the heat of this August day. Waves crash all around us, and dad and mom are laughing, carefree. I have never seen them so relaxed. I catch them looking at each other with such love, and I implant the image in my mind. It is one of the few times I've seen them so happy with each other, and I don't want to forget it. Bree yells in ecstasy, thrilled at the crash of the waves, which are at her chest, at the tug of the undertow, up to her thighs. Mom holds her tight and dad squeezes my hand, holding us back from the pull of the ocean.

"ONE! TWO! THREE!" dad yells.

I am lifted high into the air as dad pulls my hand and mom pulls Bree's. I go up high, over a wave, and scream as I clear it and it crashes behind me. I am amazed that dad can stand there like that, so strong, like a rock, seemingly oblivious to the force of nature.

As I sink down into the ocean I enter it with shock, the cold water at my chest. I squeeze dad's hand harder, as the undertow returns, and again he holds me firmly in place. I feel, in that moment, that he will protect me from everything, forever.

Wave after wave crashes down, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, mom and dad are in no rush. They hoist us again and again, Bree shouting with ever more delight. I don't know how much time passes on this magnificent summer day, on this peaceful beach, under a cloudless sky, the spray hitting my face. I never want the sun to set, never want any of this to change. I want to be here, like this, forever. And in this moment, I feel like I might be.

I open my eyes slowly, disoriented by what I see before me. I'm not at the ocean, but sitting in the passenger seat of a motor boat, racing its way up a river. It is not summer, but winter, and the banks are lined with snow. Occasional chunks of ice float past us. My face is sprayed with water, but it is not the cool mist of the ocean waves in summer but rather the freezing spray of the icy Hudson in winter. I blink several times until I realize it is not a cloudless summer morning, but a cloudy winter afternoon. I try to figure out what happened, how everything changed.

I sit up with a chill and look around, immediately on guard. I haven't fallen asleep in daylight in as long as I can remember, and it surprises me. I quickly get my bearings and see Logan, standing stoically behind the wheel, eyes fixed on the river, navigating the Hudson. I turn and see Ben, head in his hands, staring out at the river, lost in his own world. On the other side of the boat sit Bree, eyes closed, leaning back in her seat, and her new friend Rose cuddled up with her, asleep on her shoulder. Sitting in her lap is our new pet, the one-eyed Chihuahua, asleep.

I'm amazed I allowed myself to sleep, too, but as I look down and notice the half-drunk bottle of champagne in my hand, I realize the alcohol, which I haven't had in years, must have knocked me out – that, combined with so many sleepless nights, and so many days of adrenaline rush. My body is so banged up, so sore and bruised, it must've just fallen asleep by itself. I feel guilty: I never let Bree out of my sight before. But as I look over at Logan, his presence so strong, I realize I must've felt safe enough around him to do that. In some ways, it's like having my dad back. Is that why I dreamed of him?

"Nice to have you back," comes Logan's deep voice. He glances my way, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips.

I lean forward, surveying the river before us as we cut through it like butter. The roar of the engine is deafening, and the boat rides the current, moving up and down in subtle motions, rocking just a tiny bit. The freezing spray hits my face directly, and I look down and see I'm still dressed in the same clothes I've been wearing for days. The clothes practically cling to my skin, caked with sweat and blood and dirt – and now moist from the spray. I am damp, and cold, and hungry. I would do anything for a hot shower, a hot chocolate, a roaring fire, and a change of clothes.

I scan the horizon: the Hudson is like a vast and wide sea. We stick to the middle, far from either shore, Logan wisely keeping us away from any potential predators. Remembering, I immediately turn back, checking for any sign of slaverunners. I see none.

I turn back and look for any signs of any boats on the horizon before us. Nothing. I scan the shorelines, looking for any sign of activity. Nothing. It is as if we have the world to ourselves. It is comforting and desolate at the same time.

Slowly, I relax my guard. It feels like I've been asleep forever, but from the sun's position in the sky, it's only mid-afternoon. I couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour, at most. I look around for any familiar landmark. After all, we are nearly back near home. But I see none.

"How long was I out?" I ask Logan.

He shrugs. "Maybe an hour."

An hour, I think. It feels like an eternity.

I check the gas gauge, and it reads half empty. That doesn't bode well.

"Any sign of fuel anywhere?" I ask.

The moment I ask, I realize it is a stupid question.

Logan looks over at me, as if to say *really*? Of course, if he had seen a fuel depot, he would have hit it.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"These are your parts," he says. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

I scan the river again, but still can't recognize anything. That's the thing about the Hudson – it's so wide, and it stretches forever, and it's so easy to lose one's bearings.

"Why didn't you wake me?" I ask.

"Why should I? You needed the sleep."

I don't quite know what else to say to him. That's the thing about Logan: I like him, and I feel he likes me, but I don't know if we have all that much to say to each other. It doesn't help that he's guarded, and that I am, too.

We continue in silence, the white water churning beneath us, and I wonder how much longer we can go on. What will we do when our fuel runs out?

In the distance, I spot something on the horizon. It looks like some sort of structure, in the water. At first I wonder if I am seeing things, but then Logan cranes his neck, alert, and I realize he must see it, too.

"I think it's a bridge," he says. "A downed bridge."

I realize he's right. Growing ever closer is a towering hunk of twisted metal, sticking up out of the water like some sort of monument to hell. I remember this bridge: it once beautifully spanned the river; now, it's a huge heap of scrap metal, plunging at jagged angles down into the water.

Logan slows the boat, the engine quieting as we get closer. Our speed drops and the boat rocks wildly. The jagged metal protrudes from every direction, and Logan navigates, turning the boat left and right, creating his own little pathway. I look up as we go at the bridge's remains, looming over us. It looks like it rises hundreds of feet high, a testament to what humanity was once able to do before we started killing each other.

"The Tappan Zee," I remark. "We're about an hour north of the city. We've got a good jump on them, if they're coming after us."

"They *are* coming after us," he said. "You can bet on it."

I look at him. “How can you be so sure?”

“I know them. They never forget.”

As we pass the last scrap of metal, Logan picks up speed and I lean back as we accelerate.

“How far behind us do you think they are?” I ask.

He looks at the horizon, stoic. Finally, he shrugs.

“Hard to say. Depends how long it takes to rally the troops. Snow’s heavy, which is good for us. Maybe three hours? Maybe six, if we’re lucky? Good thing is, this baby’s fast. I think we can outrun them, as long as we have fuel.”

“But we don’t,” I say, pointing out the obvious. “We left with a full tank – now we’re half empty. We’ll be empty in just a few hours. Canada’s a long way away. How do you propose we find fuel?”

Logan stares at the water, thinking.

“We have no choice,” he says. “We have to find it. There’s no alternative. We can’t stop.”

“We’re going to need to rest at some point,” I say. “We’re going to need food, and some sort of shelter. We can’t stay out in this temperature all day and all night.”

“Better to starve and freeze than be caught by slaverunners,” he says.

I think of dad’s house, farther upriver. We’re going to pass right by it. I remember my vow to my old dog, Sasha, to bury her. I also think of all the food up there, in that stone cottage – we can salvage it, and it would sustain us for days. I think of all the tools in dad’s garage, all the things we can make use of. Not to mention the extra clothes, blankets and matches.

“I want to make a stop.”

Logan turns and looks at me as if I’m crazy. I can see that he doesn’t like this.

“What are you talking about?”

“My dad’s house. In Catskill. About an hour north of here. I want to stop there. There are a lot of things we can salvage. Things we’ll need. Like food. And,” I pause, “I want to bury my dog.”

“Bury your dog?” he asks, his voice rising. “Are you crazy? You want to get us all killed for that?”

“I promised her,” I say.

“Promised?” he shoots back. “Your dog? Your dead dog? You’ve got to be kidding.”

I stare him down, and he realizes pretty quickly that I’m not.

“If I promise something, I deliver. I’d bury you if I promised.”

He shakes his head.

“Listen,” I say firmly. “You wanted Canada. We could have gone anywhere. That was *your* dream. Not mine. Who knows it this town even exists? I’m following you on a whim. And this boat’s not just yours. All I want is to stop at my dad’s place. Get some stuff, which we need, and put my dog to rest. It won’t take long. We’ve got a big jump on the slaverunners. Not to mention, we have a small canister of fuel up there. It’s not much, but it will help.”

Logan slowly shakes his head.

“I’d rather not have that fuel and not take such a risk. You’re talking about the mountains. You’re talking about twenty miles inland, right? How do you propose we get there once we dock? Hike?”

“I know where there’s an old truck. A beat-up pickup. It’s just a rusted shell, but it runs, and it’s got just enough fuel to get us there and back. It’s hidden, by the river line. The river will take us right to it. The truck will take us up and back. It will be quick. And then we can continue on our long trip to Canada. And we’ll be better for it.”

Logan stares silently at the water for a long time, his fists clenched tight around the wheel.

Finally, he says, “Whatever. It’s your life to risk. But I’m staying with the boat. You’ve got two hours. If you’re not back in time, I’m taking off.”

I turn away from him and look out at the water, fuming mad. I wanted him to come. I feel like he’s looking out for himself, and it disappoints me. I thought he was better than that.

“So you only care about yourself, is that it?” I ask.

It also worries me that he doesn't want to accompany me to my dad's house; I hadn't thought of that. I know Ben won't want to come and I would've appreciated some backup. Whatever. I'm still resolved. I made a promise, and I will keep it. With or without him.

He doesn't respond, and I can tell he's annoyed.

I look out at the water, not wanting to see him. As the water churns amidst the constant whine of the engine, I realize I'm mad not only because I'm disappointed in him, but because I was actually starting to like him, to count on him. I haven't depended on anyone for a long time. It's a scary feeling, depending on someone again, and I feel betrayed.

"Brooke?"

My heart lifts at the sounds of the familiar voice, and I turn to see my little sister awake. Rose wakes, too. Those two are already like peas in a pod, like extensions of one person.

I still can hardly believe that Bree is here, back with me. It's like a dream. When she was taken, a part of me was sure I'd never see her alive again. Every moment I am with her, I feel like I've been given a second chance, and I feel more determined than ever to watch over her.

"I'm hungry," Bree says, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands.

Penelope sits up, too, in Bree's lap. She won't stop trembling, and she raises her good eye and looks at me, as if she's hungry, too.

"I'm freezing," Rose echoes, rubbing her shoulders. She wears only a thin shirt, and I feel terrible for her.

I understand. I'm starving and freezing, too. My nose is red and I can barely feel it. Those goodies we found in the boat were amazing, but hardly filling – especially on an empty stomach. And that was hours ago. I think again of the food chest, of what little we have left, and wonder how long until it runs out. I know I should ration the food. But then again, we're all starving, and I can't stand to see Bree looking like that.

"There's not much food left," I tell her, "but I can give you guys a little bit of it now. We have some cookies, and some crackers."

"Cookies!" they both yell at once. Penelope barks.

"I wouldn't do that," comes Logan's voice beside me.

I look over, and see him glancing back disapprovingly.

"We need to ration it."

"Please!" Bree cries out. "I need something. I'm starving."

"I need to give them *something*," I say firmly back to Logan, understanding where his head is, but annoyed at his lack of compassion. "I'm doling out one cookie each. For all of us."

"What about Penelope?" Rose asks.

"The dog's not getting any of our food," Logan snaps. "She's on her own."

I feel another twinge of upset at Logan, though I know he's being rational. Still, as I see the crestfallen look on Rose and Bree's faces, and as I hear her bark again, I can't bear to let her starve. I quietly resign to give her some food from my own rations.

I open the chest, and survey once again our stash of food. I see two boxes of cookies, three boxes of crackers, several bags of gummy bears, and a half dozen chocolate bars. I wish there was some more substantial food, and I don't know how we're going to make this last, how this will suffice for three meals a day for five people.

I pull out the cookies and dole out one to each person. Ben finally snaps out of it at the site of the food, and accepts a cookie. His eyes have black circles under them, and he looks as if he hasn't slept. It is painful to see his expression, so devastated from the loss of his brother, and I look away as I hand him his cookie.

I come to the front of the boat, and hand Logan his. He takes it and silently puts into his pocket, of course, rationing it for later. I don't know where he gets his strength from. Myself, I go weak at the smell of the chocolate chip cookie. I know I should ration it, too, but I can't help it. I take a small

bite, resolving to put it away – but it tastes so good, I can't help myself – I devour the entire thing, saving only the last bite, which I set aside for Penelope.

The food feels so good. The sugar rushes to my head, then through my body, and I wish I had a dozen more. I take a deep breath at the stomach pain, trying to control myself.

The river narrows, the shores becoming ever closer to each other, as it twists and turns. We're close to land and I'm on high alert, looking to the shorelines for any sign of danger. As we round a bend I look to my left and see, high up on a cliff, the ruins of an old fortification, now bombed out. I am shocked as I realize what it once was.

"West Point," Logan says. He must realize at the same time as I do.

It is shocking to see this bastion of American strength now just a pile of rubble, its twisted flagpole hanging limply over the Hudson. Hardly anything remains of what once was.

"What is that?" Bree asks, her teeth chattering. She and Rose have climbed to the front of the boat, beside me, and she looks out, following my gaze. I don't want to tell her.

"It's nothing sweetie," I say. "Just a ruin."

I put my arm around her and pull her close, and put my other arm around Rose and pull her close, too. I tried to warm them up, rubbing their shoulders as best I can.

"When are we going home?" Rose asks.

Logan and I exchange a look. I hardly know how to answer.

"We're not going home," I say to Rose, as gently as I can, "but we're on our way to find a new home."

"Are we going to pass by our old home?" Bree asks.

I hesitate. "Yes," I say.

"But we're not going back there, right?" she asks.

"Right," I say. "It's too dangerous to live there now."

"I don't want to live there again," she says. "I hated that place. But we can't just leave Sasha there. Are we going stop and bury her? You promised."

I think back to my argument with Logan.

"You're right," I say softly. "I did promise. And yes, we will stop."

Logan turns away, clearly miffed.

"And then what?" Rose asks. "And then where will we go?"

"We're going to keep going upriver," I explain. "As far as it will take us."

"Where does it end?" she asks.

It's a good question, and I take it as a much more profound question. Where does all of this end? With our deaths? With our survival? Will it ever end? Is there any end in sight?

I don't have the answer.

I turn, and kneel, and look into her eyes. I need to give her hope. Something to live for.

"It ends in a beautiful place," I say. "Where we're going, everything is good again. The streets are so clean that they shine, and everything is perfect and safe. There will be people there, friendly people, and they will take us in and protect us. There will be food, too, real food, all you can eat, all the time. It will be the most beautiful place you've ever seen."

Rose's eyes open wide.

"Is that true?" she asks.

I nod. Slowly, she breaks into a wide smile.

"How long until we make it there?"

I smile. "I don't know sweetheart."

Bree, though, is more cynical than Rose.

"Is that really true?" she asks, softly. "Is there really such a place?"

"It is," I say to her, trying my best to sound convincing. "Isn't that true, Logan?"

Logan looks over, nods at them briefly, then looks away. He is the one, after all, that believes in Canada, believes in a promised land. How can he deny it now?

The Hudson twists and turns, getting more narrow, then widening again. Finally, we enter familiar territory. We race past places I recognize, getting closer and closer to dad's house.

We turn another bank, and I see a small, uninhabited island, just a rocky outcropping. On it sits the remains of a lighthouse, its light long shattered, its structure hardly more than a façade.

We turn another bend in the river and in the distance I spot the bridge I'd been on just days before, when chasing after the slaverunners. There, in the middle of the bridge, I see the center blown out, the huge hole, as if a wrecking ball had been dropped through the middle. I flash back to when Ben and I raced across it in the motorcycle and nearly skidded into it. I can't believe it. We're almost there.

This makes me think of Ben, makes me remember how he saved my life that day. I turn and look at him. He stares into the water, morose.

"Ben?" I ask.

He turns and looks at me.

"Remember that bridge?"

He turns and looks, and I see fear in his eyes. He remembers.

Bree elbows me. "Is it okay if I give Penelope some of my cookie?" she asks.

"Me, too?" Rose echoes.

"Sure it is," I say loudly, so Logan can hear. He's not the only one in charge here, and we can do with our food as we wish.

The dog, in Rose's lap, perks up, as if she understands. It is incredible. I have never seen such a smart animal.

Bree leans in to feed her a piece of her cookie, but I stop her hand.

"Wait," I say. "If you're going to feed her, she should have a name, shouldn't she?"

"But she has no collar," Rose says. "Her name could be anything."

"She's your dog now," I say. "Give her a new one."

Rose and Bree exchange an excited glance.

"What should we call her?" Bree asks.

"How about Penelope?" Rose says.

"Penelope!" Bree screams. "I like that."

"I like it, too," I say.

"Penelope!" Rose cries out to the dog.

Amazingly, the dog actually turns to her when she says it, as if that were always her name.

Bree smiles as she reaches out and feeds her a piece of cookie. Penelope snatches it out of her hands and gobbles it up in one bite. Bree and Rose giggle hysterically, and Rose feeds her the rest of her cookie. She snatches that, too, and I reach out and feed her the last bite of my cookie. Penelope looks back at all three of us excitedly, trembling, and barks three times.

We all laugh. For a moment, I nearly forget our troubles.

But then, in the distance, over Bree's shoulder, I spot something.

"There," I say to Logan, stepping up and pointing to our left. "That's where we need to go. Turn there."

I spot the peninsula where Ben and I drove off on the motorcycle, onto the ice of the Hudson. It makes me flinch to think of it, to think of how crazy that chase was. It's amazing I'm still alive.

Logan checks over his shoulder to see if anyone is following; then, reluctantly, he eases up on the throttle and turns us off to the side, bringing us towards the inlet.

On edge, I look around warily as we reach the mouth of the peninsula. We glide beside it as it curves inland. We are so close to shore now, passing a dilapidated water tower. We continue on

and soon glide alongside the ruins of a town, right into the heart of it. Catskill. There are burnt-out buildings on all sides and it looks like it's been hit by a bomb.

We are all on edge as we make our way slowly up the inlet, getting deeper inland, the shore now feet away as it narrows. We are exposed to ambush, and I find myself unconsciously reaching down and resting my hand on my hip, on my knife. I notice Logan do the same.

I check back over my shoulder for Ben; but he is still in a nearly catatonic state.

"Where's the truck?" Logan asks, an edge to his voice. "I'm not going too deep inland, I'll tell you right now. If anything happens, we need to be able to get out to the Hudson, and fast. This is a death trap," he says, warily eyeing the shore.

I eye it, too. But the shore is empty, desolate, frozen over with no humanity in sight as far as the eye can see.

"See there," I say, pointing. "That rusted shed? It's inside."

Logan drives us another thirty yards or so, then turns for the shed. There is an old crumbling dock, and he's able to pull the boat up, feet from shore. He kills the engine, grabs the anchor and throws it overboard. He then grabs the rope from the boat, makes a loose knot at one end, and throws it to a rusted metal post. It catches and he pulls us in all the way, tightening it, so we can walk onto the dock.

"Are we getting out?" Bree asks.

"I am," I say. "Wait for me here, with the boat. It's too dangerous for you to go. I'll be back soon. I'll bury Sasha. I promise."

"No!" she screams. "You promised we would never be apart again. You promised! You can't leave me here alone! You CAN'T!"

"I'm not leaving you alone," I answer, my heart breaking. "You'll be here with Logan, and Ben, and Rose. You'll be perfectly safe. I promise."

But Bree stands and to my surprise, she takes a running jump across the bow, and jumps onto the sandy shore, landing right in the snow.

She stands ashore, hands on her hips, glaring back at me defiantly.

"If you're going, I'm going too," she states.

I take a deep breath, seeing she's resigned. I know that when she gets like this, she means it.

It will be a liability, having her, but I have to admit, a part of me feels good having her in my sight at all times. And if I try to talk her out of it, I'll just waste more time.

"Fine," I say. "Just stay close the entire time. Promise?"

She nods. "I promise."

"I'm scared," Rose says, looking over at Bree, wide-eyed. "I don't want to leave the boat. I want to stay here, with Penelope. Is that okay?"

"I want you to," I say to her, silently refusing to take her, too.

I turn to Ben, and he turns and meets my eyes with his mournful ones. The look in them makes me want to look away, but I force myself not to.

"Are you coming?" I ask. I hope he says yes. I'm annoyed at Logan for staying here, for letting me down, and I could really use the backup.

But Ben, still clearly in shock, just stares back. He looks at me as if he doesn't comprehend. I wonder if he's fully registering all that's happening around him.

"Are you *coming*?" I ask more forcefully. I don't have the patience for this.

Slowly, he shakes his head, withdrawing. He's really out of it, and I try to forgive him – but it's hard.

I turn to leave the boat, and jump onto shore. It feels good to have my feet on dry land.

"Wait!"

I turn and see Logan get up from the driver seat.

"I knew some crap like this would happen," he says.

He walks across the boat, gathering his stuff.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What do you think?" he asks. "I'm not letting you two go alone."

My heart swells with relief. If it were just me I wouldn't care as much – but I am thrilled to have another set of eyes to watch Bree.

He jumps off the boat, and onto shore.

"I'm telling you right now, this is a stupid idea," he says, as he lands besides me. "We should keep moving. It will be night soon. The Hudson can freeze. We could get stuck here. Not to mention the slaverunners. You've got 90 minutes, understand? 30 minutes in, 30 there, and 30 back. No exceptions, for any reason. Otherwise, I'm leaving without you."

I look back at him, impressed and grateful.

"Deal," I say.

I think of the sacrifice he just made, and I am beginning to feel something else. Behind all his posturing, I am beginning to feel that Logan really likes me. And he's not as selfish as I thought.

As we turn to go, there's another shuffling on the boat.

"Wait!" Ben cries out.

I turn and look.

"You guys can't leave me here alone with Rose. What if someone comes? What am I supposed to do?

"Watch the boat," Logan says, turning again to leave.

"I don't know how to drive it!" Ben yells out. "I don't have any weapons!"

Logan turns again, annoyed, reaches down, takes one of the guns off a strap from his thigh, and chucks it to him. It hits him hard in the chest, and he fumbles with it.

"Maybe you'll learn how to use it," Logan sneers, as he turns away again.

I get a good look at Ben, who stands there, looking so helpless and afraid, holding a gun he barely seems to know how to use. He seems absolutely terrified.

I want to comfort him. To tell him everything will be OK, that we'll be back soon. But as I turn away and look up at the vast mountain range before us, for the first time, I am not so sure that we will.

Two

We walk quickly through the snow and I look anxiously at the darkening sky, feeling the pressure of time. I glance back over my shoulder, see my footprints in the snow, and beyond them, standing there in the rocking boat, Ben and Rose, watching us wide-eyed. Rose clutches Penelope, equally afraid. Penelope barks. I feel bad leaving the three of them there, but I know our mission is necessary. I know we can salvage supplies and food that will help, and I feel we have a comfortable jump on the slaverunners.

I hurry to the rusted shed, covered in snow, and yank open its crooked door, praying that the truck I hid inside ages ago is still there. It was an old rusted pickup, on its last legs, more scrap than car, with only about an eighth tank of fuel left in it. I stumbled across it one day, in a ditch off Route 23, and hid it here, carefully down by the river, in case I ever needed it. I remember being amazed when it actually turned over.

The shed door opens with a creak, and there it is, as well hidden as it was on the day I stashed it, still covered with the hay. My heart swells with relief. I step forward and pull the hay back, my hands cold as I touch the freezing metal. I go to the back of the shed and pull open the double barn doors, and light comes flooding in.

"Nice wheels," Logan says, walking up behind me, surveying it. "You sure it runs?"

"No," I say. "But my dad's house is a good twenty miles away, and we can't exactly hike."

I can tell from his tone that he really doesn't want to be on this mission, that he wants to be back in the boat, moving upriver.

I jump into the driver seat and search the floor for the key. I finally feel it, hidden deep. I put it in the ignition, take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Please, god. Please.

At first nothing happens. My heart drops.

But I turn again and again, twist it farther to the right, and slowly, it begins to catch. At first it is a quiet sound, like a dying cat. But I hold it, twist again and again, and eventually, it turns over more.

Come on, come on.

It finally catches, rumbling and groaning to life. It clutters and gasps, clearly on its last legs. At least it's running.

I can't help smiling, flooding with relief. It works. It really works. We're going to be able to make it to my house, bury my dog, get food. I feel as if Sasha's looking down, helping us. Maybe my dad, too.

The passenger door opens and in jumps Bree, bristling with excitement, scooting over in the one vinyl seat, right next to me, as Logan jumps in beside her, slamming the door, looking straight ahead.

"What you waiting for?" he says. "Clock's ticking."

"You don't need to tell me twice," I say, equally short with him.

I put it into gear and floor it, reversing out of the shed and into the snow and afternoon sky. At first the wheels catch in the snow, but I give it more gas, and we sputter forward.

We drive, swerving on the bald tires, across a field, bumpy, getting jolted every which way. But we continue forward, and that's all I care about.

Soon, we are on a small country road. I am so thankful the snow was melting most of the day – otherwise, we'd never make it.

We start picking up good speed. The truck surprises me, calming down as it warms up. We hit almost 40 as we ride Route 23 heading west. I keep pushing it, until we hit a pothole, and I regret it. We all groan, as we slam our heads. I slow down. The potholes are nearly impossible to see in the snow, and I forgot how bad these roads have become.

It's eerie being back on this road, heading back to what was once home. I am retracing the road I took when chasing the slaverunners, and memories come flooding back. I remember racing down here on a motorcycle, thinking I was going to die, and I try to put it out of my mind.

As we go, we come across the huge tree felled in the road, now covered in snow. I recognize it as the tree that had been felled on my way out, the one downed to block the path of the slaverunners, by some unknown survivalist out there who was looking after us. I can't help but wonder if there are other people out there now, surviving, maybe even watching us. I look from side to side, combing the woods. But I see no signs.

We are making good time and to my relief, nothing is going wrong. I don't trust it. It is almost as if it is too easy. I glance at the gas gage and see we haven't used much. But I don't know how accurate it is, and for a moment I wonder if there'll be enough gas to get us there and back. I wonder if it was a stupid idea to try this.

We finally turn off the main road, onto the narrow, winding country road that will bring us up the mountain, to dad's house. I'm more on edge now, as we twist and turn of the mountain, the cliffs dropping off steeply to my right. I look out and can't help noticing the view is incredible, spanning the entire Catskill mountain range. But the drop-off is steep and the snow is thicker up here, and I know that with one wrong turn, one wrong skid, this old heap of rust will go right over the edge.

To my surprise, the truck hangs in there. It is like a bulldog. Soon we are past the worst of it, and as we turn a bend, I suddenly spot our former house.

"Hey! Dad's house!" Bree yells out, sitting up in excitement.

I'm relieved to see it, too. We're here, and we made good time.

"See," I say to Logan, "that wasn't so bad."

Logan doesn't seem relieved, though; his face is set in a grimace, on edge as he watches the trees.

"We made it here," he grumbles. "We didn't make it back."

Typical. Refusing to admit he was wrong.

I pull up in front of our house and see the old slaverunner tracks. It brings flashing back all the memories, all the dread I'd felt when they'd taken Bree. I reach over and drape an arm around her shoulder, clutch her tight, resolve to never let her out of my sight again.

I cut the ignition and we all jump out and head quickly towards the house.

"Sorry if it's a mess," I say to Logan as I step past him, up to the front door. "I wasn't expecting guests."

Despite himself, he suppresses a smile.

"Ha ha," he says, flatly. "Should I take off my shoes?"

A sense of humor. That surprises me.

As I open the door and step inside, any sense of humor I had suddenly falls away. When I see the site before me, my heart drops. There is Sasha, lying there, her blood dried, her body stiff and frozen. Just a few feet away is the corpse of the slaverunner Sasha had killed, his corpse frozen, too, stuck to the floor.

I look down at the jacket I'm wearing – his jacket – the clothes I'm wearing – his clothes – my boots – his boots – and it gives me a funny feeling. Almost as if I'm his walking double.

Logan looks over at me and must realize it too.

"You didn't take his pants?" he asks.

I look down and remember I did not. It was too much.

I shake my head.

"Stupid," he says.

Now that he mentions it, I realize he is right. My old jeans are wet and cold, and sticking to me. And even if I don't want them, Ben might. It's a shame to waste them: after all, it is perfectly good clothing.

I hear muffled cries and look over to see Bree standing there, looking down at Sasha. It breaks my heart to see her face like that, crumpled up, staring down at her former dog.

I walk over to her and put an arm around her.

"It's okay, Bree," I say. "Look away."

I kiss her on the forehead and try to turn her away, but she throws me off with surprising strength.

"No," she says.

She steps forward, kneels down and hugs Sasha on the ground. She wraps her arms around her neck, and leans over and kisses her head.

Logan I exchange a glance. Neither of us know what to do.

"We haven't time," Logan says. "You need to bury her, and move on."

I kneel down beside her, lean over and stroke Sasha's head.

"It's going to be okay, Bree. Sasha's in a better place now. She's happy now. Do you hear me?"

Tears drop from her eyes, and she reaches up, takes a deep breath, and wipes them away with the back of her hand.

"We can't leave her here like this," she says. "We have to bury her."

"We will," I say.

"We can't," Logan says. "The ground is frozen solid."

I stand and look at Logan, more annoyed than ever. Especially because I realize he is right. I should have thought of that.

"Then what do you suggest?" I ask.

"It's not my problem. I'll stand guard outside."

Logan turns and marches outside, slamming the front door behind him.

I turn back to Bree, trying to think quick.

"He's right," I say. "We don't have time to bury her."

"NO!" she wails. "You promised. You *promised*!"

She's right. I did promise. But I hadn't thought it all through carefully. The thought of leaving Sasha here like this kills me. But I can't risk our own lives either. Sasha wouldn't want that.

I have an idea.

"What about the river, Bree?"

She turns and looks at me.

"What if we give her a water burial? You know, like they do for soldiers who die in honor?"

"What soldiers?" she asks.

"When soldiers die at sea, sometimes they bury them at sea. It's a burial of honor. Sasha loved the river. I'm sure she'd be happy there. We can bring her down and bury her there. Would that be okay?"

My heart is pounding as I wait for a response. We are running out of time, and I know how intransigent Bree can be if something means a lot to her.

To my relief, she nods.

"Okay," she says. "But I get to carry her."

"I think she's too heavy for you."

"I'm not going unless I get to carry her," she says, her eyes flashing with determination as she stands, faces me, hands on her hips. I can see from her eyes that she will never give in otherwise.

"Okay," I say. "You can carry her."

We both pry Sasha off the floor, and then I quickly scan the house for anything we can salvage. I hurry to the slaverunner's corpse, strip his pants off, and as I do, feel something in his back pocket. I'm happily surprised to discover something bulky and metal inside. I pull out a small switch blade. I'm thrilled to have it, and cram it in my pocket.

I do a quick run-through of the rest of the house, hurrying from room to room, looking for anything that might be useful. I find a few old, empty burlap sacks and take them all. I open one and throw in Bree's favorite book, *The Giving Tree*, and my copy of *Lord of the Flies*. I run to a closet, grab the remaining candles and matches and throw them in.

I run through the kitchen and out to the garage, the doors already busted open from when the slaverunners raided it. I hope desperately they didn't take time to search in the back, deeper in the garage, for his tool chest. I hid it well, in a recess in the wall, and I hurry back and am relieved to see it's still there. It's too heavy to carry the entire toolbox, so I rifle through it and cherry pick whatever might be useful. I take a small hammer, screwdriver, a small box of nails. I find a flashlight, with the battery inside. I test it, and it works. I grab a small set of pliers and a wrench and close it and get ready to leave.

As I'm about to run out, something catches my eye, high on the wall. It's a large zip line, all bunched up, tied up neatly and hanging on a hook. I forgot all about it. Years ago, dad bought this zip line and tied it between the trees, thinking we could all have fun. We did it once, and never again, and then he hung it in the garage. Looking at it now, I feel that it might be valuable. I jump up on the tool bench, reach up and take it down, slinging it over one shoulder and my burlap sack over the other.

I hurry out the garage and back into the house and Bree is standing there, holding Sasha in both her arms, looking down at her.

"I'm ready," she says.

We hurry out the front door, and Logan turns and sees Sasha. He shakes his head.

"Where are you taking her?" he asks.

"The river," I say.

He shakes head in disapproval.

"Clock's ticking," he says. "You got 15 more minutes, before we head back. Where's the food?"

"Not here," I say. "We have to head up higher, to a cottage I found. We can do it in 15."

I walk with Bree towards the truck and throw in the zip line and sack over the back of the pickup. I keep the empty sacks, though, knowing I'll need it to carry the food.

"What's that line for?" Logan asks, stepping up behind us. "We have no use for it."

"You never know," I say.

I turn, put an arm around Bree, who still stares at Sasha, and turn her away, looking up the mountain.

"Let's move," I say to Logan.

Reluctantly, he turns and hikes with us.

The three of us hike steadily up the mountain, the wind getting stronger, colder up here. I worriedly look up at the sky: it is getting darker much quicker than I thought. I know that Logan is right: we need to be back in the water by nightfall. And with sunset basically here, I'm feeling increasingly worried. But I also I know in my heart that we have to get the food.

The three of us trudge our way up the mountain face, and finally we reach the top clearing, as a strong gust hits me in the face. It's getting colder and darker by the minute.

I retrace my steps to the cottage, the snow thick up here; I feel it piercing through my boots as I go. I spot it, still hidden, covered in snow, still as well hidden and anonymous as ever. I hurry to it and pry open it small door. Logan and Bree stand behind me.

"Good find," he says, and for the first time I hear admiration in his voice. "Well hidden. I like it. Almost enough to make me want to stay here – if the slaverunners weren't chasing us, and if we had a food supply."

"I know," I say, as I step into the small house.

"It's beautiful," Bree says. "Is this the house we were going to move to?"

I turn back and look at her, feeling bad. I nod.

"Another time, okay?"

She understands. She's not anxious to wait around for the slaverunners either.

I hurry inside and pull open the trap door, and descend down the steep ladder. It's dark down here, and I feel my way. I reach out and feel a row of glass, clinking as I touch it. The jars. I waste no time. I take out my sacks and fill them as fast as I can with jars. I can barely make them out as my bag grows heavy, but I remember there being raspberry jam, blackberry jam, pickles, cucumbers… I fill as much as the sack can carry then reach up and hand it up the ladder to Logan. He takes it and I fill three more.

I clean out the entire wall.

"No more," Logan says. "Can't haul it. And it's getting dark. We have to go."

Now there's a little bit more respect his voice. Clearly, he's impressed with the stash I found, and finally, he recognizes how much we needed to come here.

He reaches down and offers me a hand, but I scramble up the ladder myself, not needing his help and still miffed by his earlier attitude.

On my feet back in the cottage, I grab two of the heavy sacks myself, as Logan grabs the others. The three of us hurry out the cottage, and soon retrace our steps back down the steep trail. In minutes, we're back at the truck, and I'm relieved to see everything is still there. I check the horizon, and see no signs of any activity at all anywhere on the mountain, or in the distant valley.

We jump back in the truck, I turn the ignition, happy that it starts, and we take off back down the road. We've got food, supplies, our dog, and I was able to say goodbye to dad's house. I feel satisfied. I feel that Bree, beside me, is content, too. Logan looks out the window, lost in his own world, but I can't help feeling as if he thinks we made the right decision.

* * *

The trip back down the mountain is uneventful, the brakes in this old pickup holding pretty well, to my surprise. In some places, where it is really steep, it is more of a controlled slide than a break, but within minutes we are off the worst of it, back onto the stable Route 23, heading east. We pick up speed, and for the first time in a while, I'm feeling optimistic. We've got some precious tools, and enough food to last us for days. I'm feeling good, vindicated, as we cruise down 23, just minutes away from getting back to the boat.

And then, everything changes.

I slam on the brakes as a person jumps out of nowhere, right into the middle of the road, waving his arms hysterically, blocking our path. He's barely fifty yards out and I have to hit the brakes hard, sending our truck into a slide.

"DON'T STOP!" Logan commands. "Keep driving!" He's using his toughest military voice.

But I can't listen. There is a man there, standing out there, helpless, wearing just tattered jeans and a sleeveless vest in the freezing cold. He has a long black beard, wild hair, and large, black crazed eyes. He's so thin, he looks like he hasn't eaten in days. He has a bow and arrow strapped to his chest. He's a human, a survivor, just like us, that much is obvious.

He waves his arms frantically, and I can't run him over. I can't bear leaving him, either.

We come to an abrupt stop, just feet away from the man. He stands there, wide-eyed, as if he didn't expect us to really stop.

Logan wastes no time jumping out, both hands on his pistol, aiming it at the man's head.

"STEP BACK!" he screams.

I jump out, too.

The man slowly raises his arms, looking dazed as he takes several steps back.

"Don't shoot!" the man pleads. "Please! I'm just like you! I need help. Please. You can't leave me here to die. I'm starving. I haven't eaten in days. Let me come with you. Please. *Please*!"

His voice is cracking, and I see the anguish on his face. I know how he feels. Not long ago, I was just like him, scrounging to get by with every meal here in the mountains. I am hardly much better now.

"Here, take this!" the man says, taking off his bow and quiver of arrows. "It's yours! I mean no harm!"

"Move slowly," Logan cautions, still suspicious.

The man reaches out gingerly and hands out the weapon.

"Brooke, you get it," Logan says.

I step forward, grab the bow and arrows, and throw them in the back of the truck.

"See," the man says, breaking into a smile. "I'm no threat. I just want to join you. Please. You can't leave me here to die."

Slowly, Logan relaxes his guard and lowers his gun just a bit. But he still keeps an eye trained on the man.

"Sorry," Logan says. "We can't have another mouth to feed."

"Wait!" I yell at Logan. "You're not the only one here. You don't make all the decisions." I turn to the man. "What's your name?" I ask. "Where are you from?"

He looks at me desperately.

"My name is Rupert," he says. "I've survived up here for two years. I've seen you and your sister before. When the slaverunners took her, I tried to help. I'm the one that chopped down that tree!"

My heart breaks as he says this. He's the one that tried to help us. I can't just leave him here. It's not right.

"We have to take him," I say to Logan. "We can find room for one more."

"You don't know him," Logan replies. "Besides, we don't have the food."

"I can hunt," the man says. "I've got the bow and arrow."

"Much good it's doing you up here," Logan says.

"Please," Rupert says. "I can help. Please. I don't want any of your food."

"We're taking him," I say to Logan.

"No we're not," he says back. "You don't know this man. You don't know anything about him."

"I barely know anything about *you*," I say to Logan, my anger hardening. I hate how he can be so cynical, so guarded. "You're not the only one who has the right to live."

"If you take him, you jeopardize all of us," he says. "Not just you. Your sister, too."

"There are three of us here last I checked," comes Bree's voice.

I turn and see she's jumped out of the truck and stands behind us.

"And that means we're a democracy. And my vote counts. And I vote we take him. We can't just leave him here to die."

Logan shakes his head, looking disgusted. Without another word, his jaw hardening, he turns and jumps back into the truck.

The man looks at me with a huge smile, his face crumpling in a thousand wrinkles.

"Thank you," he whispers. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Just move, before he changes his mind," I say as we turn back to the truck.

As Rupert approaches the door, Logan says, "You're not sitting upfront. Get in the back of the pickup."

Before I can argue, Rupert happily jumps into the back of pickup. Bree jumps in, as do I, and we take off.

It is a nerve-racking remainder of the ride back to the river. As we go, the skies darkening, I constantly watching the sunset, bleeding red through the clouds. It's getting colder out by the second, and the snow is hardening even as we drive, turning to ice in some places, and making driving more precarious. The gas gauge is dropping, flashing red, and though we only have a mile or so to go, I

feel as if we're fighting for every inch. I also feel how on-edge Logan is about our new passenger. It is just one more unknown. One more mouth to feed.

I silently will the truck to keep going, the sky to stay light, the snow not to harden as I step on the gas. Just when I think we'll never get there, we round the bend, and I see our turnoff. I turn hard onto the narrow country lane, sloping down towards the river, willing the truck to make it. The boat, I know, is only a couple hundred yards away.

We round another bend, and as we do, my heart floods with relief as I see the boat. It is still there, bobbing in the water, and I see Ben standing there, looking nervous, watching the horizon for our approach.

"Our boat!" Bree yells excitedly.

This road is even more bumpy as we accelerate downhill. But we're going to make it. My heart floods with relief.

Yet as I'm watching the horizon, in the distance I spot something that makes my heart drop. I can't believe it. Logan must see it at the same time.

"Goddamit," he whispers.

In the distance, on the Hudson, is a slaverunner boat – a large, sleek, black motorboat, racing towards us. It is twice the size of ours, and I'm sure, much better equipped. Making matters worse, I spot another boat behind that, even farther back.

Logan was right. They were much closer than I'd thought.

I slam on the brakes and we skid to a stop about ten yards from the shoreline. I throw it into park, open the door, and jump out, getting ready to race for the boat.

Suddenly, something is very wrong. I feel my breathing cut off as I feel an arm wrap tight around my throat; then I feel myself being dragged backwards. I am losing air, seeing stars, and I don't understand what's happening. Have the slaverunners ambushed us?

"Don't move," hisses a voice in my ear.

I feel something sharp and cold against my throat, and realize it's a knife.

It is then that I realize what has happened: Rupert. The stranger. He has ambushed me.

Three

"LOWER YOUR WEAPON!" Rupert screams. "NOW!"

Logan stands a few feet away, pistol raised, aiming it right past my head. He holds it in place, and I can see him deliberating whether to take a head shot on this man. I see he wants to, but he's worried about hitting me.

I realize now how stupid I was to pick up this person. Logan had been right all along. I should have listened. Rupert was just using us all along, wanting to take our boat and food and supplies and have it all to himself. He is completely desperate. I realize in a flash that he will surely kill me. I have no doubt about it.

"Take the shot!" I scream out to Logan. "Do it!"

I trust Logan – I know he is a great shot. But Rupert holds me tight, and I see Logan wavering, unsure. It is in that moment that I see in Logan's eyes how scared he is of losing me. He does care, after all. He really does.

Slowly, Logan holds out his gun with an open palm, then gently places it down in the snow. My heart sinks.

"Let her go!" he commands.

"The food!" Rupert yells back, his breath hot in my ears. "Those sacks! Bring them to me! Now!"

Logan slowly walks to the back of the truck, reaches in, takes out the four heavy sacks, and walks towards the man.

"Place them on the ground!" Rupert yells. "Slowly!"

Slowly, Logan places them down the ground.

In the distance, I hear the whine of the slaverunners' engines, getting closer. I can't believe it, how stupid I was. Everything is falling apart, right before my eyes.

Bree gets out of the truck.

"Let my sister go!" she screams at him.

That is when I see the future unraveling before my eyes. I see what will happen. Rupert will slice my throat, then take Logan's gun and kill him and Bree. Then Ben and Rose. He will take our food and our boat and be gone.

His killing me is one thing. But his harming Bree is another matter. That is something I cannot allow.

Suddenly, I snap. Images of my dad flash through my mind, of his toughness, of the hand-to-hand combat moves he drilled into me. Pressure points. Strikes. Locks. How to get out of almost anything. How to bring a man to his knees with a single finger. And how to get a knife off your throat.

I summon some ancient reflex, and let my body take over. I raise my inner elbow up six inches, and bring it straight back, aiming for his solar plexus.

I make sharp impact, right where I wanted to. His knife digs into my throat a bit more, scratching it, and it hurts.

But the same time, I hear him gasp, and realize my strike worked.

I take a step forward, pull his arm away from my throat, and do a back kick, hitting him hard between the legs.

He stumbles back a few feet, and collapses in the snow.

I breathe deep, gasping, my throat killing me. Logan dives for his gun.

I turn and see Rupert hit the ground running, racing for our boat. He takes three big steps and leaps right to the center of it. In the same motion, he reaches over and cuts the line holding the boat to shore. It all happens in the blink of an eye; I can't believe how quickly he moves.

Ben stands there, dazed and confused, not knowing how to react. Rupert, on the other hand, doesn't hesitate: he leaps towards Ben and punches him hard across the face with his free hand.

Ben stumbles and is knocked over, and before he can get up, Rupert grabs him from behind in a chokehold, and holds the knife to his throat.

He turns and faces us, using Ben as a human shield. Inside the boat, Rose is cowering and screaming, and Penelope barks like crazy.

"You shoot me and you take him out, too!" Rupert screams.

Logan has his gun back, and he stands there, taking aim. But it is not an easy shot. The boat drifts farther from shore, a good fifteen yards away, bobbing wildly in the rough tide. Logan has about a two inch radius to take him out without killing Ben. Logan hesitates, and I can see he doesn't want to risk killing Ben, not even for our own survival. It is a redeeming quality.

"The keys!" Rupert yells at Ben.

Ben, to his credit, has at least done something right: he must have hid the keys somewhere when he saw Rupert coming. Smart move.

In the distance, I suddenly see the slaverunners come into view, as the whine of their engines grows louder. I feel a deepening sense of dread, of helplessness. I don't know what to do. Our boat is too far from shore to get to it now – and even if we could, Rupert might kill Ben in the process.

Penelope barks and jumps out of Rose's hands, race across the boat, and dig her teeth into Rupert's calf.

He screams and momentarily lets go of Ben.

A gunshot rings out. Logan found his chance, and wasted no time.

It is a clean shot, right between the eyes. Rupert stares back at us for a moment as the bullet enters his brain, wide-eyed. Then he slumps back, on the edge of the boat, as if sitting down, and falls over backwards, landing in the water with a splash.

It is over.

"Get our boat back to shore!" Logan screams to Ben. "NOW!"

Ben, still dazed, jumps into action. He fishes the keys out of his pocket, starts the boat, and steers it back toward shore. I grab two sacks of food and Logan grabs the others, and we throw them in the boat as it touches shore. I grab Bree and hoist her into the boat, then run back to the truck. Logan grabs my sacks of salvaged supplies, and I grab Sasha. Then, remembering, I run back to the truck and grab Rupert's bow and arrows. The last one in, I jump from the shore into the boat, as it starts to drift away. Logan takes over the wheel, hits the throttle and guns it, steering us out of the small channel.

We race towards the entrance to the Hudson, a few hundred yards ahead of us. On the horizon, the slaverunners' boat – sleek, black, menacing – races towards us, maybe half a mile away. It's going to be tight. It looks like we'll barely get out of the channel in time, and barely have a chance to make a run for it. They'll be right behind us.

We burst out into the Hudson just as it's getting dark and as we do, the slaverunners come into full view. They are barely a hundred yards behind us, and closing in fast. Behind them, on the horizon, I also spot the other boat, though that is still a good mile away.

I'm sure that if we had more time, Logan would say *I told you so*. And he would be right.

Just as I'm thinking these thoughts, suddenly, gunshots ring out. Bullets whiz by us, one impacting the side of our boat, shattering wood. Rose and Bree scream out.

"Get down!" I scream.

I lunge to Bree and Rose, grab them and throw them down to the ground. Logan, to his credit, doesn't flinch, and continues to drive the boat. He swerves a little but doesn't lose control. He crouches down low as he steers, trying to avoid bullets as he also tries to avoid the large chunks of ice beginning to form.

I take a knee in the back of the boat, raising my head only as high as I need to, and take aim, military style, with my handgun. I aim for the driver, and fire several shots.

They all miss, but I do manage to get their boat to swerve.

“Take the wheel!” Logan yells to Ben.

Ben, to his credit, doesn’t hesitate. He hurries forward and takes the wheel; the boat swerves as he does.

Logan then hurries to my side, taking a knee beside me.

He fires and his bullets just miss, grazing off their boat. They return fire, and a bullet misses my head by inches. They’re closing in fast.

Another bullet shatters a large chunk of wood off the back of our boat.

“They’re going for our gas tank!” Logan screams out. “Go for theirs!”

“Where is it?” I scream out over the roar of the engine and flying bullets.

“In the back of their boat, on the left side!” he yells.

“I can’t get a clean shot at it,” I say. “Not while they’re facing us.”

Suddenly, I have an idea.

“Ben!” I scream out. “You need to make them turn. We need a clean shot at the gas tank!”

Ben doesn’t hesitate; I’ve barely finished speaking the words when he turns hard on the wheel, the force of it throwing me sideways in the boat.

The slaverunners turn, too, trying to follow us. And that exposes the side of their boat.

I take a knee, as does Logan, and we fire several times.

At first, our barrage of fire misses.

Come on. Come on!

I think of my dad. I steady my wrist, breathe deep, and take one more shot.

To my surprise, I land a direct hit.

The slaverunners’ boat suddenly explodes. The half dozen slaverunners on it burst into flames, shrieking as the boat speeds out of control. Seconds later, it smashes head on into the shoreline.

Another huge explosion. Their boat sinks quickly, and if anyone survived, they are surely drowning in the Hudson.

Ben turns us back upriver, keeping us going straight; slowly, I rise and take a deep breath. I can hardly believe it. We killed them.

“Nice shot,” Logan says.

But it’s not time to rest on our laurels. On the horizon, closing in, is another boat. I doubt we’ll be so lucky a second time.

“I’m out of ammo,” I say.

“I’m almost out, too,” Logan says.

“We can’t confront the next boat,” I say. “And we’re not fast enough to outrun them.”

“What do you suggest?” he asks.

“We have to hide.”

I turn to Ben.

“Find us shelter. Do it now. We have to hide this boat. NOW!”

Ben guns it and I run up to the front, standing beside him, scanning the river for any possible hiding spot. Maybe, if we’re lucky, they’ll zoom right past us.

Then again, maybe not.

Four

We all scan the horizon desperately, and finally, on the right, we spot a narrow inlet. It leads into the rusted shell of an old boat terminal.

"There, on the right!" I say to Ben.

"What if they see us?" he asks. "There's no way out. We'll be stuck. They'll kill us."

"That's a chance we have to take," I say.

Ben picks up speed, making a sharp turn into the narrow inlet. We race past the rusted gates, the narrow entryway of an old, rusted warehouse. As we pass through he cuts the engine, then turns to the left, hiding us behind the shoreline, as we bob in the water. I watch the wake we left in the moonlight, and pray it calms enough for the slaverunners to miss our trail.

We all sit anxiously in the silence, bobbing in the water, watching, waiting. The roar of the slaverunners' engine grows louder, and I hold my breath.

Please, God. Let them pass us by.

The seconds seem to last hours.

Finally, their boat whizzes past us, not slowing for a second.

I hold my breath for ten more seconds as their engine noise grows faint, praying that they don't come back our way.

They don't. It worked.

* * *

Nearly an hour has passed since we pulled in here, all of us huddled together, shell-shocked, in our boat. We barely move for fear of being detected. But I haven't heard a sound since, and haven't detected any activity since their boat passed us. I wonder where they went. Are they still racing up the Hudson, heading north in the blackness, still thinking we're just around the bend? Or have they wised up and are they circling back, combing the shores, looking for us? I can't help but feel that it will only be a matter of time until they come back our way.

But as I stretch out on the boat, I think we are all starting to feel a little bit more relaxed, a little bit less cautious. We are well hidden here, inside this rusted structure, and even if they circle back, I don't see how the slaverunners could possibly spot us.

My legs and feet are cramped from sitting, it's gotten much colder out, and I'm freezing. I can see by Bree and Rose's chattering teeth that they're freezing, too. I wish I had blankets or clothes to give them, or warmth of some sort. I wish we could build a fire – not just for warmth, but also to be able to see each other, to take comfort in each other's faces. But I know that's out of the question. It would be far too risky.

I see Ben sitting there, huddle over, shaking, and remember the pants I salvaged. I stand, the boat rocking as I do, and take a few steps over to my sack and reach in and pull them out. I toss them to Ben.

They land on his chest and he looks over at me, confused.

"They should fit," I say. "Try them on."

He's wearing tattered jeans, covered in holes, way too thin, and dampened with water. Slowly, he bends over and pries off his boots, then slides the leather pants on over his jeans. They look funny on him, the military pants of the slaverunner – but as I suspected, they are a perfect fit. He zips them up wordlessly as he leans back, and I can see the gratitude in his eyes.

I feel Logan looking over at me, and I feel as if he's jealous of my friendship with Ben. He's been like that ever since he saw Ben kiss me back at Penn Station. It's awkward, but there's nothing

I can do about it. I like them both, in different ways. I've never met two more opposite people – yet somehow, they remind me of each other.

I go over to Bree, still shivering, huddled together with Rose, Penelope in her lap, and I sit beside her, drape an arm over her and kiss her forehead. She leans her head into my shoulder.

"It's okay Bree," I say.

"I'm hungry," she says in a soft voice.

"Me too," Rose echoes.

Penelope whimpers softly, and I can tell she is hungry, too. She is smarter than any dog I've ever met. And brave, despite her quivering. I can't believe she bit Rupert when she did; if it weren't for her, maybe we all wouldn't be here. I lean over and stroke her head, and she licks my hand back.

Now that they mention food, I realize it's a good idea. I've been trying to avoid my hunger pangs for way too long.

"You're right," I say. "Let's eat."

They both look at me with eyes wide open in hope and expectation. I stand, cross the boat, and reach into one of the sacks. I take out two large mason jars of raspberry jam and hand one to Bree, unscrewing it for her.

"You guys share this jar," I say to them. "The three of us will share the other."

I open the other jar and pass it to Logan, and he reaches in with his finger, takes a large amount, and puts it in his mouth. He breathes deeply with satisfaction – he must have been starving.

I hand it out to Ben, who takes one, too, then I reach in and scoop a fingerful and place it on my tongue. I get a sugar rush as the raspberry fills my senses, and it is quite possibly the best thing I've ever tasted. I know this is not a meal, but it feels like one.

I seem to be the keeper of food, so I head back to the bags and take out what's left of our cookies and hand one to each person, including myself. I look over and see Bree and Rose happily eating the jam; with every other fingerful, they give Penelope one. She licks their fingers like crazy, whining as she does. The poor thing must be as hungry as we are.

"They'll be back, you know," comes the ominous voice beside me.

I turn and see Logan sitting back, cleaning out his gun, looking at me.

"You know that, right?" he presses. "We're sitting ducks here."

"What do you propose?" I ask.

He shrugs and looks away, disappointed.

"We never should've stopped. We should've kept going, like I said."

"Well, it's too late now," I shoot back, irritated. "Stop complaining."

I'm getting tired of his gloom and doom at every turn, getting tired of our power struggle. I resent having him around, as much as I appreciate him at the same time.

"None of our options are good," he says. "If we head upriver tonight, we might run into them. Might ruin the boat. Maybe hit floating ice, maybe something else. Worse, they'd probably catch us. If we leave in the morning, they can see us in the light. We'd be able to navigate, but they might be waiting."

"So let's leave in the morning," I say. "At the crack of dawn. We'll head north and hope they circled back and went south."

"And what if they didn't?" he asks.

"You got any better ideas? We have to head away from the city, not towards it. Besides, Canada's North, isn't it?"

He turns and looks away, and sighs.

"We could stay put," he says. "Wait it out a few days. Make sure they pass us first."

"In this weather? If we don't get shelter, we'll freeze to death. And we'll be out of food by then. We can't stay here. We have to keep moving."

"Oh, now you want to keep moving," he says.

I glare back at him – he is really beginning to get on my nerves.

"Fine," he says. "Let's leave at dawn. In the meantime, if we're going to stay the night here, we need to stand guard. In shifts. I'll go first, then you, then Ben. You guys sleep now. None of us have slept, and we all need to. Deal?" he asks, looking back and forth from me to Ben.

"Deal," I say. He's right.

Ben doesn't respond, still looking out into space, lost in his own world.

"Hey," Logan says roughly, leaning back and kicking his foot, "I'm talking to you. *Deal?*"

Ben slowly turns and looks at him, still looking out of it, then nods. But I can't tell if he's really heard him. I feel so bad for Ben; it's like he's not really here. Clearly, he's consumed by grief and guilt for his brother. I can't even imagine what he's going through.

"Good," Logan says. He checks his ammo, cocks his gun, then jumps off the boat, onto the dock beside us. The boat rocks, but doesn't drift away. Logan stands on the dry dock, surveying our surroundings. He takes a seat on a wooden post and stares into the blackness, his gun rested on his lap.

I settle in beside Bree, wrapping my arm around her. Rose leans in, too, and I wrap my arm around them both.

"You guys get some rest. We'll have a long day ahead of us tomorrow," I say, secretly wondering if this will be our last night on earth. Wondering if there will even be a tomorrow.

"Not until I take care of Sasha," Bree says.

Sasha. I almost forgot.

I look over and see the frozen corpse of our dog at the far side of the boat. I can hardly believe that we brought her here. Bree is one loyal master.

Bree gets up, silently crosses the boat, and stands over Sasha. She kneels down and strokes her head. Her eyes well up in the moonlight.

I walk over and kneel down beside her. I stroke Sasha, too, forever grateful to her for protecting us.

"Can I help you bury her?" I ask.

Bree nods, still looking down, a tear falling.

Together, we reach down, pick up Sasha, and lean forward with her over the side of the boat. We both hold her there, neither of us wanting to let her go. I look down into the freezing, dark water of the Hudson below, waves bobbing.

"Do you want to say anything?" I ask, "before we let her go?"

Bree looks down, blinking away tears, her face lit up by the moonlight. She looks angelic.

"She was a good dog. She saved my life. I hope she's in a better place now. And I hope I see her again," she says, her voice breaking.

We reach all the way over, and gently place Sasha in. With a light splash, her body hits the water. If floats there for a second or two, then begins to sink. The tides of the Hudson are strong, and they quickly pull it out, towards the open water. We watch as she bobs, half-submerged, in the moonlight, drifting father and farther away. I feel my heart breaking. It reminds me how close I came to having Bree taken from me for good, to being washed away down the Hudson, just like Sasha.

* * *

I don't know how many hours have passed. It is now late in the night, and I lay there in the boat, curled up around Bree and Rose, thinking, unable to sleep. None of us have said a word since we set Sasha into to the water. We all just sit there in the grim silence, the boat rocking softly. A few feet from us sits Ben, also lost in his own world. He seems more dead than alive; sometimes when I look at him, I feel as if I'm looking at a walking ghost. It's odd: we're all sitting here together, yet we're all worlds apart.

Logan is about ten yards away, dutifully on guard on the pier, gun in hand as he looks around. I can imagine him as a soldier. I'm glad to have him protecting us, working the first shift. I'm tired, my bones are weary, and I'm not looking forward to taking over the next shift. I know I should be sleeping, but I can't. Lying there, with Bree in my arms, my mind races.

I think of what a crazy, crazy world it is out there now. I can hardly believe this is all real. It's like one long nightmare that won't end. Every time I think I'm safe, something happens. Thinking back, I can hardly believe how close I just came to getting killed by Rupert. It was so stupid of me to take pity on him, to let him ride with us. I still can't quite understand why he freaked out. What had he hoped to gain? Was he that desperate that he would kill all of us, take our boat and disappear – just to have more food for himself? And where would he have taken it? Was he just evil? Psychotic? Or was he a good man, and had all those years of being alone and starving and freezing just made him snap?

I want to believe it's the latter, that he was, deep down, a good man just made crazy by circumstance. I hope so. But I'll never know.

I close my eyes and think of how close I came to getting killed, feel the cold metal of his knife against my throat. Next time, I will trust no one. Stop for no one. Believe no one. I will do whatever I can to make sure that Bree and Rose and myself and the others survive. No more chances. No more risks. If that means becoming callous, then so be it.

Thinking back, I feel like every hour on the Hudson has been a life or death battle. I don't fathom how we will ever possibly make it all the way to Canada. I'd be amazed if we even survive the next few days, even the next few miles on the water. I know our chances aren't good. I hold Bree tight, knowing this may be our last night together. At least we'll go down fighting, on our own two feet, and not as slaves and prisoners.

"It was so scary," Brooks says.

Her voice startles me in the darkness. It is so soft, I wonder at first if she even spoke. She hasn't said a word for hours, and I thought she was asleep.

I turn and see her eyes are open, staring out with fear.

"What was scary, Bree?"

She shakes her head and waits several seconds before speaking. I realize she is remembering.

"They took me. I was all alone. Then they put me on a bus, and took me on a boat. We were all chained together. It was so cold, we were all so scared. They took me inside that house, and you wouldn't believe the things I saw. What they did to those other girls. I can still hear their screams. I can't get them out of my head."

Her face crumples as she starts to cry.

My heart breaks into a million pieces. I can't even imagine what she's been through. I don't want her to think about it. I feel as if she's scarred forever, and it's my fault.

I hug her tightly, and kiss her on the forehead.

"Shhh," I whisper. "It's all right. That's all behind us now. Don't think about that anymore."

But still, she continues to cry.

Bree buries her face my chest. I rock her as she cries and cries.

"I'm so sorry honey," I say. "I am so so sorry."

I wish I could take it all away from her. But I can't. It is now a part of her. I always wanted to shelter her, to shelter her from everything. And now her heart is filled with horrors.

As I rock her, I wish we could be anywhere but here. I wish things could be how they once were. Back in time. Back when the world was good. Back with our parents. But we can't. We're here.

And I have a sinking feeling things will only get worse.

* * *

I wake and realize it is daytime. I don't know how it got so late in the day, or how I slept so long. I look around me on the boat, and am completely disoriented. I don't understand what's happening. Our boat is now floating, adrift in the Hudson, in the middle of the huge river. Bree and I are the only ones in the boat. I don't know where everyone else is, and I can't understand how we got here.

We both stand at the edge of the boat, looking out at the horizon, and I see three slaverunner boats speed right for us.

I try to burst into action, but feel my arms bound from behind. I turn to see several slaverunners on the boat, see that they have cuffed me from behind, hold me back. I struggle for all I can, but am helpless.

A slaverunner boat stops and one of them gets out, his mask covering his face, steps onto our boat, reaches down and grabs Bree. She squirms, but is no match for him. He picks her up in one arm and begins to carry her away.

"BREE! NO!" I scream.

I struggle with everything in the world, but it is useless. I'm forced to stand there and watch as they drag Bree off, kicking and screaming into their boat. Their boat drifts away on the current, towards Manhattan. Soon, it is barely visible.

As I watch my little sister get farther and farther away from me, I know that this time I lost her for good.

I shriek, an unearthly shriek, begging, crying, for my sister to come back to me.

I wake up sweating. I sit bolt upright, breathing hard, looking all around, trying to figure out what happened.

It was a dream. I look over and see Bree lying beside me, everyone else asleep in the boat. It was all a dream. No one has come. No one has taken Bree.

I try to slow my breathing, my heart still pounding. I sit up and look out at the horizon and see dawn beginning to break, a faint sliver on the horizon. I look over at the dock, and see Ben sitting guard. I think back and remember Logan waking me, remember standing guard myself. Then I woke Ben, gave him the gun, and he took my position. I must have fallen asleep after that.

As I look over at Ben, I realize he is slumped over. I can see from here, in the faint light of dawn, that he is asleep, too. He is supposed to be standing guard. We are defenseless.

Suddenly, I spot movement, shadows in the darkness. It looks like a group of people, or creatures, heading closer to us. I wonder if my eyes are playing tricks on me.

But then, my heart starts pounding furiously in my chest, and my mouth goes dry, as I realize this is not a trick of the light.

We are unprepared. And people are ambushing us.

Five

"BEN!" I scream, sitting up.

But it's too late. A second later, they charge us.

One has overtaken Ben, tackling him, while the other two take a running jump right into our boat.

The boat rocks violently as they man our craft.

Logan wakes, but not in time. One of the men goes right for him, knife drawn, and is about to plunge it into his chest.

My reflexes kick in. I reach back, grab the knife from my waist, lean forward and throw it. The knife goes flying end over end.

It is a perfect strike. It lodges right into the man's throat, a second before he stabs Logan. He collapses, lifeless, on top of him.

Logan sits up and throws the corpse off, and it lands in the water with a splash. Luckily, he has the presence of mind to remove my knife before he does.

Two more come charging my way. With the light picking up, I can see that they are not men: they are mutants. Half men, half I don't know what. Radiated from the war. Crazies. This terrifies me: these types, unlike Rupert, are super strong, super vicious, and have nothing to lose.

One of them heads for Bree and Rose, and I can't let him. I dive for him, tackling him to the ground.

We both go down hard, the boat rocking wildly. I see Logan out of the corner of my eye diving on top of the other, bumping him hard and splashing him overboard.

We have stopped two of them. But a third one races past us.

The one I tackle spins me around and pins me down. He is on top of me, and he is strong. He reaches back and punches me hard in the face, and I feel the sting on my cheek.

I think quick: I raise a knee hard and slam it right between his legs.

It is a perfect strike. He groans and slumps, and as he does, I reach back and elbow him hard across the face. There's a cracking noise as I break cheekbone, and he collapses in the boat.

I hurl him overboard, into the water. It was a stupid move. I should've stripped him of his weapons first. The boat swings wildly as his body leaves.

I now turn to the last one, at the same time Logan does.

But neither of us are quick enough. He races past us, and for some reason, charges right for Bree.

Penelope leaps into the air and, snarling, digs her teeth into his wrist.

He shakes her like a ragdoll, trying to get her off. Penelope hangs on, but finally he gives her a violent shake and sends her flying across the boat.

Before I can reach him, he is about to descend on Bree. My heart stops as I realize I won't make it in time.

Rose jumps up to save Bree and gets in the way of the man's attack. He picks Rose up, leans over and sinks his teeth into her arm.

Rose lets out an unearthly shriek as he tears her flesh with his teeth. It is a sickening, awful site, one that will lodge in my mind forever.

The man leans back, about to bite her again – but now I catch him in time. I pull the spare knife from my pocket, reach back and prepare to throw it.

But before I do, Logan steps up, takes steady aim with his pistol, and fires.

Blood splatters everywhere as he shoots the man in the back of the head. He collapses down to the boat and Logan steps forward and hurls his corpse overboard.

I rush forward to Rose, hysterically shrieking, hardly knowing how to comfort her. I tear off a strip of my shirt and quickly wrap it around her profusely bleeding arm, trying to staunch the blood as best I can.

I detect motion out of the corner of my eye, and realize a crazy has Ben pinned down on the pier. He leans back, about to take a bite out of Ben's throat. I turn and throw my knife. It flies end over end and lodges in the back of the man's neck. His body goes still, as he slumps over to the ground.

Ben sits up, dazed.

"Back in the boat!" Logan yells. "NOW!"

I hear the anger in Logan's voice, and I feel it, too. Ben was on guard and he fell asleep. He left us all open to attack.

Ben stumbles back into the boat and as he does, Logan reaches over with his knife and cuts the rope. As I take care of Rose, shrieking in my arms, Logan takes the wheel, starting up the boat and hitting the throttle.

We gun it out of the channel in the breaking dawn. He's right to take off. Those gunshots might have alerted someone; who knows how much time we have now.

We tear out of the channel into the purple light of day, leaving several bodies floating behind us. Our place of shelter has quickly transformed into a place of horrors, and I hope I never see it again.

We race again down the center of the Hudson, the boat bobbing as Logan guns it. I am on guard, looking in every direction for any sign of slaverunners. If they are anywhere near us, there is nowhere left to hide: the sounds of the gunshots, of Rose's shrieking, and of a roaring engine hardly make us inconspicuous.

I just pray that at some point during the night they circled back looking for us and are farther south than we are; if so, they are somewhere behind us. If not, we will run right into them.

If we are really lucky, they gave up and turned all the way back and headed back to Manhattan. But somehow I doubt that. We've never been that lucky.

Like those crazies. That was just a stroke of bad luck to park there. I've heard rumors of predatory gangs of crazies turned cannibals, who survive by eating others, but I never believed it. I still can hardly believe it's true.

I hold Rose tight, blood seeping through her wound, onto my hand, rocking her, trying to console her. Her impromptu bandage is already red, so I tear a new piece off my shirt, my stomach exposed to the freezing cold, and replace her bandage. It is hardly hygienic, but is better than nothing, and I have to staunch the blood somehow. I wish I had medicine, antibiotics, or at least painkillers – anything I could give her. As I pull off the soaking bandage, I see the chunk of missing flesh on her arm, and I look away, trying not to think of the pain she must be going through. It is horrific.

Penelope sits on her lap, whining, looking up at her, clearly wanting to help, too. Bree looks traumatized once again, holding Rose's hand, trying to quiet her cries. But she is inconsolable.

I wish desperately I had a tranquilizer – *anything*. And then, suddenly, I remember. That bottle of champagne, half drunk. I hurry to the front of the boat, grab it, and race back to her.

"Drink this," I say.

Rose is hysterically crying, screaming in agony, and doesn't even acknowledge me.

I hold it to her lips and make her drink. She nearly chokes on it, spilling some out, but drinks a little.

"Please, Rose, drink. It will help."

I hold it again to her mouth, and in between her wails she takes a few more sips. I feel bad giving alcohol to a young child, but I'm hoping it will help numb her pain, and I don't know what else to do.

"I found pills," comes a voice.

I turn and see Ben, standing there, looking alert for the first time. The attack, what happened to Rose, must have snapped him out of it, maybe because he feels guilty for falling asleep on guard. He stands there, holding out a small container of pills.

I take it and examine it.

"I found it inside the cubby," he says. "I don't know what it is."

I read the label: Ambien. Sleeping pills. The slaverunners must have stashed this to help them sleep. The irony of it: there they are, keeping others awake all night, and stashing sleeping pills for themselves. But for Rose, this is perfect, exactly what we need.

I don't know how many to give her, but I need to calm her down. I hand her the champagne again, make sure she swallows it down, then give her two of them. I stash the rest in my pocket, so they won't get lost, then keep a close watch on Rose.

Within minutes, the booze and pills begin to take effect. Slowly, her wails become cries, then these become muffled. After about twenty minutes, her eyes begin to slump, and she falls asleep in my arms.

I give it another ten minutes, to make sure she's asleep, then look over at Bree.

"Can you hold her?" I ask.

Bree hurries over to my side, and slowly I get up and place Rose in her arms instead.

I stand, my legs cramped, and walk to the front of the boat, beside Logan. We continue to race upriver, the sky breaking, and as I look out at the water, I don't like what I see.

Small chunks of ice are beginning to form in the Hudson in this freezing morning. I can hear them pinging off the boat. This is the last thing we need.

But it gives me an idea. I lean over the boat, water spraying me in the face, and put my hands in the freezing water. It is painful to the touch, but I force my hand all the way, trying to grab a small chunk of ice as we go. We are going too fast, though, and it's hard to grab one. I keep missing by a few inches.

Finally, after a minute agony, I catch one. I lift my hand, shaking from the cold, rush over, and hand the ice to Bree.

She takes it, wide-eyed.

"Hold this," I say.

I go back and take the other bandage, the bloody one, and wrap the ice in it. I hand it to Bree.

"Hold this against her wound."

I am hoping it will help numb her pain, maybe stop the swelling.

I turn my attention back to the river and look around, on all sides, as the morning becomes increasingly bright. We are racing farther and farther north, and I'm relieved to see no signs of the slaverunners anywhere. I hear no engines and detect no movement on either side of the river. The silence is, in fact, ominous. Are they waiting for us?

I come up to the passenger seat, beside Logan, and glance down at the gas tank. Less than a quarter tank. It doesn't bode well.

"Maybe they're gone," I venture. "Maybe they turned back, gave up the search."

"Don't count on it," he says.

As if on cue, suddenly, I hear the roar of an engine. My heart stops. It is a sound I'd recognize anywhere in the world: their engine.

I turn to the back of the boat and look out at the horizon: sure enough, there, about a mile away, are the slaverunners. They are racing towards us. I watch them come, feeling helpless. We are nearly out of ammo, and they are well-equipped and well manned, with tons of weapons and ammunition. We don't stand a chance if we fight them, and we don't stand a chance of outrunning them: they are already closing in. We can't try to hide again, either.

We have no choice but to confront them. And that would be a losing battle. It is like a death sentence racing towards us on the horizon.

"Maybe we should surrender!" Ben yells out, looking back, terrified.

"Never," I say.

I can't imagine becoming their prisoner again.

"If I go down, it's as a dead man," Logan echoes.

I try to think, pressing my mind for any solution.

"Can't you go any faster!?" I press Logan, as I watch them close the gap.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" he shouts back, over the roar of the engine.

I don't know what else to do. I feel so helpless. Rose is awake now, wailing again, and Penelope barks. I feel as if the whole world is closing in on me. If I don't think quick, come up with some solution, we will all be dead in minutes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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