

The Lion's Mouth

A Nick Lawrence Novel:
Book 2

By
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the taken. To those children swallowed by the beast that is human trafficking. Keep your strength and stay in the fight. Know that there are good people out there looking for you and hunting those responsible.

Chapter 1

It was the sound that woke her. The rumble of the truck's tires as they slowly veered off the roadway and into the breakdown lane. The stagnant air was ripe. She assumed that it must be night or early morning. Her exposed leg was pressed up against the metallic wall of the box truck and it was not warm. It had been hot earlier. Almost burning her skin.

She could hear the muffled voices of the two men in the cab of the truck. *Why are we stopping?* The last time it was bad. This time could be worse. They had taken an interest in her. She knew the interest from men like this was never good.

Death has a unique smell. Mouse was not unaccustomed to it but, in the enclosed space of the truck, it sickened her. He'd been dead for over a day. The humidity didn't allow for his blood-soaked shirt to dry. Mouse could feel the moistness of it dampen hers. She managed to shift the weight of the lifeless man off her but could not completely separate from him. Too many people. Too little space. His bowels had released. That smell had intertwined with the others who had turned the 6x14 foot living space into a toilet on wheels. Mouse had urinated in her pants too many times to count, but they were beginning to dry now that dehydration had set in. She'd hoped that the smell of her urine-soaked clothing would deter the two men in the front from their intentions.

The last time the truck pulled off the road they had already been riding for a while, but time was an elusive thing under the circumstances. The door had swung open. It was still dark, but Mouse had been able to see a hint of light in the background. Though she was unable to determine if the sun was rising or setting. Everyone stirred when the truck door opened. Any hope that the long journey was over quickly dissipated. The fat man had grabbed Mouse's leg and began pulling her out toward the opening. The thin man stood beside his fat friend. His long greasy hair

slicked back with sweat. His eyes were wild. Mouse feared him most. The thin man started to unzip his faded dirt-covered jeans. The old man realized what was happening. He tried to protect her. He had smacked the hand of the fat man with a scar over his left eye. A mistake.

The thin man withdrew a large knife from a worn leather sheath that hung from his sagging pants. The sound of the knife plunging in and out of the old man was a sound that Mouse never wanted to hear again. Pop and thud. Pop and thud. The old man never screamed. He whimpered softly in sync with the plunge of the blade. Each sound softer than its predecessor until the old man slumped over and onto Mouse. The thin man smiled and zipped his pants. His primal needs satiated. The fat man retracted and closed the door. Darkness again. A few of the others sobbed quietly at what they had just witnessed. Mouse had not.

That was yesterday, or what felt like yesterday. This time would be different. There was no kind-hearted old man to save her. She would have to fend for herself. Her father had long ago prepared her for this journey, for the potential gauntlet she'd face. And he'd prepared her well. The men in the cab of the truck would underestimate her. Her small size had earned her the nickname. But she knew that *Big things come in small packages.*

Mouse could hear the two outside. The harshness of their voices muffled by the heavy doors. Then laughter. An unsettling sound. It did little to belie their true intention. *Focus. Visualize what you need to do. Commit to the action needed. Then act.* Her father's simple words replayed in her head as they had a thousand times before. She had proven the value of their meaning and this would be yet another test.

The padlock attached to the latch stirred. In the darkness, she edged closer to the door. The grunts of the others as she crawled over them seemed louder in the silence. There were men, women and children of all ages huddled together in the truck's dark interior. They were unknowingly sold into servitude with the promise of reaching America. Each of her cabin mates destined for different services. There were whispers among the imprisoned that the younger women and children would undoubtedly end up in the sex trade. The older men and women would be put to work in sweatshops or as day laborers. The desperation of their circumstance seemed to drain their will to fight back. Not Mouse. It fueled a fire inside her.

She'd reached her destination, feeling the cool metal of the double doors. Mouse rolled silently onto her back. Her head rested against the back of one of the others. It would give her added leverage when the time came. Mouse's feet rose high and the soles of her worn sneakers now rested lightly against the door. *Commit to the action needed.*

The clank of the hinge told her that the time had come. The tension in the doors released and they swung wide. The darkness of the sky seemed bright against the pitch of the box truck's interior. *Act.*

Mouse shot her feet outward, striking at the two men. Her back arched on impact as they found their intended targets, one foot connecting with each man's throat. *Big things CAN come in size 5 shoes.* A gurgling cough erupted from the fat man. The thin man was quiet. As Mouse sat up she understood why. His eyes were wild but not like the day before. This was fear. A palpable terror on the man's bony face. His hands clasped tightly around his throat. A horrible wheezing sound expelled from his crushed windpipe as he staggered backward. The thin man fell and rolled into the shallow ditch that ran alongside the road. His body continued to writhe in agony, twisting to avoid the end that was fast approaching.

The fat man was not down. He was recovering from the initial blow, but his hands no longer held near his throat. His body hunched and his hands on his knees. Mouse had planned for the possibility that the fight wouldn't be over with one action.

Earlier, she had taken the tattered leather belt from the old man and now it was wrapped tightly around her right hand. Even in death, he would protect her one last time. The oversized belt buckle was exposed across her knuckles. The image embossed in the steel depicted a cowboy on a bronco. Apropos in the desert landscape of this standoff.

Mouse slipped out and onto the roadway. Her legs momentarily unsteady, adjusting as she stood for the first time after the long confinement. The fat man did not notice her. He was loud, spitting and cursing. She swung upward hard. Again, she found her target. The trachea. This time with the added devastation of the buckle. The blow sent his head straight up. Bewildered, the fat man tried to account for this new injection of pain. His hands were back at his throat. *Remember, Mouse, no matter how big your enemy, the throat is weak.* Her dad's words. Wise and true.

The fat man dropped to his knees. The jagged scar above his eye seemed more menacing in his current state. Fearful that he would recover and overpower her, Mouse moved quickly, timing her next assault.

The belt hung loosely in her hand as she shot behind the fat man. His hands lowered as he went to all fours, trying to find her like a dog chasing his tail. The leather strap wrapped around his throat. Mouse quickly slid the open end through the buckle and pulled it taut. A make-shift choke collar. Mouse was airborne. Her knees landed squarely in the fat man's back, toppling him face-first into the asphalt. Mouse now stood with the heels of her small feet rooted in his shoulders. She leaned back hard like a water skier in the wake of a speedboat.

The fat man flailed his arms, but the lack of oxygen weakened their movement. Mouse counted in her head. 6...7...8. She felt the fat man's chest sink. His arms no longer reached for her. Eight seconds without oxygen reaching the brain

and a person will sleep. Mouse was not content with sleep. She couldn't afford to have this man come for her later. Survival was an ugly business. Under the circumstances, it was fortunate that Mouse learned this sad fact early on in her short fifteen years of life.

She pulled hard until her grip could no longer hold the leather of the belt that was now slick with her sweat. Mouse released, letting the strap fall from her hand. Nothing. No movement from the fat man. As morning's light began to cast its eerie glow she stared at the fat man's chest. No rise. No fall. It was done. She rummaged through the pockets of both men, taking a wad of cash from each. The sheathed knife that had been used to take the life of the old man now hung from the belt on her hip. The same belt used to finish off the fat man. Mouse's slim waist was comparable to the old man's, thus, making it a perfect fit.

She set off in the direction that the truck had been headed. Mouse did not know where she was, but she did know that anything was better than here. She looked back just once, as the other passengers in the truck clumsily started to climb out. *What can I do to help them?* The tentative looks they sent her way assured her she was making the right decision to carry on alone. *God, save them.*