

CHAPTER THREE

mags13: I think I'd be okay in a hunger games-style scenario

battleroyale: are you in the military or something? Because I don't think I could kill other people.

mags13: oh no I'm not killing anyone. Not on purpose anyway.

tyz7412: if those are the rules of the game you don't have a choice

MAGGIE BROKE OFF ONE of the branches from a nearby tree to use as a prod. She was careful not to step onto the dirt of the jungle area at all, since Roni had been killed by a mine that was very close to the edge. She didn't have any tools to sharpen the point, but she did tear off the large, floppy green leaves and any smaller branches. Sanya did the same with another branch, and they huddled up into a two-by-two formation near the place where #2 and her cronies had entered the jungle.

Maggie and Sanya carefully inserted the tips of each stick into the dirt before them, feeling for anything that might be just under the surface. It was slow, frustrating work, and Maggie sensed both Natalie and Sanya getting impatient with her caution.

"We can follow the other group's footsteps," Sanya said.

The first set of women had clearly plowed through the jungle with no regard for any danger. There were broken leaves and branches in a clear path ahead, as well as the marks of their sneakers on the ground.

"We can use them as a guide," Maggie said. "But one of their group got blown up, too. We heard the explosion, heard the scream. It might have just been luck that they missed some of the other mines."

"We're just going so slow," Sanya said.

"Slow or dead," Maggie said. "I know which one I'd rather be."

When they'd entered the jungle, Maggie had noticed the lack of sound right away. There hadn't been much sound in the main part of the maze, but she'd still heard the distant echoes of the men outside shouting to each other or doing maneuvers or whatever they were up to. The greenery of the space seemed to block all that out, to blanket the area in a deceptive quiet.

Beth held on to the back of Maggie's shirt like a child trying not to lose their parent in a crowd. Maggie wondered again what her story was, how she'd gotten there. Maggie herself was still pretty convinced that her own kidnapping was Noah's doing, but Beth didn't seem like the kind of person who would piss anybody off at all, much less to the degree that Maggie had done for Noah. It made her sad sometimes, to think about how once they'd been happy, how they'd laughed together, how they couldn't wait to see one another at the end of the day. Then Noah started doing cocaine with his coworkers after work instead of—sometimes in addition to—having a few beers. He became paranoid, frightening, and often violent, and Maggie had to forget the person he'd been, the person she'd fallen in love with. That man was gone.

But Noah was so angry when she said that, when she defied him, when she took Paige and ran.

He was so angry.

And then she'd filed for divorce, and gotten custody of Paige, and he was even angrier than before—angry because he'd lost, angry because, as he put it, "that bitch judge sided with you." Angry because he was a man and he expected the world to fall into line for him the way it always had.

Maggie could definitely see him encountering something like the group that had kidnapped her and agreeing with their base philosophy, which seemed to be "punish women." She imagined it as some online group, a private chat that became reality.

But this reality is pretty elaborate. Who pays for this? How did they set up some giant maze without newspapers or local TV stations catching on? How do they keep it a secret?

She shook away her questions. She needed to pay attention to the here and now, to focus on what was in front of her. If she didn't, they could all die.

A few minutes later, Sanya inserted the tip of the stick into the dirt, and Maggie heard a tiny metallic ping.

"Shit," Sanya said. "I found one."

"Oh god," Natalie said. "What now?"

"Stay calm," Maggie said. "Don't take the stick out yet. Nobody move your feet at all. I'm going to get something to mark the spot, and then you can all come single file behind me for a few feet. We don't know how big these mines are."

Maggie took a few steps off the path they'd been following, careful to prod the ground before her, and grabbed a handful of hot pink flowers with oversized petals. They were so bright that they looked almost fake, like someone had painted them.

A tune rose up from the depths of her memory, an animated film she'd watched with Paige when her daughter was three or four.

Painting the roses red, we're painting the roses red . . .

She moved carefully back to the group, stepping into the foot marks she'd made already, and dropped the flowers over

the spot where Sanya stood, trembling, holding the stick into the ground.

"What if I set it off when I pull the stick out?" Sanya whispered.

Maggie thought about this for a moment. "I think it's probably set off by pressure, but more pressure than you're applying at the moment."

A bead of sweat dripped over the bridge of Sanya's nose and fell onto the ground. "Better safe than sorry. All of you get ahead of me."

"Sanya—" Maggie began.

"No," Sanya said. "If this thing goes off, then I want all of you out of harm's way. It doesn't make any sense for all of us to get blown into little bits."

Maggie did not like this idea at all. She'd already lost one member of the group, and if she was completely honest, the last person she wanted to lose was Sanya. The other woman was smart, strong and practical, and Maggie liked her on top of everything else.

"You know you'd do the exact same thing," Sanya said, holding Maggie's gaze. "You know you would."

"Please, let's do what she wants," Natalie said.

Maggie felt a little flare of anger. Of course Natalie wanted to go ahead. Then she would be safe, and it wouldn't matter what happened to Sanya.

She's scared. She can't help it, Maggie told herself.

But Maggie was scared, too, and she wasn't thinking only of her own safety. She was thinking about everyone's safety, including—especially—the hostages.

"My little girl's name is Joy," Sanya said. "You'll find her for me, won't you, if something happens?"

"You're going to find her yourself," Maggie said. "Because you're going to pull that stick up and nothing's going to happen. You're going to be just fine."

"Move ahead of me," Sanya said. "The longer we stand here talking about it, the less time we have to get through the maze."

Maggie stared at Sanya. "No. I'm going to stand right here because you're not going to die."

"Look, if you want to be a hero, you can do that," Natalie said. "But give me the other stick so I can go ahead of you."

"No one's getting blown up," Maggie said. "I promise."

"I never thought I'd meet someone more stubborn than me," Sanya said, her voice shaky.

"It's one of my best qualities," Maggie said.

Sanya gave a little laugh. "If you say so. I'm not loving it right at this moment."

"Count of three," Maggie said.

"Let me get by you!" Natalie said, her voice reaching its shrieking point. "This isn't fair. You can't play Russian roulette with all of our lives."

"One," Maggie said. "Stay still, Natalie. You don't want to accidentally push Sanya forward. Two."

Natalie put her hand over her mouth, like she was trying to hold in a scream.

Sweat ran down the back of Maggie's neck, over her spine, pooled in the small of her back. "Three."

Sanya pulled out the stick.

Nothing happened.

For a second, they all stared at the place where the stick had been. Then Maggie said, "See? I told you it would be fine."

Sanya looked like she was about to collapse, and Natalie bent over, holding her stomach like she was about to throw up.

Beth didn't say anything. She just gave Maggie a tiny smile, like she had known everything was going to be okay all along.

Maggie gave everyone a few minutes to breathe, then said, "We've got to keep going. We can't see the clocks in here with all of the foliage overhead. We don't know how much time has passed."

"A ton, I bet," Natalie said. "We're moving super slow."

"For a reason," Maggie reminded her, trying not to be as short with Natalie as she wanted to be. "Which was just illustrated for us in living color."

Natalie looked mutinous for a minute, then subsided. "I get it. I do. It's just hard to feel like we're making progress. Number two and her mean girls are probably miles ahead of us already."

"We don't know that," Maggie said. "Anyway, their race is not ours. Don't let number two convince you to endanger yourself just because she's happy to do it."

They moved ahead, slow and careful as before. Maggie heard everyone's breathing clearly in the still air, and heard the soft thump of their sneakers on the ground. Everything smelled like wet greens, like someone had been in to water the plants just before the game started. Then she noticed something she'd been too distracted to notice before.

"There's no wind," she said.

"Yeah, it's hot as hell in here," Sanya said.

"No, I mean, there's no wind *at all*. No air movement of any kind."

"So?" Natalie said.

"So when we were outside the maze, did you notice anything about the sky?"

"It was fake." Beth's voice, very low behind Maggie, almost like she was a student afraid to give the correct answer in class. "The light was weird."

Maggie nodded. "Exactly. The light didn't seem like natural light. And there's no wind. We're inside some bigger structure."

"Why does it matter?" Natalie said. "That knowledge isn't going to help us get through this."

"You know, you're just incredibly negative," Sanya said. "And it's starting to piss me off."

"I'm just saying," Natalie said, her tone defensive, "I don't get why it matters."

"Because," Maggie said, "it explains a little bit of how they've been able to keep a place like this under wraps. No helicopters or planes flying overhead wondering what they're getting up to."

"It also means it's going to be harder to get out," Sanya said. "We can't just grab our hostages and escape into the wilderness or whatever."

"Yeah," Maggie said. She knew that Sanya had been thinking what she'd been thinking—that escape was the only real solution. If they were indoors, maybe inside some big complex—it would be harder. A lot harder. They didn't know how big this organization was, or how many personnel they had, but surely there would be guards everywhere. And locked doors.

"What do you mean, escape?" Natalie asked, her eyes wide. "If we get through the maze, they'll let us go. That's the deal."

"Uh-huh," Sanya said in the tone of someone talking to an idiot.

"What do you mean, 'uh-huh,' like that?" Natalie said. "They told us. Get through the maze and they'll let us and our hostages go. They told us."

"Do you always believe everything you're told?" Sanya said.

"They can't just let us go," Maggie said, cutting in before the two of them started arguing. She sensed that Sanya was beginning to lose patience with Natalie. "What's the first thing that you'll do when you get home?"

"Go to the police," Natalie said promptly. "Report all of this."

"Right. And assuming that the police take you seriously—they might not, you know—then there will be an investigation. And then the investigation might find this place, and these men. Do you think they're just going to give up their fun when they've gone to such lengths to get it?"

Natalie's face had gone slack. "But, but . . . they said! They said we'd go free! They can't just lie like that."

"They kidnapped us," Sanya reminded her. "And our children, or parents, or siblings. They have weapons, and we're essentially imprisoned. Why can't they lie?"

"Because it's not fair!" Natalie said. "They set out the rules. If we follow the rules, we get what we want."

Maggie resisted the urge to explain to the other woman that life was not fair, that it had never been fair, that terrible things happened all the time that nobody planned on, that even when you tried your hardest, you didn't always get what you wanted. Natalie should have been old enough to know that already, but apparently not.

Natalie seemed like the kind of person who'd always been a quiet rule follower, and she'd probably been rewarded throughout her life for that—by parents, teachers, employers. Society in general liked those who colored inside the lines, who didn't raise a fuss, who handed in their reports on time. Those people who were good little cogs all their life got straight As and entry into the best colleges and jobs with high starting salaries and paid vacation. And as long as you kept doing what you were "supposed" to do, as long as you didn't take too many days off and avoided conflict in the break room, you got your raises in pay at the correct intervals and could afford that nice little house, the one that made you an upright property-tax-paying American. Maggie could see the course of Natalie's life in her eyes, see all dotted i's and crossed t's, see the self-satisfaction that came with knowing she'd done everything right and everything well.

And yet she'd ended up here in the maze, and the people who put her there were not going to let her—or any of them—go when this was over. There would be another task, another hill to climb, another obstacle to scale. There would always be more, because they could change the rules whenever they wanted.

So Maggie had already been thinking about escape, and what might be needed, and what might be involved in order to be successful. She needed to get through the maze first, or maybe find an escape route out. She knew that Sanya had been thinking of it, too. Maybe Beth had considered it—Maggie couldn't tell, because Beth was an enigma. But Natalie hadn't contemplated the possibility at all.

"You're all looking at me like I'm stupid," Natalie said, tears running down her cheeks. "I'm not stupid. I'm not. I just believed them. That's not stupid. I wanted to, you know, be hopeful. I wanted to think there was an end to the nightmare."

Beth tugged on Maggie's shirt as Natalie continued to rant and cry. "Maggie, there's something."

"What?" Maggie said, leaning close to hear Beth's soft voice.

"There's something. A noise. Listen."

Maggie strained to hear over the sound of Natalie's voice. There was *something*, as Beth had put it. A humming kind of sound, or was it clicking? Something soft that was gradually getting louder.

Maggie tuned in to what Natalie was saying. ". . . don't think that you should treat me like a moron just because—"

"Stop," Maggie said, holding up her hand. "Listen."

Natalie looked outraged. "These other two might have made you their unofficial captain, but you don't have the right to tell me—"

"No, I mean really listen," Maggie said, and Natalie finally stopped.

Sanya turned her head to look behind them. "Something's coming."

"I know," Maggie said.

"We have to move," Sanya said.

"If we run, we could step on a mine."

"If we don't, then whatever is behind us is going to get us," Sanya said.

Despite the collective sense of urgency, none of them moved a muscle. Maggie felt paralyzed, compelled to find out what was approaching before she went another step.

Come on, her brain shouted at her. Go, go, go! This is the stupid shit that people always do in the movies, just stand there waiting for their doom to fall down on their heads.

"Let's go," she said, and started poking the ground in front of her with the stick again. Sanya copied her. Beth kept hold of Maggie's shirt, and Natalie walked so close to Sanya that Sanya had to tell her to back off.

"Faster," Natalie moaned. "We have to go faster."

The clicking noise was louder, getting louder every second. It sounded like a mass of something, a hive that had been opened up and set loose. Maggie glanced over her shoulder and Beth stared up at Maggie, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Spiders," Beth said. Her breath was coming in ragged, shallow gasps.

"How do you know it's—" Maggie began, but then she saw them.

Spiders. Lots of spiders, big spiders and small spiders, spiders surging toward them in one massive, undulating, alien wave.

Maggie didn't mind spiders, generally. But the sight of so many of them, charging directly toward her, twanged some primal chord of fear deep in her soul. These creatures did not seem to come from the same earth as she.

"Oh my god, run, run!" Natalie shouted, pushing past Sanya and barreling through the jungle, batting leaves and branches away.

"No, don't!" Maggie said, but she couldn't stop them, they were all running now, and then she was running, too, heedless of the traps that might be set or the mines that might explode, because it wasn't *natural*; it wasn't right. Spiders didn't hurtle toward people like an invading army; they didn't move at the speeds that they were moving now.

Those guys did something to the spiders, or maybe they created them whole cloth and they're just robots or something. Whatever they are—fake or chemically altered—they were obviously sent to get us moving, to stop us from crawling carefully through the jungle. They're watching us and they want entertainment, and we weren't providing it.

Maggie wished she could stop wondering about everything all the time, wished she could turn her brain off and run without trying to solve for *x*. She was always like this, somehow incapable of letting things go once her brain snagged on a question. The other three women were well ahead of her now. Beth was the farthest from Maggie, sprinting hard. Maggie wondered how she could even run that fast, if her airways were so constricted that she would fall down at any moment.

She's really scared of spiders. Really, really scared. Maybe the adrenaline is opening up her airways. Does it work like that?

Sanya was behind Beth, and Natalie was closest to Maggie, maybe ten feet in front of her. Maggie felt something tickle the back of her neck. She brushed it away and felt hairy legs trying to cling to her hand.

Don't look, don't look, keep going.

"Help," a voice said, somewhere ahead of Maggie. "Help me."

Maggie slowed, her eyes searching for the woman who'd called out for help. Several spiders scuttled up her legs, and Maggie used the stick she still held to bat them off, but it was fruitless.

If she didn't run, they'd catch up to her, overwhelm her, crawl all over her and spin their webs until she was mummified.

"Help," the voice said again. It was the last gasp of a desperate person.

Maggie saw her then. It was #9, one of the women who'd refused to share food with anyone else at the first obstacle. The bottom of her right leg was missing and she was lying in a pool of sticky blood. She'd obviously stepped on one of the mines, but maybe only the edge of one, because she wasn't entirely blown to smithereens like Roni.

Her group had abandoned her, though, left her there to die slowly. Maggie was amazed she was still awake, considering the amount of blood loss. But then people generally did show a remarkable desire to stay alive.

#9 saw Maggie staring at her. Her eyes widened in hope and she said, "Help. Please help me."

Maggie was rooted to the spot, spiders crawling freely up her body now. She tried not to think about them, beating at her legs as best she could to keep them off. She didn't know what to do. She didn't think she could help this woman on her own. The other three had disappeared. And even if Maggie somehow managed to pick up #9, what could she do for the woman? She didn't have a way to stop the blood loss, or to replace the blood that was gone.

#9 reached toward Maggie, beseeching. "Help. Don't leave me alone."

"I can't," Maggie began, but then it didn't matter anymore.

The spiders swarmed #9, and she began to scream.

"Oh, god," Maggie said, running in the same direction as the others, #9's screams echoing behind her. "Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god."

What have I done? What should I have done?

She ran and she beat at the spiders that had crawled up her chest and over her shoulders, that were trying to nest in her hair. She ran and she screamed and she cried and she prayed that she didn't step on a land mine because she couldn't see, she didn't know how to be careful anymore and she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd done something terrible, something irreversible, something she shouldn't have done.

I should have helped her. I shouldn't have left her there.

And then somehow, all of a sudden, she was out of the jungle. There was no more foliage, just the walls of the maze around her and the hard ground beneath her and the fake sky above her. And there were Sanya and Beth and Natalie standing huddled together before her.

They turned toward Maggie as one, their faces relieved, but then Beth turned white and fell to the ground.

"Beth!" Natalie shouted, and knelt beside her.

Sanya strode toward Maggie, still holding the stick she'd used to prod the ground for mines. She lifted it up in the air like a baseball bat and swung it toward Maggie's head.

Maggie didn't even have a chance to think as the stick whooshed above her. She saw a very large spider fly through the air out of the corner of her eye.

"Thanks," she said to Sanya, but Sanya didn't say anything, only circled behind Maggie and methodically began removing any visible spiders with the stick. All the spiders ran back into the jungle, like they were afraid to be in the light, and the rest of the arachnid army had stopped at the border.

Sanya finished up, but Maggie still felt like there were minute feet moving over her skin. She yanked her tee shirt over her head, turned it inside out and saw several tiny spiders clinging to the cloth. Maggie shook and beat at the shirt until they were all gone, but she couldn't shake the creepy-crawly feeling. Her hands kept

going up to her scalp, running through her hair, feeling for something that didn't belong there.

"What happened?" Sanya said. "I thought you were right behind us."

Maggie realized her heart was pounding like she was still running. She couldn't shake the terrible image of #9, part of her leg gone, the pool of blood beneath her, her open, screaming mouth as the spiders ran over her.

"The other group, they left someone behind. Number nine," Maggie said. "She called out."

"So?" Sanya said. "You know that none of them would spit on you if you were on fire. They made that very clear."

"Well, I'm not like them," Maggie said, irritated at Sanya's dismissal. "I can't just pass by someone bleeding and asking for help without trying to do something."

Sanya said, "So where is she?"

"I couldn't help her. Part of her leg had been blown off by one of the mines."

"And as soon as you saw that, you should have kept going," Sanya said.

Maggie stared. "You saw her, too."

"Sure did," Sanya said. "And I could tell right away that I couldn't do anything for her, so I kept moving."

"But you couldn't tell that from a glance," Maggie said.

"The woman's leg was missing," Sanya said, her tone hard. "I could tell."

"But—"

"Listen," Sanya said. "I can tell you're one of those people who wants to help everybody, who wants to do their best for their community. But you're not going to be able to help everyone in here. You're just not. They didn't set up the game that way."

"They set it up so we would fail," Maggie murmured.

"They set it up so we would hurt each other, and then we would fail," Sanya said. "As we have heard so often, the cruelty is the point."

Maggie swiped at her arms, shivering. She didn't know if she would ever be able to shake the feeling of spiders crawling all over her.

Sanya and Maggie walked over to Beth and Natalie. Beth was sitting up, leaning on Natalie's arm, bleary-eyed.

"Are the spiders gone?" she asked.

"Yes," Maggie said.

"Time's running down," Sanya said, pointing at the clock overhead that was visible now that they were out of the jungle. "We've got to move faster."

Two hours had already gone by.

Maggie thought about Paige—maybe cold, maybe hungry, definitely scared. Maybe almost as scared as Maggie herself was feeling, wondering if she could make it through the maze.

I can. I will.

She looked down the seemingly innocuous channel of the maze in front of her, at the T-junction ahead.

"Let's move, ladies," she said, and gave Beth a hand up.