

CHAPTER ONE

apocalypseya: I know they kind of got overdone a few years ago but I love those ya books with the dystopic future and dangerous killing games and their painfully obvious love triangles

mags13: agreed they're a total weakness. Pretty disappointed that you don't see as many of those kinds of books anymore

apocalypseya: maybe you should write your own!

MAGGIE LOOKED DOWN AT her hands, then glanced at the women on either side of her. The woman on her right was sobbing, her face pressed into her knees. On her left was another woman, staring at the opposite wall. It wasn't a stoic kind of stare, though. It was the thousand-yard stare of the exhausted and disbelieving, or maybe the woman's body hadn't yet shaken off the effects of the sedative they'd all been given. Another woman stood by the double doors, banging ceaselessly and energetically, shouting, "Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!"

So her sedative has definitely worn off, then.

Nobody tried to stop the screaming woman. Nobody tried to comfort the sobbing woman. Most of the women were like Maggie, their body language saying that they were resigned to their immediate future.

All the women were dressed the same way, in black leggings and gray tee shirts and white sneakers. The backs of their tee shirts had bright orange numbers on them. Maggie's was number three—she'd pulled it away from her body and peered over her shoulder to look at it.

She had not dressed herself in this stupid outfit, and that upset her a lot. It meant that someone else—possibly more than one someone else—had pawed at her, had taken her pajamas off her, had looked at her body without her permission. Maybe they'd laughed. Maybe they'd grabbed at her breasts or her thighs and she'd been completely out cold, unable to do anything about it.

Maggie wasn't as resigned as she pretended to be. She was angry. And she knew exactly who to be angry at—Noah.

Noah, her ex-husband, was a piece of shit, and when Maggie saw him again (assuming she survived the next twelve hours), she was going to kick his ass from here to kingdom come.

She wouldn't be in this situation if it wasn't for him. She was 100 percent certain of that. Most of the bad shit in her life had come down because of Noah. It was hard to remember now why she'd ever loved him in the first place, how she ever thought she could be happy with him. She sometimes thought of when they were younger, when they laughed together instead of screaming at one another all day, and it was like remembering somebody who wasn't her, remembering a character in a TV show that she'd watched long, long ago.

Now she was in a big metal room—a shipping container, if she wasn't mistaken—with nine other women who'd been equally fucked by life.

No, not fucked by life. Fucked by the men in our lives, and not in the fun way.

Maggie didn't know their stories, didn't know their names, but

she was sure they'd all experienced the same thing—the terror of waking up in a strange place, groggy from the sedative, followed by a bright light shone in their faces.

Maggie had tried to speak, but her tongue had felt like it was rolling uselessly around her mouth. It didn't matter, anyway. A few moments after she had opened her eyes, a man came into the small room where she was being held. That was when she had realized she was tied to the chair, and she began to struggle to get free of the cords.

The man had laughed. "Well, he said you were a fighter. Glad you won't be a disappointment. Some of them are, you know. They just cry and cry."

Maggie couldn't see the man's face as he stayed out of the pool of light that shone directly on her. Her brain felt scrambled. "Wh-what are you—"

That was all she had managed to eke out because the man cut her off.

"You will not talk. You will listen. Your daughter, Paige, is in our custody. If you ever wish to see your daughter again, you will do exactly as we say, when we say it, and you will not ask questions."

Maggie stilled the moment the stranger had mentioned Paige. This monster had kidnapped her daughter? Was Paige hurt? Was she scared? Did they mean to hurt her?

"She is not hurt," the man had continued. "And we have no intention of hurting her, unless you become a problem. Are you going to become a problem? Shake your head yes or no."

Maggie shook her head no. She had to get out of this, whatever *this* was. She had to find Paige.

"Good. Now, listen carefully, because these instructions will only be given once. You are here to participate in a survival game. At the appointed time, you and nine other participants will be released into the Maze."

Maggie could hear the capitalization in his voice as he said this—"the Maze." *What the fuck is the Maze? Am I stuck in some kind of goddamned Dashner fan's fantasy?*

"In the Maze, there will be various obstacles to your completion of the course. You will attempt to conquer these obstacles. You will not refuse to participate at any time, no matter what the obstacles entail."

That sounded ominous. Maggie had squinted, trying to catch a glimpse of the man's face. She wanted to be able to describe him to the police later, when she got out of the situation.

I'm going to get out of this. I'm going to get you, Paige.

"You will have twelve hours to complete the Maze. Anyone who does not complete the Maze in the required time will be eliminated. Anyone who does not follow all rules and directions at all times will be eliminated."

"Eliminated?"

The hand had appeared out of the darkness, and a second later, Maggie's ears were ringing.

"You will not speak unless you are given permission to speak."

Maggie's teeth had ground together. She didn't know who this man was, but she was going to find out and make him pay for this. After she got free. After she found Paige.

"Any player who completes the Maze in the required time and under the required circumstances will be allowed to go. We would like to make sure you understand the gravity of your situation."

The man held up a phone with a video playing on the screen. There was no sound, but the video showed Paige in a big white room. She wasn't restrained, but she was hunched over her knees, and tears ran down her face. She wore the pajamas that she'd picked out the night before, mint green with little ice cream cones patterned all over.

I'm going to kill this man, Maggie thought. She could take any

amount of abuse to herself, but anyone who made her baby cry could drop dead, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars.

"We don't wish to hurt your daughter," the man repeated. "But we will if we have to."

Those words had rung in Maggie's ears as she was untied by two other men, both of whom wore full balaclavas and sunglasses that covered their eyes. The men had blindfolded her, dragged her some unknown distance, and then yanked off the blindfold just before tossing her into this metal room. There had only been four other women in there then, and none of them had spoken to her. Maggie had waited with the others as their ranks grew, one by one.

Now there were ten of them waiting, waiting for a sign or a signal that their nightmare would shift, that they would have some chance to try to regain control of their fate.

Maggie's stomach rumbled, and her throat felt parched. She supposed it was purposeful that they—whoever *they* were—had left all the women hungry and thirsty. Suffering seemed to be the point of this exercise. And there was no person on this earth who wanted her to suffer more than Noah. He was the only one who would have arranged for her to be in this situation. The man had mentioned a "he" who had said Maggie was a "fighter." So it had to be Noah. He was the only person who hated her that much.

And it was all because Noah was angry about the custody decision at the hearing. It wasn't Maggie's fault that he was a coke addict who terrified the shit out of their ten-year-old daughter.

Paige had told the judge at the hearing that she didn't want to live with her dad, that she was scared of him, and even though she was a minor and Noah's lawyer had argued strenuously that Noah's income and lifestyle were far more advantageous to Paige's

future (*as if the only thing that mattered was money*), the judge had still awarded sole custody to Maggie.

Maggie knew that Noah couldn't give a shit about Paige. He was only interested in her as a weapon, as leverage he could use against Maggie.

The proof was in the pudding. If Noah cared about Paige at all, then he wouldn't allow his daughter to be used for this sick game. He wouldn't mind if Maggie were dropped into a pit of alligators, she knew that, but if he was any kind of decent dad, he wouldn't want Paige to be hurt or scared.

But what if it isn't Noah? What if I've just been randomly selected by a bunch of weirdos?

Maggie shook that thought away. It was definitely Noah. He had the money to arrange for something like this, and he hated her guts.

I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to find Paige. I'm going to make sure that Noah never sees her ever again, not even for a supervised custody visit.

Her mother must be worried sick right now. Maggie's widowed mother lived in the attached town house next to the one that she and Paige lived in, and Mom usually stopped by every morning to check in.

How did they even get us? Maggie wondered. It must have been sometime last night, because Paige is still wearing her pajamas. And I know I set the security system before I went to bed. I double-checked it. I triple-checked it.

Maggie always double- and triple-checked the security system because Noah had tried to break into the town house more than once. Infuriatingly, he somehow always managed to wiggle out of jail time even though Maggie always pressed charges.

Because he's a rich white guy, and rich white guys get what they want. And rich white guys who pal around with the police in town really get what they want.

But he hadn't gotten custody of Paige. He hadn't gotten custody of Paige because family court judges were not the same as criminal judges, and the family court judge had taken Maggie's—and Paige's—fear of Noah seriously and didn't care if Maggie was a middle-class Latina and Noah was a rich white guy.

The screeching sound that indicated the metal doors were being unlocked filled the container. The screaming woman, the one who'd been banging on the doors this whole time, increased her volume and frequency.

The doors swung open, and several men—dressed in black, wearing balaclavas and dark glasses—stood outside. One of them extended a long silver tube with a U-shaped end in the direction of the screaming woman. Maggie realized what it was a second before the man applied it to the woman's neck—a cattle prod. The woman screamed louder, for a brief and terrible moment. Then she keeled over backward. The air filled with the smell of burnt flesh.

"Oh my god," the crying woman beside Maggie whispered. "Is she dead?"

"You have been told not to speak unless spoken to, or you will be eliminated," the man who'd used the cattle prod said to the group at large. "This is your final warning."

The screaming woman wasn't moving. Maggie stared at her, hoping to see the rise and fall of her chest, hoping for some proof that she hadn't just seen a murder occur right in front of her.

The screaming woman still didn't move.

The crying woman began to sob again in earnest, holding her hand over her mouth to cover the sound. The men—there were about twenty of them—stepped back and lined up to face one another, leaving about four feet of space between the lines. The cattle-prod guy—who Maggie assumed was the leader—gestured at the remaining women.

"File out," he said.

The majority of the women looked around uncertainly.

Maggie stepped to the front of the line. She wanted to see what was coming. She gave the cattle-prod guy a hard look as she stepped down from the shipping container. He stared back at her—or at least she thought he did, since his glasses were pointed in her direction. His hand twitched on the cattle prod and she figured he must want to shock her on principle, but technically she hadn't done anything to violate his rules. She was pretty certain that he was the one who'd given her that little speech when she woke up tied to the chair.

Whoever he was, Maggie was coming back for him. She'd remember his voice. He had a slightly raspy undertone, like a lifelong smoker. And he smelled like smoke, too, now that she thought about it. She had a pretty clear idea of his height and build, despite his keeping to the shadows. She'd find him.

First get through this goddamned nightmare, she thought. Then you can take your revenge or bring the authorities or whatever.

Maggie walked down the line of men, who all stood impassively as the women passed by. She kept her chin up and her eyes straight ahead. She was not going to let a bunch of role-playing misogynistic assholes think they had broken her in any way.

The shipping container opened onto a wide grassy area, maybe four or five acres across, and faced a high white wall with double doors. The wall curved around left and right, away from the grass. Other than the grass and the wall, Maggie couldn't see anything but trees.

So we're in the middle of a forest. I guess we're not in Arizona anymore, because there are no trees like that at home.

That scared her, because it meant that she—and Paige—had been knocked out for a serious length of time and likely taken on a plane somewhere. Even if she managed to break out of this facility and away from these paramilitary yahoos, she didn't know

where she would go. Was she even still in the US? What if she'd been taken to Canada, or even farther from home?

Once all of the women were out of the shipping container, the cattle-prod jerk shouted, "Stop!"

Maggie stopped walking. The woman behind her bumped into her back, treading on the back of Maggie's sneaker.

"Sorry," the other woman murmured.

Maggie turned to tell the woman it was all right. Before she could, one of the men in the line stepped out, grabbed the accidental bumper by the shoulder and slapped her across the face.

"Do not speak unless spoken to," he said. He then roughly released the woman so that she stumbled backward into Maggie and stepped back into the line.

Maggie put her arm around the other woman's shoulders—her number was six—and steadied her. #6 looked at Maggie, her eyes full of shock and fury.

Maggie nodded back at her to show that she understood exactly what #6 felt. Then cattle-prod guy strode past them until he reached the head of the line.

"Players!" he called, and Maggie confirmed that this was the same man who'd spoken to her inside. It was the same raspy smoker's voice. "You are about to enter the Maze. In the Maze, there are only two rules. You must complete all obstacles in the Maze or you will be eliminated. There will be no Katniss-ing this shit. You may not abstain from participation."

Maggie thought it notable that the man knew *The Hunger Games* well enough to reference it, and that he also assumed that everyone else there knew it, too. She supposed it had been a cultural phenomenon, but still . . . he didn't seem to be the reading type.

"The second rule is that you must complete the Maze in twelve hours or less, or you will be eliminated. This is also nonnegotiable.

When these doors behind me open up, you will enter the Maze. Once the doors close, the clock will begin running. Once the doors close, you may speak to one another, though at no time will you be permitted to speak to any male. Women are to be seen and not heard.”

He said this like it was a joke, and all the men in the lines chuckled. Maggie wanted to run at the fucker and tackle him and stick him with that cattle prod several times. It was bad enough that they were all in this unbelievable situation to begin with. It was somehow worse that the leader spewed bad sexist dialogue like a cartoon villain.

It doesn't matter if he acts like a character in a bad movie. He—or this organization or whatever—has your daughter. She's the only thing that matters, and you need to get through this and get her out.

“You have all been told what is at stake for you. Remember that if you cease participation, your hostage will be eliminated as well.”

That wasn't what the guy had told her in the room. He'd threatened Paige with harm, but he hadn't said he'd kill her. Was this really what was going on here? These pricks would kill a child if her mother didn't jump through their hoops?

Maggie felt #6 shift beside her and wondered who they were using to force the other woman to play their stupid game.

“Let the game begin,” the man said, and the white double doors behind him swung open.

He stepped to one side as the women filed past, but not very far. If Maggie wanted to, she could have reached out and grabbed the cattle prod, or at least reached out and grabbed his balls and squeezed until he screamed. But she didn't, because this fucker had Paige somewhere. She stared death daggers at him until she passed by and entered through the double doors. Maggie couldn't see his mouth under the balaclava, but she was

sure he was smirking. Men always smirked when they thought they'd gotten one over on you. She was going to wipe that smirk off his face.

Count on it, fucker.

The doors swung closed behind the ninth woman. Maggie didn't want to think about the screaming woman, who lay so still and quiet on the floor of the shipping container. She couldn't help that woman, couldn't do anything that might change her fate. All she could do was try to get through whatever was ahead.

A few seconds after the door closed, almost every woman started talking at once, most of them in various degrees of panic.

“Oh my god! They took my sister.”

“What's happening? What are we doing here?”

“I have to get out of here. I have to get home. I have a business to run.”

“They have my mom. My mom. She has a heart condition. What if she has a heart attack and dies?”

Maggie thought about telling them all to be quiet and focus, but she didn't want to be anybody's leader. She didn't want the responsibility of all these women and their hostages. She had to save Paige.

Maggie noticed that #6 stood beside her. She didn't want to be a leader, but it couldn't hurt to have an ally. She stuck her hand out.

“Maggie,” she said.

“Sanya,” the other woman said. She was a very slender African American woman with beautiful light brown eyes, almost golden.

“They took my daughter.”

“Mine, too,” Maggie said.

“Any idea who set up this playland for assholes?”

“Nope. But I'm pretty sure it was my ex who got me roped into this.”

"That's what I thought, too," Sanya said. "He's always trying to get me for something. I committed the grave crime of daring to divorce him after he cheated on me. This is a little, uh, extreme though. Compared to nonpayment of child support, which is his usual gambit."

"Not just extreme. Elaborate," Maggie said, gesturing around. "Who could have built all of this?"

They stood in an open grassy area, similar to the one outside the walls. Ahead of them, the walls narrowed into a passage maybe fifteen feet across. The walls were white, smooth and very high—too high to climb, even if she could find a handhold. Maggie liked to rock climb in her spare time—what she had of it after spending all her time fighting Noah—and she wasn't afraid of heights. But it looked like the organizers had eliminated climbing as an option. She'd have to inspect the walls more closely.

A blinking light overhead caught Maggie's attention. She glanced to the left and noticed a large digital clock on the wall, counting down the time from twelve hours.

Sanya followed her gaze. "Looks like we should get started with this shitshow."

"Yeah," Maggie said.

The two of them jogged in unison toward the entrance to the Maze.

"Hey!" one of the women behind them shouted. "Where are you going?"

"Where do you think we're going?" Maggie shouted back over her shoulder.

"Seriously," Sanya muttered beside her. "That jerk with the cattle prod made it very clear that participation was not optional. What part of 'not optional' do they not understand? I've got to get my girl out of here."

Maggie snorted, then sobered. "Yeah, but I don't want anyone else getting hurt. Do you think she's dead?"

"Number eight?" Sanya asked.

Maggie nodded. The screaming woman's tee had a large orange eight on the back.

"It didn't look like she was alive," Sanya said. "But I find it hard to believe that this group, whatever it is, would kill a woman right in front of us."

"They seem perfectly willing to kidnap a bunch of women and throw them into their gladiator arena," Maggie said. "Why not kill people?"

"I guess. Kidnapping would already be a felony charge, and the penalties are sometimes higher than for murder. It depends on the state and whether or not the charge is first degree or aggravated or if the charge is second degree. First degree or aggravated can result in a life sentence, again depending on the state. Of course, if they crossed state lines with us, that could result in a federal felony charge." Sanya said all of this with almost automatic recitation, like she didn't have to think about what she said.

"Because of the Lindbergh baby, right?"

Sanya nodded. "Right, that law was put in place to allow federal officers to pursue kidnapers over state lines."

"Are you a lawyer?"

Sanya nodded again. "Division attorney for the great city of Chicago, which is nobody's second city. It's not as glamorous as it sounds, though. Mostly I prosecute municipal ordinance violations, and the bulk of them are misdemeanors. What do you do when you're not running through some freak's maze?"

Maggie laughed, a little out of breath because she was jogging while talking. "I'm a school librarian in Tucson, which means I've read a lot of young adult apocalypse fiction."

"Hopefully that means you have lots of knowledge that will get us and our girls out of this mess," Sanya said.

"Only if these dumbasses read the same books as me and follow the same formula," Maggie said. It felt strangely soothing to have a semi-normal conversation, even if the circumstances didn't warrant it. She wondered if Sanya felt the same way, that she was grasping at something normal in a very abnormal situation.

"Yeah, you're right," Sanya said. "They didn't seem like they spent a lot of time in the library. Which means that everything we encounter will be from some movie one of them saw once."

"It's funny that you say that, because when cattle-prod guy talked about Katniss, I thought he didn't look like a big reader. I guess it wouldn't matter, though, if he saw the movie. I kind of forgot about the movie."

"Jennifer Lawrence is Jennifer Lawrence Superstar because of that movie," Sanya said.

"Yeah, but I'm not a big movie watcher. I'd rather read."

"Unsurprising in a librarian. I'm more of a reader myself."

They entered the first passage. Maggie smoothed her hand along one of the walls as she passed, trying to see if there were any potential handholds.

"What are you looking for? Secret doors?" Sanya asked.

"Handholds," Maggie said. "I'm a rock climber. I thought maybe I could climb up to the top and see how big the maze is, or see a clear path out."

"I thought you had impressive biceps for a librarian," Sanya said. "No go?"

Maggie shook her head. "Not here, anyway. I'll keep checking."

"I don't think they'll make it that easy," Sanya said.

"Probably not," Maggie said. "I have the distinct impression that they want to make us suffer."

There was a rustling behind them. Maggie looked back and saw that the rest of the women were approaching, strung out in twos and threes.

Maggie and Sanya reached the end of the first passage. The maze came to a T-intersection there, extending off to the left and right. In front of them was a long white table covered in a thick white tablecloth like at a fancy restaurant. On top of the table were six cloth bags in neon colors—yellow and pink and orange and green. Each bag had a blank tag tied to a string that was wrapped around the bag's opening.

"Is this an obstacle?" Maggie said.

"I don't think they put this here for fun," Sanya said.

They both stared at the table for a minute. Maggie wondered if Sanya felt as reluctant as she did to open the bags.

"They did say that the obstacles were required," Sanya said.

"Yeah, I know," Maggie said. "I just have a bad feeling that the bags have scorpions in them, or bombs or something."

The other seven women caught up with Maggie and Sanya while they stood there.

"What's going on?" one of them asked.

Maggie glanced over at the speaker—medium height, professional blonde highlights, twisted mouth. Maggie didn't want to make assumptions about the woman because they were all in this shitshow together, but the blonde had a whiff of privilege about her, like she was used to asking for what she wanted and getting it. Maggie had a strong feeling that this woman drove a BMW crossover and wore overpriced yoga pants and always had something to say at the school board meeting. She felt her back molars grinding. This was a type that made Maggie crazy.

You've got to stop being so judgmental. Maybe she's not like that at all.

"Jesus Christ, what are all of you standing around for?" The blonde pushed through the crowd and strode toward the table. Maggie saw a two on the back of her shirt. "I don't know about the rest of you, but the sooner I get through this, the sooner I can get back to my real life. I have a multimillion-dollar company that can't wait."

Yep, she's definitely that type. Probably asked to see the manager the second she woke up tied to a chair.

#2 grabbed a neon pink bag and yanked at the string. She didn't even look inside the bag before dumping the contents on the table.

A bottle of water and an off-brand granola bar fell out.

"Thank god," she said. "I'm so thirsty I could die."

She opened the bottle of water and tipped her head back, swallowing it as fast as she could.

The rest of the women moved forward. Maggie took one of the bags and opened it cautiously, because she didn't trust that every bag would have the same contents. Beside her, Sanya did the same thing. They both peered into their bags before looking at each other.

"Water and goldfish crackers," Maggie said.

"Water and a Nutri-Grain bar," Sanya said, making a face. "I hate Nutri-Grain bars."

"I don't mind them," Maggie said. "Swap?"

"Hey, I didn't get anything," one of the women said, her voice full of outrage.

"Me, neither," said another, in a very small voice.

#2 had crammed most of the granola bar into her mouth already. Now she spoke around a mouthful of toasted oats.

"You snooze, you lose. These are obstacles for a reason."

"Hey," Maggie said. "There's no reason why we can't share what we have. Just because they put us in this maze like animals doesn't mean we have to act like it."

A couple of the other women murmured their agreement, but two of them clutched their bags to their chests.

"I'm not giving up any of mine," #4 said.

#9 nodded beside her. "Who knows if this is the only water we'll get for the next twelve hours?"

"If it is, then all the more reason to share," Maggie said. "We don't want anyone else to end up like number eight."

"I'm not giving up anything I've got," #9 said, and moved to stand closer to #4 and #2.

"Swap," Maggie said to Sanya. "You can have the crackers."

"No worries," Sanya said, beckoning to #1 and #7, the two who'd been left out. "We can pool with them."

#5 had opened her granola bar and started eating it already, but now she stepped forward with a slightly guilty look. "Sorry I already bit into it. Anybody can share what I have left."

"Cool," Maggie said, opening the package of crackers. "Let's put what we have on the table and divide it up between the five of us. I'm sorry to say that we're all going to have to share the same bottles of water, so I hope none of you are the backwash type."

#7 laughed, and #1 gave a timid smile.

She's a little mouse, Maggie thought. If she's not careful, she's going to get eaten up in here.

#10 looked between Maggie's group and the two women standing close to #2. She appeared torn.

"Nobody's making you do anything you don't want to do," Maggie said to her. "I just think we all stand a better chance of getting out of here if we help each other."

"And I think that kumbaya shit is going to get you killed," #2 said. "You can all stand around here having a picnic together, but time's running out, and I'm not going to be stuck here with a bunch of losers."