

PROLOGUE

I will *not* panic. I will *not* cry. Everything will be okay.

Help will arrive soon—right?

Deep breaths, take deep breaths.

My deep breaths are little more than shuddering gasps.

No food. No water.

A quiet sob escapes my lips. Can I do this alone?

What if the gunmen are looking for me?

Hide!

In the falling darkness, I frantically search for a place that will shield me from view.

Through the jungle, I spy a tree with low hanging branches. Part way up, there is a place where I can straddle a big branch, and still be mostly hidden from view.

I run to the tree, staying low to the ground and close to the jungle foliage for cover.

Using the lower limbs as a ladder, I climb, my hands shaking as I claw my way up.

Without much thought on my part, my legs follow my hands as each branch becomes a battle I must win. I settle on the big branch I spotted, straddling the limb and hugging the tree, as I rest my chest and head against the trunk. It isn't comfortable but it should keep me from falling while I sleep . . . if I sleep.

Loose hair falls around my face, the tendrils catching on the tree bark. I shove the long, blonde strands behind my ears and out of my way, trying to push my panic down.

I close my eyes, but no matter how hard I try to stop it, my mind reverts to the scene in the village. Over and over, I see Lucy's surprised expression before she falls to the ground . . . and the image of the villager—shot point blank—blood going everywhere. These horrific images keep etching themselves deeper and deeper into my brain.

Something scurries across my arm. I yelp, almost falling in my hastiness to brush whatever it is off, relieved I can't see it in the darkening night.

Maybe I shouldn't stay in the tree, maybe I should keep running, maybe . . .

“Stop!” I whisper as I re-situate myself on the branch.

Calm down. It's only for a short time.

I sit as still as my shaking body allows, ignoring the insects and reptiles I imagine around me. The dark jungle floor probably hides more dangerous predators than what I'd felt crawl over my arm.

I force myself to think of happy things. Images of my best friends, Maryn and Marrot pop into my head and the parties and the cheer activities we attended. My family's faces flood my mind next. Tears roll down my cheeks. I miss my mom, and I would give anything to be with her instead of up in this tree. I would apologize for being such a brat.

Swiping at my tears, I shake my head as other thoughts sift through my head like wind through the leaves—the stupid decisions which brought me here in the first place . . . Senior Prom . . . Parker . . . and Chase.