

CHAPTER FOUR

mags13: rules LOL

battleroyale: yeah, the one who always wins those games in the books is the one who doesn't follow the rules

tyz7412: they should have let that bitch Katniss kill herself. Otherwise dumb bitches like you would know that rules are there to be followed

mags13: whoa dude chill. We're just having some made-up fun here.

tyz7412: no, I'm sick of bitches like you who think they can do whatever they want

mags13: muted

THEY CAME TO THE T-junction and peered in both directions. There was no obvious obstacle.

"Which way?" Sanya asked.

"I'm not sure it matters," Maggie said. "At some point they make sure we're all funneled to the same obstacles. Damn, I meant to try to use one of the trees in that jungle, but I got distracted by the problem of the mines."

"And the spiders," Beth said, her voice quavering. She was still too pale.

"Yes, and the spiders," Maggie agreed.

"What were you going to do with the trees?" Natalie asked.

"Climb one of them to see if I could get to the top of the maze and maybe scope out an efficient exit."

"Not sure it would make a difference," Natalie said. "Since they're going to make sure we're all killed anyway."

Maggie and Sanya exchanged looks, and silently agreed not to engage. Natalie was still holding on to the argument they'd had before the spiders arrived. She had a broody look, especially whenever she looked at Maggie. It was pretty clear Natalie blamed Maggie for something.

Maggie couldn't worry about Natalie, or about Natalie's issues. It wasn't Maggie's fault if they were stuck in a game where the rules could change at any minute. But she knew that Natalie felt helpless, and sometimes when people feel helpless, they lash out. They look for someone to blame. As Maggie had become the de facto leader, she was the obvious recipient of any emotional sludge Natalie wanted to throw around.

"I wonder where the other group is," Beth said.

"Wherever they are, they're down to three," Maggie said. "I just hope that somewhere soon there's another food drop. I'm starving."

"And I peed myself," Natalie said. "Because I wanted to go underneath a bush or something in that jungle, but you scared us to death with the mines."

"I didn't put the mines there," Maggie said in as mild a tone as she could manage.

"No, but you acted like they were the worst thing in the world, and we lost a ton of time because of it. And I peed myself."

"Guess you've never been pregnant," Sanya said. "In the last trimester, I peed myself in my sleep at least three times."

"I never made it to the last month," Maggie said. "Paige was in a hurry and broke out four and a half weeks early. I thought

I peed myself, though. I woke up because my underpants were wet. I went to the bathroom and I remember I was crying because I thought I wet myself in my sleep and Noah was telling me it was all right, that they told us at the parenting class it might happen."

She remembered how he'd come into the bathroom with dry underwear for her, and she was sitting on the toilet, and she'd suddenly realized that it wasn't pee at all; that her water had broken. She'd looked at Noah and told him that they were going to have the baby that day, and she remembered how panicked he'd looked because he hadn't packed their hospital bag yet. He'd thought they'd have more time—another month, maybe more, because first babies don't usually show up on time. But Paige had been in a big hurry, a big hurry to get out and see the world. She was still like that—always rushing, always running, always jumping, always wanting to go faster, do more, see everything.

And now she was in a locked room, waiting for her mother to find her.

"Yeah, they do tell you that, because the baby starts pressing on your bladder *nonstop*," Sanya said, picking up the thread of Maggie's story. "Like they've got their little feet on your bladder and they're watching it squirt for fun or something."

"Well, some of us have never had children," Natalie said. "And some of us think it's humiliating to wet ourselves."

Maggie opened her mouth—she wasn't sure what she was going to say, but she was losing patience with Natalie's attitude—but Beth cut in.

"Some of us don't give a shit," she said. Then she slapped her hand over her mouth, clearly appalled at herself.

Sanya started laughing. "Now that's what I call a Freudian slip."

"I'm sorry," Beth said to Natalie. "I just— It just kind of came out."

Maggie started laughing, too, and Beth giggled, like it was catching and she'd been infected. Sanya's laugh got bigger then, and she bent over slightly, clutching her stomach.

"It's not funny," Natalie said.

"It is," Maggie said, gasping. "It's really funny."

"It really, really is," Sanya said.

"I'm s-s-s-sorry," Beth said again, through a mouthful of giggles.

Natalie's mouth turned up at the corners, like she couldn't help herself.

"Okay, I guess it is a little funny," she said.

Maggie knew that they were all a little hysterical, all on the verge of screaming or crying or running headlong into a wall over and over, and that's why they were laughing so hard. If they didn't laugh, they'd have to think, have to think about what they'd already been through and what was up ahead, and none of them wanted to do that.

Just think about Paige. She's the light at the end of the tunnel, and she's waiting for you.

"Okay, okay," Maggie said, holding one hand up and wheezing through her laughter. "We've got to get it together here."

"Yeah," Sanya said, trying to straighten out her expression and failing.

"And the next time somebody has to go to the bathroom, three of us will surround that person while they go," Maggie said. "With our backs to you, obviously. I don't know if it will actually make a difference in your privacy, because I'm assuming that there are cameras everywhere, but hopefully it will help you feel more comfortable."

A blush crept up Natalie's cheeks, and Maggie thought she looked a little ashamed that she'd given Maggie such a hard time.

"Thanks," Natalie said. "It *will* help."

"You never think about this stuff when you're watching a movie or reading a book," Sanya said as they started forward again, the four of them lined up shoulder to shoulder. "The main characters never seem to need the bathroom. I'm telling you right now, I would have shit my pants immediately if I were in those Hunger Games."

"I don't know about that. You seem to be doing pretty well right now," Maggie said.

"Yeah, but in the book, those were teenagers, right? And in that Japanese one, too." Sanya snapped her fingers like she was trying to remember the title.

"*Battle Royale*," Maggie said. "And lots of others, too. Even if there isn't a killing game, there's always some kind of apocalyptic scenario that requires adolescents to put themselves in extreme physical danger."

"*The 5th Wave*," Natalie said.

"*The Maze Runner*," Beth added.

"Right," Sanya said. "The point is that these are always kids in these stories, and kids don't have the same sense of caution that adults do. They don't think they're actually going to die, even if they see other people die around them. Teenagers think they're immortal."

"Okay," Maggie said, wondering where Sanya was going with this.

"Therefore," Sanya said, with the air of someone presenting an inevitable conclusion, "they aren't going to shit their pants when dropped into some killing game."

Maggie shook her head, laughing. "I feel like you went a long way around for that."

It also did not escape her notice that every woman present had more than a passing familiarity with young adult dystopic fiction. There was something in that fact, she was sure. She just didn't know exactly what.

"And I'm not 100 percent sure how it's currently relevant?" Natalie said, grinning at Sanya.

"What I'm trying to say is—" Sanya began, but whatever point she was trying to make was lost in the sound of screams from up ahead.

"Oh god, what now?" Maggie said.

They all started running except Beth. Maggie looked at Beth and saw her wave them forward.

"I'll walk as fast as I can," Beth called.

Maggie figured the other woman didn't want to have another asthma attack, and she understood. Beth was at risk in here just because she didn't have her inhaler, and heavy exercise seemed to set off her attacks.

Maggie, Sanya and Natalie followed the sound of screaming to the right turn of the maze. They rounded the corner and all three of them stopped.

Before them was an obstacle course, a big solid-built wooden and metal and plastic structure that spanned the whole width of the maze. There was no going around it or, Maggie noticed, above it. Some kind of thin, tight wire had been strung from the top of the obstacle course to various points along the wall, and it was crisscrossed so densely that squeezing through wasn't an option.

They thought of everything. There's no cheat code, no getting around their requirements. Ever.

The obstacle course started, Maggie observed, with a plastic tube tunnel that was close to the ground. It reminded her of the inflatable obstacle courses that Paige liked when she was younger, the ones they had at those bounce house businesses. Maggie loved those places when Paige was small, because her daughter had more energy than your average toddler, and for ten bucks, Maggie could sit on a bench and watch her daughter go berserk jumping on

inflatables until it was time for lunch. Paige was still high-energy, still the type of kid who ran instead of walked, who wanted to take her bike everywhere.

She's probably banging off the walls of whatever cell they've hidden her in. I hope they don't hurt her because of it.

The bounce house obstacle courses always had a little tunnel for the kids. The kids would scoot through the tunnel, then come out and have to climb up a short wall. On the other side of the wall would be a slide, and then more objects to climb over or bounce off. Maggie had a strong feeling that whatever was at the end of the tunnel in front of them would not be so benign. They couldn't see what the other obstacle might be, though, because there was a high wall, maybe fifteen feet or so, blocking the view of the obstacles ahead.

And the obstacles will be ridiculous, Maggie thought. There will be swinging axes and walls designed to make you fall and break your leg. They want us to get hurt. They want us to fail.

They'd have to crawl inside and through to whatever waited farther along, sight unseen. And whatever waited farther along was clearly not great, because the screams were echoing through the tunnel and out into the maze. Maggie also heard two people arguing, but couldn't make out their words over the screaming.

"Sounds like number two's group is coming apart at the seams," Natalie said.

"Yeah," Maggie said. The screams were making her feel sick. Whatever had happened inside the course, the woman was clearly suffering. Couldn't the other two help her instead of arguing?

Sanya gave Maggie a sideways glance. "Even if they wanted to help her—and I'm not sure they do—they don't have any medical gear. It's the same problem we have. We don't even have bandages."

"Yeah," Maggie said, but the knowledge didn't make her feel any better.

The screams had faded away by the time Beth caught up with the rest of the group. She gazed apprehensively at the plastic tunnel in front of them.

"Do we have to go in there?" Her voice was tiny and mouse-like again. Any confidence she'd gained from telling Natalie off had disappeared.

"There's no way to go around it," Maggie said.

"And we have to do every task," Sanya reminded them. "At least until we find a way to break out of here. We have to play their game until we find a way to figuratively shove the game up their ass."

"It's just . . . It's just . . ." Beth said, but she didn't finish her thought.

"Are you claustrophobic?" Natalie asked, with more compassion in her tone than Maggie had heard from her yet.

Beth nodded.

Claustrophobic, arachnophobic, asthmatic, and her arms look like limp noodles, so if there's any climbing in there, she's going to have a hard time.

Maggie worried again that Beth wasn't going to survive this game at all.

But she's not as weak as she looks, not on the inside. She's trying. She's determined. She doesn't want to be a burden.

"We'll help you get through it," Maggie said. "The tunnel might not even be that long. It will be like we're at the playground, crawling through one of those little climbing set tunnels."

"I never went through those," Beth said. "I never went inside anybody's playhouse, either. I had some friends who had an actual cupboard under the stairs—"

"Like in *Harry Potter*?" Sanya asked.

Beth nodded. "And they used it as a little playroom. They loved it in there, but I hated it. Whenever they closed the door, I felt like I was suffocating."

Natalie went to the tunnel, crouched down and peered inside. "The stretch I can see is pretty short, but it turns, so I can't tell how far it goes on."

"Of course it does," Maggie muttered. "They want us to be afraid every second, scared of whatever's around the corner."

"Well, job well done, because I am," Natalie said.

"Me, too," Beth said.

Maggie wasn't scared—not the way the other two were, anyway. She wasn't scared for herself, or scared of what might be ahead of them. She was scared that she would fail, and that her daughter would pay the price for her failure.

She already worried that Paige had paid too high a price for Maggie's hesitance to leave her marriage, for her stubborn conviction to try to work it out with a man who'd changed so utterly that he literally bore no resemblance, physically or emotionally, to the man she'd married. Coke made him thin and twitchy, carved long lines in his cheeks and forehead, made him sniffle constantly. It made him quick to argue and to anger, to always find fault in whoever was present. Paige would skirt around him if they were in the same space, giving him the kind of wide berth one generally reserved for snarling animals. Or she'd quietly exit the room if he came into it. Maggie worried every single day that she'd done something unforgivable, that she'd hurt Paige just by not leaving sooner.

So Maggie couldn't lose, couldn't let this sick game take her down or out. She had to get through, had to save her daughter, had to prove to Paige that she was worthy of being her mother.

"How do you want to do this?" Sanya said.

"I'll go first," Maggie said. "Beth, you behind me. Once we get through the tunnel part, we'll call back to you to come through."

Sanya nodded, and pointed at the sign overhead. "We'll time you, though. If it's been ten minutes and you haven't called back, we're coming after you."

Maggie crouched in front of the tunnel and took a deep breath. The odor of new plastic was overwhelming, and just underneath it, fresh sawdust. This construction, whatever it was, had clearly just been built.

So we're the first, then? The first group to be dropped into this game? Or maybe we're the only ones. But that doesn't make sense. Why build this elaborate maze if you're only going to use it one time?

She had to stop thinking about the whys and wherefores. There was a task in front of her that needed to be completed. Paige was counting on her. She could worry about logistics later.

Her stomach churned. Her mouth felt like it had too much saliva in it. There could be anything inside the tunnel, anything at all. These fuckers could have put in falling blades or triggers to release snakes or . . .

Or there could be nothing, and you're letting yourself get psyched out when you're supposed to be helping Beth get through this.

Maggie crawled into the tunnel.

The fit was tight. She couldn't move forward on her hands and knees. The only way to move was on her stomach, using her forearms to pull herself along. Behind her, she heard Beth enter the tunnel. The other woman's breath was already shallow and terrified.

Please don't let her have an asthma attack in here, Maggie thought. I have no idea how I would pull her out if she did.

Maggie crawled forward to the turn. This wasn't a junction, like in the maze, but a left turn clearly meant to make the participants anxious about what might be on the other side of the bend. Maggie peeked around the corner and saw nothing except more tunnel, and another turn maybe ten or so feet away, this one turning right.

"Looks okay up ahead," she said. "How are you doing, Beth?"

"All right," Beth said, her breath ragged. She was so close to Maggie that Maggie felt the other woman breathing on her ankles.

She wanted to tell Beth to back off a little bit, but she realized that might make Beth more anxious, so she kept her mouth shut and concentrated on pulling her body through the tunnel as fast as possible. The plastic chafed her skin as she crawled, and the strong chemical smell made Maggie feel a little nauseous.

"How are you doing?" Sanya called.

"It smells gross in here," Maggie called back.

"Can't wait for my turn," Sanya said.

Maggie reached the next corner, peeked around, saw daylight ahead.

"Okay, there's just this one turn here, and then the exit is a little farther away," Maggie said to Beth.

"O-okay," Beth said. She sounded completely spent.

Maggie was glad they would be out of the tunnel soon, and grateful that it didn't seem to be booby-trapped, as she expected. It was just a psychological barrier, though not an insignificant one for someone like Beth. Maggie felt weirdly proud of the other woman for sticking it out. She wondered if Beth could have managed the tunnel on her own if she hadn't been with a larger group.

When she reached the end of the tunnel, Maggie paused. It would be pure stupidity to clamber out without taking a look around first. Directly in front of her was a doorway cut into a wooden wall. A cheap plastic shower curtain was pulled across the doorway so she couldn't get a glimpse of what was beyond—the next obstacle, she assumed. She inched forward, only sticking out her head far enough to see to the left and to the right.

To the right there was nothing special—just more wooden wall, so that the space before her was like a rectangular box with an open top. Up above she saw the gleam of the wire that had been strung to prevent them from climbing over obstacles.

Maggie looked to the left, and then she wished she hadn't.

There was a woman there, pinned to the wall by what appeared to be a giant blade, like a scythe but with two sharp and equally sized ends. Maggie followed the path of the blade's handle to a rod directly above the tunnel. It appeared that the blade swung back and forth on the rod, almost like one of those Viking ship-style rides at the amusement park. Except this ship had gleaming razor points and no one was supposed to scream with happiness and delight.

There was screaming, though. We heard the screams.

Blood had pooled beneath the pinned woman—Maggie was pretty certain it was #4, although she couldn't see the back of her shirt. Her eyes were blank and lifeless.

Maggie thought that the blade was supposed to swing continuously, so that whoever left the tunnel would be risking their life just to get out. But the blade had gotten caught in the wood behind #4, and so Maggie and Beth and Natalie and Sanya would be safer because of #4's accidental sacrifice.

I bet it wasn't accidental, though. I bet #2 made sure someone else was in front of her and someone else behind, so that she would be perfectly safe throughout. What's she going to do when she runs out of bodies to throw around her?

"Maggie?" Beth said. Maggie heard the edge of panic in her voice. "Can we get out now?"

"Yeah," Maggie said, crawling forward. "But just don't look around yet, all right?"

She felt almost motherly toward Beth, like she was a child who couldn't be allowed to see the horror.

I've got to stop thinking that way. She's a grown woman, and even if she's a little timid, she's not a child.

Still, she couldn't stop herself from blocking the view as she climbed out and then helped Beth out of the tunnel. It didn't help, though. Beth crinkled her nose and said, "What's that smell?" and

then immediately peeked around Maggie's shoulder. Beth closed her eyes and looked like she might be sick.

"We're through," Maggie called. Then she said to Beth, "You'd better go over there by the curtain, make sure you're out of the path of that blade in case it loosens."

"You should, too," Beth said.

"I'm going to, believe me," Maggie said. First, she bent over and called through the tunnel again. "Listen, don't rush out when you get here. There might be an obstacle. But hopefully there won't be."

She heard the slide of cloth over plastic, heard it pause. "So which is it?" Natalie said. "An obstacle or not?"

"You'll see when you get here," Maggie said.

"Great," Sanya said.

The sound of crawling resumed. Maggie went over near Beth, out of the potential path of the blade. Beth stood nervously near the plastic curtain.

"Did you look?" Maggie asked.

Beth shook her head. "Too scared. I almost don't want to know."

Maggie swallowed. Her mouth was so dry, and they only had a little bit of water left in the bottle to be shared around with everyone. She hoped that there were more food drops somewhere along the way, although she had a feeling there wouldn't be. The comfort and safety of the participants didn't seem to be high on the organizers' priority list.

Maggie twitched the curtain aside, peering through the doorway. On the other side she saw what appeared to be a standard obstacle course, like the kind you sometimes saw at outdoor races. There was a climbing wall and a pretty brackish-looking body of water that might be generously termed "a pond." There were even rubber tires lined up in two rows, like they had to run in and out of the tires. She could see all the way to the end. It all appeared fairly

straightforward, but Maggie did not trust the evidence of her eyes in this place. It couldn't be that easy, that they would just have to complete a bunch of tasks like they were in PE class.

A sliding, squeaking noise drew her attention back to the tunnel, and Natalie's face appeared in the opening.

"Is it safe?" she asked.

Maggie looked at the blade, still firmly embedded through a woman's body and into the wall. "Sure."

Natalie clambered out, saw #4, blanched, and hurried to Maggie's side. A few seconds later, Sanya was out and they were all surveying the obstacle course together.

"It can't be that easy," Sanya murmured.

"That's what I thought, too," Maggie said.

"You mean there's probably bombs inside the tires or the wall will collapse when we try to climb it?" Natalie said. "It seems like that would be the case, but wouldn't we see evidence of triggered traps, then? Like the swinging axe?"

"Yeah, okay," Maggie said slowly. "But what if not all the traps are triggered on the first go? What if they're set for the third person, or the eighth person? They're trying to take out as many of us as possible. It would be too easy if every trap went off when the first person went through."

"Number two would just sit back and watch her minions get blown up and then stroll through," Sanya said. She jerked a finger over her shoulder, in the direction of #4's body. "Looks like what she did back there."

"She's already established that she does not give a flying fuck about anybody in here except herself," Maggie said.

"Yeah, but she's so horrible, she's almost not real," Sanya said. "You know what I mean? She's like a bad caricature from a TV show about high school life. People don't act like that. Not really."

"Oh, they do," Natalie said. "I've met plenty of assholes in my time."

"Yeah, but not in such a clearly cartoony villain kind of way," Sanya said. "A lot of people are hateful, but they keep that hate under their breath. They only show it to certain other people. They're passive-aggressive. That lady, she's all aggressive."

Maggie looked at Sanya, trying to figure out the point of all this. "What are you saying?"

"I think that she's a ringer," Sanya said. "I think that her job is to get as many of us killed as efficiently as possible. And look—her group is down to just her and one other person."

"A ringer," Maggie said. For some reason, this idea bothered her more than the notion of the men who'd kidnapped them. She expected terrible behavior from men. She didn't expect women to be just as bad. "That would be awful. Just unbelievably awful."

"Because women are all saints?" Sanya said, smirking. "What kind of sheltered life have you led, librarian?"

"That's not what I mean," Maggie said, stung. "I just . . . It's hard to believe that a woman would be complicit in something like this. In kidnapping other women. In killing them."

"Women serial killers exist," Natalie said. "There was that movie, you know, the one with Charlize Theron?"

"She was so good in that movie," Sanya said.

"That's not really germane to this conversation," Maggie said, frowning. "Do you really think number two is a ringer?"

Sanya shrugged. "I'm just saying that it's possible. I think we should be prepared for anything, including that one of the supposed victims is actually a perpetrator."