

## CHAPTER TWO

**mags13:** LOL I'm more of a reader than a writer, although I will admit that I've fantasized about how I would handle one of those dystopian games

**apocalypseya:** who among us hasn't been convinced that they could do a better job than Katniss?

**mags13:** to be fair she was distracted by her hot teammate. That wouldn't happen to me. I'm too old to be distracted by men's bullshit, hot or not

**battleroyale:** tell me about it, sister

#2 POINTED TO THE clock on the wall overhead.

"I'm going to get out of here even if you don't," she said, swallowing the last of her water and tossing the bottle on the ground. She gave a derisive look at the small piles of food on the table. "Have fun with that."

#2 jogged away to the left of the T-junction. Maggie watched her go. *Yep, she's definitely that type.* It made Maggie feel marginally better about making snap judgments.

"Since we don't know if we're going to get any more water, I think maybe we should all just take a swig off the one bottle and save the other," Sanya said.

"Good idea," #5 said.

"But I'm so thirsty," #7 said.

"We all are," Maggie said, trying not to be annoyed. #7 had a petulant look about her, not quite as high-tone as #2, but definitely up there on the Karen scale. "But let's try to think long-term if we can."

#4, #9, and #10 were all hastily finishing their own snack bags, though Maggie noticed that #10 only drank half of her water. Then the three of them took off in the direction of #2.

"How do they know that's the right way to go?" #1 murmured.

"They don't," Maggie said. "It's a maze, which means that you have to make choices, and sometimes those choices will be wrong."

"How big do you think it could be?" #5 asked, stuffing a few crackers into her mouth. She was a short Asian woman with a cute pixie cut that was dyed electric blue at the tips. Maggie loved that cut, but her own face was too broad to pull it off. "I'm Natalie, by the way."

They all introduced themselves. #1 was Elizabeth ("but you can just call me Beth") and #7 was Roni.

"So what do you think? About the size of the maze, I mean," Natalie said again.

All the women looked at her, and Maggie realized she'd become their de facto leader. She felt a little tug of nervousness. She didn't want to be in charge of all these women, all these lives. To have an ally was one thing, but if any of them didn't make it through the maze because of a decision she made, Maggie didn't think she could live with herself.

"Well," Maggie said slowly, because she was thinking as she talked, and she didn't want to say anything that someone might decide to use against her later. "They gave us twelve hours to get through. So either the maze is very big, or the obstacles are much more difficult than this one. Or both."

Natalie nodded. "That's what I was thinking, too. And if it's big, we don't want to have to double back if we can avoid it, so rushing through doesn't make a lot of sense."

"But we do have to go fast enough not to fall too far behind on time," Sanya said. "We've already eaten up a half hour."

"Oh god," Roni moaned. "How are we going to do this? How did this happen?"

Maggie clapped her hands together three times, a librarian habit she used at story time when the kids were getting squirrely.

"Look, this is hard on all of us. If we work together, we're going to get through. So let's get moving."

*Not the world's most inspiring speech, Mags, she told herself as they jogged along in the opposite direction from the other group. Could you be any more clichéd?*

It wasn't her job to give inspiring speeches to the troops. The only priority she had at this moment was to get through the maze and get Paige.

*But you don't want any of these others to get hurt, either.*

Maggie let a little sigh escape her lips. No, she couldn't let anyone else get hurt. It was fundamentally against her nature to allow anyone to be harmed if she could avoid it.

*Although maybe I wouldn't mind letting #2 fall into a Pit of Despair, or whatever else they might have set up in here.*

They went along for about fifteen minutes. Natalie and Sanya and Maggie conferred at each turn before deciding which way to go. Beth went along with whatever they decided, and Roni spent most of the time complaining.

"This is impossible. Impossible," Roni said.

In between complaints, Roni told everyone about her mother, who lived with her and had a very serious heart condition. She also told them all about her job as an insurance underwriter, her shitty

ex-husband who'd taken their house and most of their assets in the divorce, and the general misery of her life.

Maggie did her best to tune Roni out, thinking only of Paige. She had to get to Paige.

It soon became clear that only Maggie and Sanya and Natalie were in any shape to move at a decent clip. Beth tried her best but was continuously out of breath, and Roni didn't seem to want to try at all.

"I can't do this," Roni moaned. "I'll never make it. I can't run like this."

Sweat poured over Roni's temples, and the front of her shirt stuck to her chest, which was not small.

"You have to," Natalie said. "If you don't try to get through, they'll kill you and your hostage."

"My mom," Roni said. "They took my mom. She has a heart condition."

Maggie exchanged a glance with Sanya. She knew they were both thinking the same thing—should they try to help Roni along, or should they just leave her behind? Every second was precious, and Roni could potentially jeopardize the whole group.

Maggie shook her head no once, and Sanya looked resigned. They couldn't leave Roni behind even if they wanted to. They couldn't let the woman's poor mother die because her daughter didn't have the physical strength to save them both.

Beth had fallen several paces behind the group, and Maggie dropped back to jog next to her. As she did, she saw Sanya move next to Roni and murmur words of encouragement. Natalie glanced at both pairs and said, "I'm going to scout out the next turn."

Maggie nodded. Natalie had revealed that she was a regular marathoner, and a fast one, too. She'd already scouted some of the turns for them, making sure they didn't accidentally walk into something terrible.

Beth gave Maggie an apologetic look. Her small pale face was coated in a thin sheen of perspiration, and her chest heaved with every step.

Maggie said, "Maybe you should walk for a few minutes, catch your breath."

Beth shook her head. "I . . . have . . . asthma," she managed to choke out. "They . . . took . . . my . . . inhaler."

"Shit," Maggie said. "What can we do to help you?"

"Nothing," Beth said. "Unless . . . there's . . . a . . . coffee . . . pot . . . somewhere. Caffeine."

"Well, at least you can joke about it," Maggie said. "But seriously, you need to walk for a bit. Maybe sit down and take some deep breaths."

Beth shook her head, and Maggie knew she was thinking of her hostage. Beth had said the least of all of them, hadn't revealed anything about why she thought she was there or about her life or hobbies or job. Maggie couldn't rid herself of the initial impression she'd had of Beth as a mouse, a little mouse trying to scurry along the baseboards until she could dart into a hole.

"Look," Maggie said. "Asthma attacks can kill you, right? If you don't get your breathing under control, you're not going to make it through. We still have a long way to go."

The skin around Beth's eyes tightened. Maggie could tell she didn't want to stop, but Beth's breathing was getting more labored by the second.

"Okay, enough," Maggie said, putting her arm in front of the other woman. "You've got to stop for a little bit and get this under control."

Beth tried for a second to push past Maggie, but Maggie gave her the "quiet in the library" look that brooked no disagreement. Beth stumbled to a halt and sat down with her back against the

high, smooth wall, her breath a thin wheeze.

"Sanya!" Maggie called, for the other two had gotten farther ahead as Beth struggled.

Sanya glanced back, said something to Roni, who also looked over her shoulder and then shouted, "Thank Christ!" before sitting down herself. Sanya jogged back to Maggie.

"You do not look good," Sanya said to Beth.

"She has asthma," Maggie said. "She's got to sit for a while and catch her breath. And then I think we're going to need to walk for a while."

Beth shook her head and opened her mouth, but Maggie held up her hand to still her.

"Don't try to talk. Just calm down and try to take long, deep breaths if you can. I know what you're going to say, anyway. You're going to say that the rest of us shouldn't stay just for you, that we should leave you behind because you can't keep up."

Beth just stared at her with huge brown eyes, looking like a puppy waiting for the inevitable kick of a cruel master.

"But we're not going to do that," Maggie said. "Or at least I'm not. I don't want to speak for anyone else."

"I won't, either," Sanya promised. "Women should look out for each other, and I'm not going to be like that bitch number two. I am definitely better than her."

Maggie laughed. "Yeah, me, too."

Beth gave them both a little smile, and Maggie thought that Beth's smiles were probably rare and wonderful gifts, earned by only the fewest.

"Hey," Natalie called, jogging back.

She went right past Roni without a look, which let Maggie know that Natalie, at least, would leave Roni behind without regret. She stopped when she reached their huddle of three. Maggie noticed the wrinkle of worry between her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Natalie asked Beth.

Beth held up her hand and flapped it loosely. Maggie wasn't sure, but Beth's breathing seemed to be smoothing out.

"You're not going to believe what's up ahead," Natalie said. "I'm not even sure how to describe it."

"Try," Sanya said.

"Well, it kind of looks like a jungle?" Natalie said, her voice turning up at the end to make it a question.

"You're not sure?" Maggie asked.

Half of her attention was on Beth, making sure the other woman was breathing normally. Maggie didn't know what they would do if Beth's airways constricted past the point of no return. She couldn't believe those fuckers had taken Beth's inhaler. It was like they wanted her to fail.

*That's exactly it. They want her, and you, and everyone else here to fail while claiming they gave you a fair shot. But they've stacked the deck so that a fair shot doesn't really exist.*

"Well, it's extremely weird to see a jungle in the middle of a man-made maze," Natalie said, responding to Maggie's question.

"It's extremely weird to be in the middle of a man-made maze," Sanya said. "I'm not sure anything could surprise me after this."

"It will," Natalie said.

"How are you feeling now?" Maggie asked Beth.

"Better," she said, and then her eyes darted nervously around the circle of women. "But I don't think I can run anymore."

"It's okay," Maggie said, coming to her feet and offering Beth a hand to help her up. "It seems we're going to have to cross a jungle, anyway. I don't think there will be much running."

The group of four started toward the next turn of the maze. As they passed Roni, she heaved a melodramatic sigh.

"I'm so tired," she said. "And hungry."

"So's everyone else," Maggie said.

Roni huffed out an insulted breath, but Maggie kept walking.

She didn't want to leave the other woman to her own devices, but the whining was getting pretty old pretty quick. It was also hard to feel sympathy for Roni when Beth had an actual medical condition and Beth was trying her hardest not to be a burden on everyone. Roni seemed to relish the idea of being a burden.

The group made it up to the turn in a few minutes, and Natalie pointed right.

"It's there."

They stepped out into the middle of the maze, and all of them stared.

"You're right," Maggie said after a few stunned moments. "It's definitely a jungle."

The stretch of maze before them was covered with climbing greenery from the top of the walls on both sides and down to the ground. In between, there were trees and thick, lush plants with huge leaves.

"How did they put this here?" Sanya asked. "It looks like it was properly grown. Look."

She pointed at the ground underneath the plants.

"There's actually soil," she said.

"How long were they planning this?" Natalie asked. "Long enough to grow a goddamn jungle?"

"They could have had the plants shipped in from somewhere else and just deposited them in the soil here," Maggie said. "Let's not make this conspiracy any bigger than it needs to be."

"You mean bigger than a strange organization kidnapping ten women and their family members and dropping them into some sick game? Which they are no doubt observing right now?" Sanya said.

"Yes, that's what I mean," Maggie said.

She hadn't thought about the men watching until Sanya said it, but of course, they must be. What was the fun of forcing people to participate in a game if you didn't get to watch the game? She imagined the bastard with the cattle prod in one of those rolling office chairs, his feet up on a counter, a bank of monitors before him. Maybe he was eating pizza or French fries, the cattle prod propped up beside him. Maybe he was laughing.

"So what do we do?" Beth asked in her smallest voice. She'd shrunk back when she saw the jungle before them.

"We go through it," Maggie said. "Carefully. It's probably filled with traps and tricks."

"Do you think there are spiders?" Beth said, her voice even tinier than it had been a moment before.

Maggie glanced at her. Beth's face was bloodless.

"You don't like spiders?"

Beth shook her head.

"If it means anything, I'm not too fond of them myself," Natalie said.

Spiders didn't bother Maggie. She lived in the Southwest, and there were tarantulas everywhere. Natalie was clearly trying to make Beth feel better. It seemed, though, that Natalie just disliked spiders. Beth appeared bone-deep terrified.

"There might be spiders," Maggie said. She didn't think it would be a good idea to lie to the other woman. "But we'll all be together. We'll be with you, and you can get through this."

*Ugh, more stupid platitudes.* But she didn't know what else to say, really. Maggie wasn't worried about spiders, in any case. Or snakes, or any other fauna that might be crawling through the greenery in front of them. What worried her was the possibility of traps—hidden holes that might break someone's leg, say, or trip wires. That seemed like the sort of thing that might amuse the guy with the cattle prod and his giggling little buddies.

"What the hell is all this shit?"

The voice was behind them. The group turned as one to see the second gang, led by #2, come jogging up. Maggie noticed that they all looked sweaty and out of sorts. Seemed like #2's path had been longer than their own, though they were clearly keeping up a faster clip. #4 and #9 stopped on either side of #2, but #10 hung back a step, like she wasn't sure she wanted to associate with the other three.

"As you can see," Sanya said (in a voice that Maggie imagined she used in court), "it's a jungle."

"We're supposed to go through it or what?" #2 said.

"What do you think?" Maggie said.

"Then why the hell are you dumbasses just standing around?" #2 tapped her wrist, as if there were a watch there. "Time's ticking."

She charged ahead, deliberately pushing through their group instead of going around. #4 and #9 stayed on her heels, but #10 went around the group, throwing them an apologetic glance.

"Hey!" Roni said. "What's your problem?"

"Get going or get out of my way," #2 said. "I don't have time for your bullshit."

"And yet you took longer to get here than we did," Maggie said. "Despite all of our kumbaya crap."

Sanya and Natalie grinned as #2 looked momentarily flustered. Then she put her armor back up, the hardness back in her eyes and jaw.

"Let's just see who gets to the end first," #2 said. "I never lose."

"It's not a race," Maggie said.

"That's what you think," #2 said. "What if they decide to only let out the first three that arrive at the end or something like that? I'm not going to be left behind."

"Do you think they would do that?" Sanya asked in a low voice so only Maggie could hear.

"I think that there are no real rules and they can do whatever they want," Maggie responded in the same tone. Then slightly louder, "But we're not there yet. We're here, and we have to get through what's in front of us."

"Good luck with that," #2 said.

Maggie could hardly believe such a walking stereotype existed in real life. #2 was hardly a person at all—more like someone dreamed up in a writer's room.

#2 moved toward the mass of plants before them. #4, #9 and #10 followed behind, even though #2 didn't give any indication that she noticed or cared what happened to them. The four of them quickly disappeared into the thick growth. Maggie heard the rustle of leaves and the crack of branches, but it faded swiftly. She didn't know if it was because the other group was moving so fast or because the plants were so thick that they muffled any noise.

Sanya and Natalie started forward, but Maggie held up her hand. "Wait. Wait and see for a minute."

Sanya gave her a sideways look, and Maggie flushed. It was incredibly cruel, what she was doing. She was letting the other group go ahead so that they could trigger any traps, but only Sanya seemed to realize it.

"Are we really doing this?" Sanya murmured.

"I don't *want* anyone to get hurt," Maggie said. "But if it has to happen, then my priority is making sure it doesn't happen to you guys."

"I have to pee," Roni said. "Like, really bad."

"So pee," Maggie said.

"Right out here in the open?" Roni said, obviously aghast. "I thought maybe I could go hide under a tree or a leaf or whatever."

"I kind of had the same idea," Natalie admitted. "I've been holding on to it for a while. I didn't want to give those pricks a thrill by letting them see my ass hanging out."

"They already saw your ass when they put you in that stupid uniform," Maggie said.

Natalie appeared disconcerted. "I forgot. It's been one thing after another since I woke up, and I forgot. They saw me. They touched me."

Natalie ran her hands up and down her arms like she could wipe away what had happened. Maggie's stomach gave a guilty little twist. She hadn't meant to be so blunt, to make anyone else feel worse about their situation.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to remind you."

"No, it's okay," Natalie said. "I mean, it's not okay that it happened, but it's okay that you reminded me. Because it happened to all of us, right? So we can help each other, like you said. We can make it better for us, let them know that what they did won't hurt us."

Maggie nodded. So did Beth and Sanya.

"Okay, so what we should do now—" Maggie began, but Roni pushed past, her hands flapping in a panic.

"I have to *pee right now*," Roni shouted, running toward the jungle's entrance.

"Wait, Roni, don't!" Maggie said.

But it was too late. Roni plowed into the trees, just a little to the left of where #2 and her gang had entered.

Just a little to the left, and then something exploded, and someone was screaming, but it wasn't Roni, because Roni was gone. Roni was a spray of blood and flesh and bone, and Roni's mother with the heart condition wasn't going to make it, because even if the men didn't kill Roni's mother, she'd probably die from the shock.

Maggie's ears rang. She felt her breath heaving in her chest, like she couldn't get enough oxygen. Beth sobbed beside her, her hand clinging to Maggie's sleeve like a child's.

"I told her not to go," Maggie said. Her voice sounded far away to her own ears, like it was coming from somewhere outside her body. "I told her. You heard me."

"It wasn't your fault," Sanya said. "Not your fault at all. Someone like her, she probably wasn't going to make it anyway."

"That's harsh," Natalie said. A tear ran down each of her cheeks, like she'd been shocked into crying.

"It's true, though," Sanya said. "You know it even if you don't want to say it."

Natalie pressed her lips together but didn't say anything else. Maggie noticed her glance at Beth, though, and realized that the other woman was thinking the same thing about Beth that Sanya had said about Roni.

*She's probably not going to make it, Maggie thought. I have to get used to the idea now.*

"We should get moving," Maggie said.

"Into the minefield?" Sanya said.

"All roads lead this way. We don't have a choice if we want to get through," Maggie said.

As she said this, they heard another explosion, deeper into the jungle, followed by a scream of terror.

"Maybe that bitch number two got blown up," Natalie said, then gave everyone a sideways look. "Don't try to tell me you weren't thinking it."

"Oh, no, I definitely was thinking it," Maggie said. "But I was also thinking about how to get through this without all of us being blown to smithereens one by one."

Maggie's eyes moved toward the gory splat that used to be Roni, and the others did the same.

"So what was your idea, fearless leader?" Sanya asked.

"Don't call me that," Maggie said.

"It's already happened, whether you want it to or not," Sanya said.

"Just . . . don't call me that," Maggie said. She felt again the tremendous burden of responsibility, of the feeling that it was on her to get all of them through the maze. She'd already failed Roni.

*No, I didn't fail her, Maggie told herself firmly. Roni charged ahead. Roni didn't listen.*

But it was still difficult for Maggie to think about Roni's mother. Roni's mother was going to hear something that no mother ever wanted to hear—that her daughter was dead.

And then, according to the cattle-prod prick, Roni's mother would die, too.

Maggie thought about her own daughter, thought about her daughter all alone and scared, and she stiffened her spine. Roni was the past now. Maggie couldn't do anything about Roni anymore, couldn't help her or her mother in any way. Maggie had to go forward. She had to think about the living.

"Okay, so what I was thinking is that we each get something like a long stick and make the end pointy," Maggie said. "And then we stay in a tight group, two by two, and use the sticks to prod the ground in front of us."

"So that we'll be able to feel the explosive with the stick and then avoid it," Sanya said. "That could work. I think I saw that in a World War Two movie once, except they used their bayonets."

"Right," Maggie said. "I was thinking of the same movie."

"Isn't that funny?" Sanya said, shaking her head. "Especially since we both just said we'd rather read."

"Movies stick in your head," Maggie said. "The power of visual media."

"What if the bombs are so pressurized that even the touch of a stick will set them off?" Natalie asked, and then gestured at the remains of Roni. "Mines in World War Two didn't usually vaporize people."

"Well, we can use really long sticks," Maggie said. "Hopefully we'll be out of range if one of the explosives goes off."

"Hopefully?" Natalie said.

"You have a better idea?" Sanya asked. "Because if so, you can feel free to tiptoe wherever you want without us."

"No," Natalie said. "I just . . . I'm scared."

Her words seemed to run around the group. Beth's hand, still holding Maggie's sleeve, trembled.

"I'm scared, too," Maggie said. "But we don't really have a choice, do we? We have to go forward."

"What if we didn't?" Natalie said. "What if we just sat down and refused to participate?"

"We know what would happen," Maggie said. "We all saw what happened to her, at the beginning."

The cattle prod pressing into flesh, the body falling backward.

"What if it wasn't real?" Natalie said. "What if she's not really dead, and it was just an act to convince us we have to play this game?"

"It could have been a performance," Maggie said. "But I don't think so. And anyway, we all saw what happened to Roni. Whatever this is and whoever is running it—they're deadly serious. It doesn't matter what we want right now. We have to play the game, and if we want to save our hostages, we have to win."

Sanya nodded, and so did Beth.

"Okay," Natalie said. "Let's play."