

Chapter One.

Robyn – After the smoke clears.

Robyn was jolted awake by an ominous symphony of claws screeching across a metallic surface, a nightmarish overture that sent shivers racing down her spine. Disoriented, she gasped as the crackling of something unseen enveloped her. Her eyes stung and streamed with tears, rendering her helpless in the oppressive darkness, which was far from the comforting shroud of night. Smoke. Thick and malevolent smoke, suffocating her senses.

In a fevered haze, she summoned all the vestiges of her strength, forcing her unsteady body into a sitting position. The air was a searing wall of heat, and every breath was a painful, desperate struggle against the encroaching smoke. Her mind was a chaotic whirlpool of confusion, unable to grasp the reality of the perilous situation.

With limbs heavy as lead, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, only to recoil in agony as her bare feet made contact with the scorching floor. Water. She needed water to soothe her scorched throat and burning lungs. Desperation drove her to seize the jug, ripping the sheet from her bed, and drenching it before wrapping it tightly around her face in a makeshift mask.

Her thoughts careened through the smoke-choked haze. Boots. She needed her boots, but they lay on the floor, radiating an unbearable heat. Her new boots, a labour of love crafted by her father, beckoned from the blanket box at the end of the bed, where her mother had lovingly placed them. Panic threatened to consume her, but she fought to regain control.

Blindly, she groped for the boots in the dark, her fingers finally finding their familiar shape. Time was a merciless adversary, and she knew she might not have the luxury of lacing them, a task her father had left undone for her to complete to her liking.

She screamed as the searing agony of her burns flared anew when she forced the boots onto her feet. Laces or not, she couldn't afford to leave them behind. With courage born of desperation, Robyn faced the relentless inferno, determined to survive the relentless trial that destiny had thrust upon her.

Her heart pounded in her chest like a desperate war drum, and her thoughts raced even faster. She needed to reach the door, her last glimmer of hope amidst the encroaching chaos. The floor below her, would be a deathtrap soon. She cast her desperate gaze upon the room, seeking a solution to her plight.

The room's furniture became her lifeline, her makeshift stepping stones to survival. She calculated her route with frantic precision, the sweat-soaked tendrils of hair clinging to her forehead as she pondered her options. The mattress, a potential bridge to safety, was dismissed in a heartbeat; it would only ignite and seal her fiery fate. Panic clawed at her thoughts, but she couldn't afford to falter.

Desperation fuelled her resolve as she scanned the room. Then, a moment of clarity pierced through the haze of fear. The bedside stool! Of course, the simple wooden stool stood as her unlikely saviour. Chiding herself for not realising sooner, she stretched her body across the bed, fingertips straining until they gripped the edge of the wicker seat.

With a final burst of determination, she hoisted the stool onto the bed, its feet scorched but still sturdy. There was no turning back now; this was her lifeline. Robyn clung to the wicker stool as her only hope, her fingers stinging with pain from her last hope of escape.

With a heart heavy with trepidation, she mustered every ounce of her dwindling strength and pushed herself upright, taking a faltering step onto the blanket box stationed at the foot of her bed. But the relentless smoke choked her, a reminder of the peril that faced her. In the cruel dance of life and death, she adjusted her mask, her makeshift saviour already drying out. The jug that had been her only source of temporary salvation lay empty, a bitter testament to her dwindling chances.

Time ticked away like a merciless executioner. With a trembling hand, she placed the stool on the floor, the weight of her fear pressing down upon her. Summoning all the courage she possessed, she ascended the stool, her heart thundering in her chest. It swayed under her weight, a precarious bridge to life or death. Just a short distance now to the chest of drawers, and she reached it with a unsteady hand. The real test lay before her. Had her frantic efforts been in vain? Would she find searing flames waiting behind the door?

The moment of truth arrived, laying her hand on the wooden door. A wave of relief washed over her as she discerned warmth but not unbearable heat. With no alternative and no time to spare, she pulled the door open, her heart pounding wildly. No flames greeted her on the other side, and she released the breath she had been holding, a rush of gratitude surging through her.

Yet, the battle was far from won. Smoke billowed into the landing, obscuring her path like a shroud of impending doom. The flames had not yet claimed her, but the relentless inferno still pursued her with its insatiable hunger.

Coughs wracked her fragile frame once more, resonating through the pitch-black hallway that felt like a corridor of despair. Fumbling her way through the inky darkness, she inched along the passage, every step a precarious dance with the unknown. Her sole mission, now etched into her mind, was to reach her parents, to save them from the looming horror that threatened to consume their world.

Anticipation pounded in her chest as she swung open the door to their room, but to her astonishment, it was empty, bathed in the eerie glow of encroaching flames that voraciously devoured the wooden floorboards. She slammed the door shut, not knowing their fate, and spun on her heels. Time was the cruellest of adversaries, and escape was her only option.

She traced the wall, navigating the disorienting darkness. The stairs beckoned, her last path to freedom, but her heart sank as she gazed upon a nightmarish tableau. The lower floor was an inferno, the stairs themselves aflame, a cruel reminder of her dwindling chances.

Deflated, she sagged against the wall, her world collapsing around her. And then, like a distant beacon of hope, she remembered it—the window at the end of the hall, shrouded by boards for as long as she could recall. Her father had intended to replace the glass, but the task had remained unfinished. With a desperate pull, she pried the shutters open, and the boards outside gave way, offering her a slender chance at survival.

Peering out into the half-lit morning, the first tendrils of daybreak painting the sky, she realised the flames had not yet reached this side of the house. But the world beyond was a maelstrom of chaos. Shouts and screams filled the air from all directions, their meaning lost in the tumult. Were they trying to battle the inferno? Did they know she was trapped within these walls? These questions would have to wait, for the flames crept ever closer, clawing their way toward her.

Time dwindled to mere seconds, and with one last effort, she squeezed through the narrow opening, landing unceremoniously on her father's workshop roof, teetering dangerously close to the edge. Gathering herself, she perched there, the relief of being outside washing over her. Her thoughts immediately turned to her parents, and she scanned for a way down.

With no alternative, she turned and grasped the wooden frame of the roof's edge, slowly lowering herself, her legs giving way as she dropped the final two feet into the path beside the workshop. The bedsheet, now parched and stained with smoke, still clung to her face, a grim reminder of the ordeal she had endured.

She needed to find her parents, to assure them of her survival, but her body betrayed her. Exhausted and drained of adrenaline, she slumped to the earth, ripping the protective sheet away in a desperate gasp for air. Coughing fits wracked her frail form as her head pounded, her vision blurred, and the world around her spun into a foreboding darkness.

Robyn teetered on the precipice of consciousness, the boundaries between dreams and reality a shifting, uncertain veil. Her thoughts were a tumultuous storm, swirling with questions that clawed at her sanity. Where were her parents, the pillars of her life? Why had they not come for her? Did they believe she had been consumed by the merciless inferno? She had to find them; the urgency was a relentless drumbeat in her mind.

As she mustered the strength to rise, a sudden presence materialised. Joan, her dearest friend, wrenching her from the cold grip of despair, and yanking her unceremoniously to her feet. Panic surged anew, a maelstrom of confusion and terror swirling within her. Why were they running? What horrors pursued them in the night? And why wasn't it her father guiding her to safety?

"Run, we have to go, NOW!" Joan's voice pierced the chaos, a frantic plea that echoed through Robyn's disoriented mind. Desperate questions tumbled from her parched lips, her voice a feeble whisper in the chaos of the night. Where were her parents? Why flee? Was it the fire, or something more sinister? And why was Joan the saviour in this surreal nightmare? A whirlwind enveloped her addled mind.

Amidst the chaos, the village around them was ablaze, an apocalyptic vision of destruction and despair. The symphony of agony, shouts, and crumbling structures reverberated through the night, an enigma Robyn struggled to comprehend.

"The sheriff's men are burning the village. They are burning everything and rounding up everyone." Joan's words carried an urgency that pierced through the fog of Robyn's confusion. With a strength born of desperation, Joan practically dragged her along a path strewn with debris, across a small stream, and into the looming forest beyond. They stumbled forward, her breaths ragged, her eyes stinging from smoke and fear until they reached the sanctuary of the trees. There, amidst the shroud of darkness, Robyn's world descended into an ominous void.

Awakening, she found herself half-buried in a chaotic bed of leaves, disorientation and fear gnawing at her core. An eerie silence enveloped her, leaving her alone in a chilling forest, stripped of all but her nightdress and the boots that clung to her feet like relics of a forgotten life. Panic clawed at her consciousness as she desperately tried to piece together the fragments of that fateful night, the creeping dawn, and now, the inexplicable darkness that shrouded her.

Memories danced on the edges of her mind like phantoms teasing her sanity. When had she last glimpsed daylight, and how had she ended up here, shivering and vulnerable? The world spun around her, a dizzying maze of questions without answers. Her throat was a furnace of agony, her dry mouth like sandpaper, and the chilling emptiness of the forest weighed heavily on her soul. Where had everyone vanished to? And where was Joan, her lifeline, in this bewildering nightmare?

Desperation clung to her frail voice as she attempted to call out, but her vocal cords rebelled, and a painful cough was all that emerged. "Joan," she croaked, her voice a fragile whisper carried away by the ominous night. "Joan, are you there?"

From the shadows, a voice emerged, a lifeline of hope. "Quiet," it urged, a haunting murmur in the darkness. Joan materialised from the obscurity, a guardian in this nightmarish realm. She handed Robyn a flask of water, a precious elixir in this desolation, and shrouded her white nightdress with dead leaves to shield her from prying eyes. "Stay still, stay quiet," Joan implored, her voice a threadbare whisper laced with urgency.

Together, they huddled close, to the forest floor, their only refuge from the frigid night, leaves their fragile armour against the chilling air. In the heart of this eerie wilderness, they clung to each other, two lost souls seeking warmth and shelter amidst the chaos of a world turned upside down.

Unable to sleep, Robyn woke early. It was still dark, and morning would be here soon. Then what? If only she had possessed the foresight to glimpse into the future and witness, the profound transformation her life would undergo on that fateful night, she might have navigated the preceding hours with an entirely different perspective. The weight of this question hung heavy in the air, casting a haunting shadow over her thoughts.

The very essence of her existence seemed poised on the precipice of an irrevocable transformation. What secrets would today unveil? What trials and tribulations awaited her and Joan in this treacherous reality?

The night had been pregnant with uncertainty, and Robyn's contemplations swirled in the profound silence of the forest, each moment carrying the weight of her unspoken question: If she had only known...

Joan awoke and passed her a flask of water. Robyn took a long, grateful slurp of the water, quenching the thirst that had haunted her for hours. She handed the flask back to Joan, ready to demand answers, to unravel the twisted tapestry of this nightmare. But Joan's insistence held her back.

"Not yet," Joan urged, her eyes filled with concern. "Take another sip. You need it."

Robyn obliged, the water soothing her sore throat as she drank deeply, her breath shuddering with each gulp. With newfound energy coursing through her veins, impatience bubbled within her, demanding answers like a relentless drumbeat.

"Where are my mother and father?" Robyn implored, her voice quivering with fear.

"The sheriff's men took them away," Joan replied, her voice bearing the heavy weight of their shared burden.

"Are they alive?" Robyn's voice wavered.

"Yes, they're alive," Joan confirmed, her eyes betraying a mixture of hope and despair.

Robyn's heart sank as uncertainty gripped her. She had never been accustomed to such turmoil. Her world had been one of simplicity and warmth, not of fear and uncertainty. The house her parents had built with love, their sanctuary, had been reduced to ashes. It was a stark reminder of the capricious nature of life.

"Who else is left, in the village or here?" Robyn asked, her voice tinged with sadness.

"Nobody, as far as I know," Joan replied with a heavy heart.

"How did you find me?" Robyn inquired, her curiosity overcoming her anguish.

Joan's story unfolded, a harrowing tale of confrontation, violence, and escape. Robyn listened; her heart heavy with gratitude for her friend's courage. The flames that had consumed her home had almost claimed her life as well.

"But why did the guard attack the village?" Robyn's voice trembled with confusion.

"Taxes," Joan explained. "The villagers refused to pay them. Your father, along with mine and the others, couldn't afford these latest taxes. If they had paid, the village would have starved."

"Why didn't my father tell me?" Robyn pondered aloud.

"I don't know," Joan admitted, a sadness in her eyes mirroring Robyn's own.

Robyn's foot throbbed with pain, a persistent reminder of the terrifying ordeal. She gingerly removed her boot, revealing a red, angry burn on her foot.

"Ouch, that must hurt," Joan remarked as she inspected the injury. "It's a burn, but the skin isn't broken."

"It does hurt," Robyn admitted, recalling how she had unwittingly stepped onto the searing floor. She had been fortunate to pull her foot back in time.

Joan offered to help, using a torn strip of her nightdress to dress the wound. Robyn watched as she carefully wrapped the makeshift bandage around her injured foot, a symbol of their newfound reliance on one another in this world, turned upside down.

"How's that?" Joan's voice quivered with a mixture of tenderness and anger. "I added honey I took from the broken hive beside your father's workshop. Those thoughtless guards smashed it for some reason. I hope they got stung. Luckily, there were only a few bees left around it. Bees never bothered me."

Robyn, determination etched on her face, rose to her feet with cautious deliberation, placing gingerly measured weight on her injured foot. Pain shot through her, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through it.

"I think I'll be okay to walk," she declared, her voice tinged with a hint of stubborn resolve. "I might be a little slow, though."

Robyn stood, her injured foot throbbing, the blistered skin a testament to her resilience. She longed to charge forward, to race headlong into the unknown in search of her parents. But Joan's words, though whispered, carried the weight of wisdom.

"We have to be quiet, no talking," Joan urged in hushed tones. "Come, we'll check it out from the safety of the trees first. We can't go blundering in, just in case they've left men behind."

Robyn's anger simmered beneath her determination, a relentless fire that burned for answers, for the safety of her parents. She knew Joan was right, knew that rushing in recklessly could spell disaster. Yet, controlling the urge to act was a battle she could feel raging within her, a battle she was determined to win.

Joan and Robyn, two inseparable friends since they were toddlers in the village, were as different as night and day. Joan, barely five feet tall and slightly plump, sported a cascade of rich blond hair always neatly braided. She was a homebody, finding joy in assisting her mother with cooking and sewing, or entertaining the younger children in the village.

In stark contrast, Robyn stood almost six feet tall, her frame lean and muscular, her long, fiery auburn hair cascading in wild waves, and her eyes a vibrant shade of green. She spent much of her free time in the forest, a realm she considered her sanctuary. There, she immersed herself in nature's symphony, honing her skills with the bow, and absorbing the secrets of the woodland. Her father, a skilled craftsman, had imparted to her the art of crafting longbows and arrows, while her fascination with leatherwork led her to explore the intricacies of various types of leather.

Despite their differences, Joan and Robyn shared a profound bond, one that transcended their dissimilarities. Evenings under the stars were their cherished moments, spent recounting the day's adventures, dreams, and fears.

When they reached the forest's edge and laid eyes upon the village, Robyn gasped in horror. A scene of devastation greeted them, with charred houses still smouldering, broken and twisted cart fragments, and the lifeless bodies of animals strewn haphazardly in the streets. The grim tableau told a story of brutality that defied comprehension.

Moving stealthily along a gully beside the stream, closer to the bridge, they remained low and silent, fearful of revealing their presence. As they reached the bridge, Joan dared a glance into the village square, but the sight before her left her breathless and bemused. She turned away; her face drained of colour, retching in anguish, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Joan," Robyn implored, her voice tinged with anxiety. "What is it?"

Joan struggled to respond; her voice choked with grief. "Little Daisy... why? Why would they do that? To Daisy, why her?"

Robyn's heart raced as she felt an overwhelming urge to see for herself. She needed to know, to bear witness to the horrifying truth. Gritting her teeth, she raised her head; her pulse pounding in her ears. And there, just feet away, Daisy's lifeless eyes locked onto hers. A bolt from a crossbow pierced her back, another in her neck, blood pooling around her tiny form, her eyes frozen in a final moment of fear. Robyn felt her knees give way, and she collapsed, convulsing with dry heaves as shock and horror overcame her. She had never seen a dead body before, and the sight had shattered her.

It felt like an eternity before she could even stand. Her legs were like jelly as she staggered toward the stream, falling to her knees and gasping for air. The cool water against her face helped steady her racing heart, and she knew she had to check on Joan.

With great effort, Robyn gathered her strength and, after counting to ten, rose to her feet. She willed herself to be steady as she made her way back to Joan, who was still sobbing uncontrollably. Robyn sat beside her, extending an arm to offer solace. They sat in silence, sharing their grief in the wake of the unimaginable horror that had befallen their village.

Amidst the mournful stillness, Robyn thought she heard a voice, distant yet unmistakable.