

IT'S FOR
YOUR
OWN
GOOD

CONTENT NOTE

It's For Your Own Good is a work of fiction
but it deals with many real issues, including
grief, depression, death and murder.

To the original legends...Mum and Dad.

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IT'S FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

KATE FRANCIS

USBORNE

CHAPTER 1

Something stirred the night air in Liv Walker's bedroom.

A warning instinct pulled her out of deep sleep, forcing her thoughts to struggle to the surface. She blinked her eyes open, momentarily confused by the shadows on the ceiling – branches of darkness swaying silently in an unseen breeze.

There was an unfamiliar chill in the room. Had she left the window open?

Reluctantly, she pushed herself onto her side and looked around. It wasn't the window.

There was a faint yellow rectangle of light; the door was wide open. Liv groaned. Why was her door open? She always kept it closed, no exceptions. It was the only way to get some much-needed privacy, and besides, she couldn't sleep with it open like that. It felt too exposed somehow.

A flash of irritation hit her. Damn Mattie. Her bratty little stepsister must have toddled over in the night – probably to steal some make-up or something. She was always coming in and out like she owned the place. Four years old and she already ruled the whole house.

Maybe tomorrow night she would balance a cup of water on the jamb – a small surprise for the little diva. Her stepmom, Carianne, would not be happy. Oh no – she wouldn't like that at all. Her precious princess doused in the middle of the night by her evil stepsister. All hell would break loose. Liv smiled at the thought.

Rubbing her eyes, she shook off the last clinging edges of sleepiness and pushed herself up to sitting. The bed was so cosy, but there was no way she could go back to sleep until she got up and shut the door. Except, of course, once she got up, she'd never get back to sleep.

A shot of familiar midnight angst hit her. She needed sleep. *She needed it.* How was she going to cope in the morning if she hadn't slept? All the things waiting for her the next day started listing themselves in her head, one after another in a fizz of panic. She had to wash her hair, all her clothes were in dirty piles spread across her floor, there was a test she hadn't studied for, another lunchtime detention. Fuck. She couldn't face any of it. She just couldn't – not if she was tired. Not if she hadn't slept.

She reached over to the bedside table for her phone. But it wasn't there. It was probably buried somewhere in the bed sheets; she must have fallen asleep while she was doomscrolling and forgotten to plug it in. Reaching around, she poked the comforter, trying to feel for it.

Something creaked.

It was faint, almost inaudible – but enough. Liv froze, every part of her instantly on alert. The shadows around the doorway deepened as she stared into them, searching. It had to be the house groaning, settling after a long day of summer heat – right? Or maybe Mattie was still here, the little monster, lurking in the corner.

“Mattie, is that you? I’m going to kill you...” she whispered.

Another creak, louder. Too loud.

That was when she saw it. The yellow rectangle of light morphed as a dark shadow pushed into one side of the doorframe. Her mind pushed back, struggling to make sense of what she was seeing. Was she imagining it? Angles? An elbow? A shoulder...?

Fuck. Someone was there. Someone big.

“Who is it?” Liv’s voice sounded unnaturally high; her heart was beating too hard. She sat up, rigid, instinctively pulling the sheets around her. “Dad, is that you?”

There was a silence...too long. Not Dad. *Who was it? Who?*

The shadow stretched, extending itself slowly across the floor and onto the bed as a dark figure moved fully into the doorway. The weak light illuminated its large silhouette.

A man.

Fuck.

A stranger.

Fuck.

Something was covering his face. A ski mask.

Fuck no.

Liv kicked out wildly, instinct taking over. She pushed off the bed, stumbling as she tried to find her feet. No plan, no idea what to do. Pure adrenaline driving her – fight or flight.

Two steps. She took two steps away from the bed before she landed smack into something soft and big. Something solid.

Someone else was there. Standing by her bed. There were two of them!

Rough hands grabbed her, catching her easily, pulling her in.

Everything exploded in Liv’s head. She thrashed hard, kicking

out desperately, but she couldn't break free. She tried to scream but it was too hard to breathe. Fear took over as she felt her wrists gripped tightly. The man from the door was behind her now, pushing up hard against her back, an arm locked around her shoulders. She was trapped between the two of them, she could feel the weight of their bodies, the fabric of their shirts, she could smell them – smell their sweat.

“Help!” she managed to get out, her voice cut off as a meaty hand clamped itself over her face.

They were talking. Words she could barely understand.

“Have you got her?”

“Get her.”

“I'm trying!”

Liv thrashed out wildly with her free feet, kicking viciously.

“Fuck...she's kicking me.”

Without thinking, Liv sank her teeth hard into the vice-like fingers gripping her face.

“Ow!” The person recoiled. “Jesus. She bit me!” It was a woman's voice.

“Calm down already,” the man behind Liv growled at her. He twisted her around and in a second, she was on the bed, face down. The man's heavy weight landed hard on top of her, pinning her down, her face pushed into her sheets. Pinpoint flashes of light were breaking behind her eyes. Sheer panic hit her. Was this it? Was this how she was going to die? Sixteen years old and murdered in her own bed.

The man grabbed her hair, pulling her head back. He pushed his face close. She could smell spearmint gum through his knitted ski mask.

“Olivia Walker, settle down. We’re not here to harm you.” The man’s voice was calm. Too calm for *this*. “Now, I’m going to count to three, then you’re going to get up and we’re going to walk downstairs. Do you understand? You won’t get hurt unless you do something stupid. Got it?”

Liv didn’t dare move or speak.

Still holding her hair, the man forced her head up and down in a crude nodding motion.

Tears pulled at her eyes. Nothing was making sense.

She felt something cold grip her wrists, a metallic snap. *Handcuffs?*

“Good girl. All right then. Are we ready? On the count...one, two, three.” The man slowly peeled his weight off her. She sucked in air, gasping, instantly struggling to push herself away from him. The man laughed. “Feisty. You’re gonna have your hands full with this one.” He nodded at the woman, who was standing to one side, nursing her hand.

“Just what I need,” the woman muttered. “Another dang troublemaker. Come on, Walker. You’re mine now, kiddo.”

She grabbed an elbow, pulling Liv up. Liv wobbled, her feet unsteady. What the fuck was happening here?

They half-walked, half-dragged her through the yellow doorway. All the house lights were on. She looked around wildly for signs of anyone, trails of blood or weapons – anything to make sense of this. Oh God, what had they done to the others; to Dad, to Carianne and Mattie? Mattie’s door was open. She was just a kid, a baby. They wouldn’t hurt her, would they? She must be so scared.

They clumsily stumbled down the stairs. The front door was also open. Why were the lights on? If they were kidnapping her, they’d want it dark.

A fuzz of confused thoughts raced through her mind. They knew her name. They said they weren't going to hurt her. Who were they? Kidnappers? Had they targeted her family because they were rich? That would explain why they knew her name. Well, they'd fucked up – her stepmom would rather pay them to keep her than pay a ransom to get her back.

As they stepped through the open doorway, Liv felt a shock of cold night air. A white passenger van was parked in the driveway, lights on, doors open.

She was roughly pushed towards the van. Somebody had to see something; someone had to notice a kidnapping, right in the middle of their fancy cul-de-sac. The nosy neighbours would call the police; they'd write down the licence plate. The police were probably already on the way. Someone would stop this. Someone would help. She looked around wildly, opening her mouth to scream – but stopped cold.

They weren't alone. Standing on their immaculate McMansion lawn, were three people – her dad, Carianne and little Mattie, her chubby arms wrapped tightly around her mother's leg.

Her so-called family.

Watching.

"Dad!" Liv gasped. "Help me!"

James Walker's arms were tightly folded, his chin stuck forward; there was an uncharacteristically hard look on his usually amiable face.

"Dad, help..." Something was wrong. Her father didn't move or speak. He just stood there – impassive. "*Dad!*" They were almost at the van.

That was when she saw it. His green eyes flicked up and for a

brief, painful second met hers – cold and locked-in. Defensive. She felt like she had been punched hard in the gut. *Her dad*. Why? Why was he doing this?

“Dad...” Her voice wavered. “Dad, please don’t...please...” She was begging; she didn’t care. He had to stop it. “Look, I know I fucked up, but please just give me a chance to explain. Don’t send me away. Please... *Dad...*” The words choked in her throat and died. Her father didn’t move; he didn’t look at her again. Nothing. He just stood there, with Carianne rigidly by his side, one manicured hand resting possessively on his shoulder, the other hand waving at Liv.

She was smiling. *Smiling*.

That was it. Everything left Liv. She sank against the gripping hands. The two masked figures lifted her through the side door of the passenger van, dropping her onto the floor between two rows of seats and smoothly removing her handcuffs. They pulled the van door shut behind her.

There were voices outside, but she couldn’t focus. Her mind had shut down. A humming noise was building in her ears. She lay still, her face pushed into the cold metal of the van floor. More doors slammed. An engine kicked in.

She didn’t move. She couldn’t move. She wouldn’t move. The passenger van pulled forward; an indicator ticked. Streetlights flashed over her.

But she lay there, focusing on the only thing that was cutting through the buzzing, ugly mess in her head. The one thing that she could see clearly – her dad turning away from her, letting them do this, letting them drag her away. The hard look in his eyes, that one last defiant glance.

He had done this to her. He had chosen this for her.

Her own father.

Her own fucking father.

CHAPTER 2

Rain streaked across the van's window; occasional streetlights flashed past. Liv's face was pushed against the cold glass, her breath steaming up the surface.

Somehow, she'd managed to scrape herself off the floor and crawl into the row of seats at the back of the van. She had no idea how long they had been driving but it must have been hours. The two dark figures in the front had played through old country songs, alternating with vaguely familiar nineties hip-hop, squabbling each time one track ended over who got to pick next.

The kidnappers were both thickset with low, gravelly voices. They were still wearing their identical ski masks pushed up on their heads like beanies, and seemed inappropriately relaxed, guffawing and joking around like old friends.

Clearly, they had done this before – at least twice.

Because Liv wasn't the only one in the van.

The two other kids were slumped deeply in their seats. Liv had the clearest view of one of them, a tall girl with curly red hair, sitting two rows in front of her. The girl had been sobbing quietly to herself ever since Liv had been unceremoniously dumped on the van's

floor. On the rare occasion that she looked up, Liv would sneak a brief glimpse of her profile – high, soft cheekbones, pale white skin and wide-set, tear-soaked eyes.

The boy was harder to make out. He was at the front, in the row behind the driver's seat with his back to them, a grey hoodie pulled low over his head. His face was turned to the window – all Liv could see were a few curls of sun-bleached blond hair escaping from under his hood. Everything about him said to fuck off and leave him alone.

Liv shivered. She was freezing. For the hundredth time she cursed herself for her choice of pyjamas – shorts and a cami-top dotted with tiny blue flowers. It was no better than underwear and she felt horribly, mortifyingly exposed. Being dragged around half-dressed like this tapped into all her worst insecurities. She hated the way she looked on a good day – and this was definitely not a good day.

Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, she contemplated asking Bert and Ernie up front if they could put the heat on. But the memory of them grabbing her and forcing her into the van was still too raw. She'd rather freeze to death than ask them for anything.

Gritting her teeth, she turned back to the window, looking for any landmarks or signs that might give away where they were going, and – more importantly – how to get back home.

Home.

Well, that was a joke.

The oversized McMansion in Flagstaff had never been her home. Not really. Her home – her *true* home – was back in Seattle, with her mom, with her memories, with her best friend, Min.

Fuck.

Liv rested her forehead on the cold window, letting it tap against the glass as the van bumped along the road. It hurt a little. But she

didn't mind. It was a distraction from her spiralling thoughts.

It was pointless to think like this. That home – that life – didn't exist any more. It had ended two years ago, on the day her mom died. The day her father left the hospital, unlocked the front door and walked straight into his office, closing the door behind him, leaving Liv alone on the other side. Countless times over the next several weeks, Liv had sat by his office door, listening for him, needing to know she wasn't alone in the empty house, needing someone who would never come. At least, until the day the door opened wide, three months after her mom died. He stepped out, a manic grin on his gaunt, unshaven face, and announced he was getting remarried and that they were moving to Flagstaff, Arizona. A “colleague” had swept in online and given him the attention he'd needed while mourning the death of his wife. Carianne.

Her father's face flashed into her mind. His expression as she was dragged from the house. It didn't bother her that Carianne was clearly delighted that she'd finally got rid of her problematic stepdaughter. But *her dad*, his face resolutely turned away from her, the set of his jaw...

Fuck. That hurt. How could he do that? *How?*

If her mom was still alive, he would never, *ever* have done this. If her mom was alive...

Stop. Liv pulled herself up in her seat, wiping at her eyes. *If this. If that. Fuck if.* Her mom was gone, and would never know how bad things had become between Liv and her dad. No, her mom had died leaving a perfect little family of love – a perfect little daughter. At least she had taken that with her. None of this could touch her now or hurt her. Wherever she was, she was safe.

Instinctively, Liv rubbed her thumb against a silver ring on her

right hand, gently pushing against it and turning it around and around.

Another unreadable road sign flashed past, caught in the headlights. She wasn't sure, but from the scarcity of towns or stops along the empty road, Liv thought they might be heading north, through the desert, towards Utah.

Liv tried to think through what was happening. A while ago, she had gone down a rabbit hole watching content about kids incarcerated at some school for "troubled teens". Is that where she was going? A school? Rehab? *Prison*? No, it couldn't be prison, right? Her lawyer said the charges against her had been dropped. She'd been released with an official warning. It couldn't be that. So, what was it?

Her stomach did a small flip as her head went darker. Her dad and Carianne wouldn't have decided to get rid of her... permanently? She looked at the two goons up front. They weren't *professionals*, were they? No, that was stupid. They wouldn't have professionals drive up to their house in front of all the neighbours. She was being irrational – right?

Oh God. What was happening here?

Where were they taking her?

Pushing her face harder against the window, Liv watched the raindrops dripping like pathetic tears down the glass. She traced one with her finger. The drops were running straight down now, pooling at the bottom of the window.

At long last, the van was slowing down.

"Restroom break," barked the woman. The van pulled off the road into the dimly lit forecourt of a gas station. Pure darkness surrounded them. There was nothing nearby. Just the gas station

and the road disappearing out of the halo of light, shrouded under shards of pouring rain.

The middle of nowhere.

The van parked next to a gas pump, and the woman walked to the side door, opening it wide. Cold, wet air sucked into the van.

“Out.” The woman stood back, her muscular arms crossed tightly over her broad chest.

This was the first time Liv had managed to get a good look at her. Her face was unnervingly ordinary, like someone you’d be standing in line behind at Costco. She had nondescript features and wispy dyed-black hair, and was wearing a faded yellow T-shirt with a crudely drawn smiley face nestled under an inverted V-shaped hat. Only one thing stood out: she had tattoos running the length of her right arm. It was a mess of dark-arts images – skulls and wolves and a snake wrapping around her arm several times, its head rearing onto the back of her hand.

“Five minutes. Restrooms are inside.”

Trying not to look too relieved, Liv slouched out of the van, shivering as the rain pelted her. She kept her eyes down and was careful to steer well clear of snake woman. She needn’t have bothered. The woman was busy on her phone and blanked her; probably queueing up another round of achingly loud hip-hop to torture them with.

The tall girl shuffled out next, her crying on a momentary hiatus. Blinking in the rain, she pulled her pink fleece pyjamas around her as she sniffed her way to the gas station store.

A bell dinged as the door swung open.

There was a boy working behind the counter; he could hardly be much older than her, Liv thought. He looked up, an expression of

mild curiosity on his face, clearly not used to customers at this hour. He nodded at Liv.

A short, sharp thrill raced up her spine. The woman was still outside on her phone. There was time. She could tell the boy she was being kidnapped and get him to call the police. She just had to make it look casual in case the woman was watching.

Without a phone or money and basically in underwear, Liv didn't bother pretending she was about to buy something. She just walked up to the kid, arms wrapped protectively around herself, still soaked through and shivering with cold.

"I need help," she whispered, keeping her head down, trying to act cool. She had to manage his reaction too. If he panicked when she told him what was going on, the snake woman might suspect something.

The boy looked at her. He had a shock of dark hair that covered the top half of his face. How could he even see like that?

"Kay." He grinned.

"Please, you have to listen. Don't react when I say this – they're probably watching. But I'm being kidnapped by that man and woman." Liv looked pointedly in the direction of the van. "You need to call the police."

The hair nodded.

"Kay – gotcha," the boy said, still smiling. It wasn't the right reaction. He seemed unfazed.

"No...seriously. Those two people outside have kidnapped three of us. Please, you have to get help. My name's..." Liv paused here. If she said her real name, where would she end up? Right back home where all of this had started, waiting for the next van to pull up in the middle of the night. "My name's Min Wei. I'm from Seattle."

It was all she could come up with in the moment. She hadn't made any close friends in Flagstaff – not the kind she could call for help in the middle of the night. But her best friend from Seattle wouldn't mind Liv using her name. If she gave the police Min's number, when they called, Liv could explain everything. Min would help. They'd been best friends since the first day of kindergarten and they still talked almost every day. Min's parents were lawyers and had been her mom's best friends for as long as Liv could remember. They were the closest thing Liv had to family – a real family. They would help her out. Of course they would. They'd be so shocked at what her dad had done. Maybe she would be able to go and live with them? At least for a while, until she figured things out.

"Min Wei?" The boy crumpled up his face in confusion. With her mother's bushy middling-brown hair and her Canadian father's pale green eyes and freckles, Liv knew she did not look like her name was Min Wei. Damn it.

"Look, it doesn't matter, all right. The thing is, I've been *kidnapped*."

"Kay." He nodded again. A hand reached out and pushed the overly long bangs back. For the first time, Liv saw his face clearly. Not as young as she'd thought. Maybe mid-twenties? Definitely unimpressed.

This wasn't going the way she'd hoped. She looked around nervously. The red-haired girl had disappeared in the direction of the restroom. Outside, snake woman wasn't standing by the van any more. *Where was she?*

"Listen," Liv said urgently, resisting the impulse to grab the cashier by his ridiculous floppy hair and shake him into action. She had the horrible feeling that this might be her last chance to escape – especially if they were headed to some school or rehab facility. She had to make him understand that she was serious. "*Please*, just

call the police, already. I'm being kidnapped! What part of this are you not getting?"

The doorbell pinged behind her. Liv's heart leaped; a cold chill crept down her back. She didn't need to turn round. She just knew – snake woman was here.

"Yo, Chipmunk," the boy called out to her. "Got yourself another runner here..."

Fuck. He knew her. They must come here all the time with their latest van-load of victims.

"Yeah, thanks, Shane. I figured, the way she hot tailed it outta the van." Chipmunk walked over to the counter and stood next to Liv. "Planning an escape, were ya?"

Liv shook her head, sullenly.

"Good. Cos you can't do a runner from here." Chipmunk grinned conspiratorially at Shane. "Not unless you wanna hike across seventy miles of flatland in a hundred-degree heat, all on your little lonesome. Though I suppose you could follow the road and get yourself flattened by an eighteen-wheeler. No skin off my nose neither way. You run – you're not my liability no more. Dead or alive." Chipmunk turned to look around the small store. The girl from the van had emerged from the restroom and was standing forlornly in the snack aisle. "Now y'all need to finish up and get your butts back on the van, A-SAP. That means you too, Miss Shasta Lee." Chipmunk nodded pointedly at the girl.

The girl squeaked and dropped a bag of Doritos.

Damn it. Liv sighed in her head – not out loud. She wouldn't give Chipmunk the satisfaction. Serving Shane her finest stink eye, she turned and walked to the restroom, slamming and locking the door behind her.

CHAPTER 3

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What was she going to do now? Liv didn't know where they were taking her, but her survival instincts were fired up.

It must be early Friday morning by now. Any way she looked at it, it was unlikely anyone would realize she was missing until after the weekend. She'd skipped enough days of school that no one would think twice if she didn't show up. If she was brutally honest, she couldn't think of anyone in Flagstaff who would notice or care if she disappeared for months, if not for ever. The only person who might actually miss her was Min; but even if Min was worried, it could still take her days to decide what to do.

No, Liv had to be realistic. She was on her own, and she'd watched enough true crime to know her best odds for escape were now, before she got to wherever they were taking her. She couldn't let her imagination go beyond that thought. It was too terrifying. She had to keep in the moment. Out here, in the real world, she still had a fighting chance.

Liv's reflection in the dirty restroom mirror made her jump. Her face was pale with dark circles around her eyes, and her long hair was matted and wild, like a stray dog on an Instagram reel.

She looked like she felt – as though she'd been chewed up and spat out by an angry universe.

Gritting her teeth, she looked around. There wasn't much to see, apart from a narrow window over the washbasin. It was small, but she could potentially fit through it. Chipmunk had shot down the options for escaping but hadn't factored in one thing. Shane-the-hairy-cashier had got himself to work somehow, and he would have to leave at the end of his shift. Whether he had a car, scooter or Uber set-up, Liv was going to hitch a ride out of here and make her way to Seattle – to Min. All she had to do was get through this stupid little window and hide somewhere close by until her ride arrived. Easy. She had a plan.

She clambered onto the washbasin rim. It creaked loudly under her weight. The window was cracked and easy to open. Without thinking, she dove headfirst into the opening, balancing painfully on her stomach. The next part was awkward. She was hanging upside down, legs still inside, cold rain pelting hard on her head and shoulders, dangling over a metre above the ground.

Wriggling around, she tried to get a knee up to the frame, but it didn't fit. The window wasn't wide enough to bend her legs through. She was stuck, half-in, half-out. There was nothing for it – she was going to have to drop headfirst, with nothing to break her fall.

Roll, she told herself. Drop and roll, you'll be fine. One hand clung to the frame as she shifted her weight forward. Her other hand came up over her head, ready. There was no scenario in which this wouldn't hurt. It was a really bad idea. But she was committed. She was not going to be locked away by her treacherous father and evil stepmother. They didn't get to win.

Tipping forward, she dangled precariously for a moment before

gravity took hold, whipping her through the window, her legs scraping hard on the sill, her knees catching excruciatingly as she fell. Her arm barely broke her fall and she tumbled headlong onto the ground, crashing to a stop against a nearby dumpster.

Ow. She didn't dare move. There was damage, for sure. She just didn't know how bad it was. Slowly she scanned her body, wriggling various bits as she checked them out; knees burning, scratched up but functional. Her forearms had some cuts and bruises, but nothing broken. The rest seemed all right. She grinned. *She'd done it.* She'd escaped! She just needed to find Shane's ride and...

"If I could get me a dollar for every kid who tried that..." The voice crushed Liv's momentary euphoria. Two worn hiking boots moved in front of her face. Chipmunk. "Are we going to need handcuffs again, young missy?"

Slowly, reluctantly, Liv looked up. Chipmunk was looming over her, rain dripping off her nose onto Liv's face. The man was close behind her.

Despair cut through Liv. She'd fucked up. Again. How could this be happening? She just wished she could be home in bed – for this all to be some messed-up nightmare.

Chipmunk squatted down next to her and leaned in.

"Look, missy. I get it. This isn't how either of us wanted to be spending our night. But no one's going to hurt you. You're safe in our hands. I know you don't see it yet, but all this is for your own good."

"Where...where are you taking me?" The adrenaline was wearing off and Liv's voice was shaky; she could hear how pathetic she sounded.

"To a place where you can get the help you need. I'll explain

everything when we get there. But for now, you just need to know that this is in your best interest. Trust in the process, and this'll go a heck of a lot easier on all of us."

Liv didn't respond. What was there to say? She'd lost this round. Her father and Carianne had won – for now.

Chipmunk gave a short nod, and before Liv could process what was happening, she was roughly lifted from behind by the man and hustled into the van. The door slammed shut on her for the second time that miserable night. The two goons clambered back into the front seats, their playlist started up loudly, and they were off.

Liv lay curled up on the floor of the van for a long time – tears of frustration mixed with the rain on her face. She was shaking now, though not from cold. Anger and fear mixed together. She was in trouble, big trouble, and she knew it.

Her cami-top and shorts were soaked through from the rain. Folding her arms self-consciously, she dragged herself onto her scraped-up knees, then over to her seat, trying to hold it together. She could hear the other girl, Shasta, back in her seat, sobbing again – great gulping sobs.

There was something on Liv's seat. A folded grey rectangle. Confused, it took a moment to understand what she was looking at. Then it finally registered.

Carefully, she picked up the soft, grey hoodie and slipped it over her head. She pulled her knees up underneath and curled into the cosy fleece, burying her face into the folds. She could smell the faint, reassuring scent of clean laundry and something else – someone else. A warm, earthy scent. Nothing had felt so good in this whole shitty night. Nothing.

Grateful, she looked across at the boy, sitting silently, position

unchanged. Without his hoodie on, she could see the back of his neck, the way his floppy, blond hair curled just above the line of his faded black T-shirt, just over his shoulders.

Silently, she thanked him.

There was at least one good thing here. Just the one.

Whatever came next, she wasn't alone.

CHAPTER 4

“Off!”

Liv jumped. She must have dozed off at some point on the long drive. The side door to the van was open. Chipmunk was standing by it, glaring at her.

Rubbing her eyes, Liv stood up, wobbling a little. They’d been driving so long it felt odd to be stationary. The van was empty; the others had left while Liv was still sleeping. She must have been really out of it not to notice.

As she stepped out of the van, she breathed in the air; it was different from before – dusty and dry. It could make your eyes water and your throat itch at the same time.

Yup, it definitely tasted like Utah.

A soft dawn light clipped the tops of a small cluster of bland box-buildings and asphalt parking lots littered along a solitary road that wound tightly into the foothills of a low, scrubby mountain range. They weren’t in the desolate emptiness of the previous night’s drive, but it could hardly be called civilization, more of a pit stop on the road to nowhere.

Chipmunk led the way into one of the nondescript buildings

under a sign that ominously read: *INTAKE*, with a small logo below it made from the intertwined letters WTC. The building seemed to be empty, lights auto-flickering on as they walked down a long corridor and into a darkened room lined with rows of beige, plastic folding chairs. The two others from the van were already waiting, sitting awkwardly in front of a large screen.

Liv slipped into a seat near the back, grateful for the darkness. Pulling her knees up, she took the opportunity to look around, trying to find clues to her new location. So, was this it? The final destination? It didn't look like a boarding school or rehab, or even a prison. At least not like any she'd seen online.

Shasta was sitting in the front row, slumped low in her seat with her curly red hair falling over her face and her long legs folded awkwardly under her. Her posture hung with dejection and utter misery. She was clearly just as shocked as Liv to find herself sitting in some random office building in the middle of God-knows-where in her pyjamas.

As for the boy, Liv's eyes drifted over to him and lingered. He was at the end of a row, facing forward, one arm draped loosely over the seat back, fingers tapping lightly on it. From where she was sitting, Liv could only see the side of his face: sun-bleached, surfer-dude hair and a tanned jawline with standard-issue freckles. His manner was laid-back and relaxed; his easiness projected an entitled confidence she hadn't felt once in her whole life. Just that small, limited view was enough to tell he was the kind of boy she avoided – they didn't like girls like her, and she didn't like them back. The way of the world, or at least high school.

Liv sighed and looked away.

To be fair, he had given her his hoodie. Fingering the grey sleeve,

she breathed in the faint scent that lingered on it. What was it? Something salty and fresh, like a dip in the sea on a sunny day – like summer.

Okay, so the hoodie was nice. Not that it meant she owed him anything. It was his choice to leave it on the seat for her. She'd give it back as soon as she got the chance. So, no big deal.

Without warning, the lights went out and the big screen lit up.

The logo with the letters WTC appeared at the top of the screen, followed by a series of stock images of smiling parents with fake teens, fake hugging and fake hiking in random picturesque scenery.

An unnervingly calm voice-over kicked in:

Welcome. Today is a new dawn in your journey. Under the guidance of our compassionate and trained staff, you will discover the power of Mother Nature, our ultimate healer. With our help, you will uncover your authentic selves and learn to live, thrive and survive. At our Wilderness Therapy Camp...

Oh no – no way. No, no, no...*Wilderness Therapy Camp?* How could this get any worse? *How?*

Liv felt ill. Her twisted stepmother must have laughed herself sick when she signed the papers. Liv didn't have an outdoorsy bone in her body; she loathed hiking and camping with a passion – and Carianne knew it. So, this was her parting gift to her unwanted stepdaughter, a little kicker of added misery. She could have chosen a residential programme or a school at least. But no. *Camping.*

Fuck.

Liv would have preferred prison.

Academic, supportive, immersive...

The promo video was prattling on and on, throwing out endless big words strung together earnestly over the images of grinning

models. Liv blanked it out. She needed to think.

Okay, so wilderness therapy...what did she know? Most of the troubled-teen industry stuff she'd seen was about scary residential programmes with cavity searches, solitary confinement and horrific punishments. She didn't know too much about wilderness therapy camps – just that some boy at school had been sent to one for smoking weed. He came back six months later and developed a full-blown fentanyl addiction. She vaguely remembered him telling stories about not showering for months and pooping in holes in the ground. That was all she knew.

It was enough.

Clearly, she wasn't the only one freaking out. Shasta stood up abruptly, turned and walked towards the door. But she was pre-empted. The man from the van stepped out of the shadows, blocking the doorway with his immense bulk.

He didn't need to speak. He just needed to smile – a cold, tight smile that reeked of confident domination. The message was clear: *I own you. You're not leaving.*

The girl dropped into the nearest chair with a small whimper, folding in on herself. She looked as broken as Liv was feeling. This was bad, really bad. But what could they do?

Liv's mind was racing. Was any of this legal? She wished she had her phone. She'd ask ChatGPT, "is it legal for your parents to pay to have you forcibly kidnapped from your bed in the middle of the night and dragged to fucking Utah?" But she already knew the answer. Wouldn't the camps have been shut down by now if it wasn't legal? So, it must be legal – even if not technically moral. But that didn't help her case.

Maybe she could ask for a phone call and beg her dad to reconsider.

But she knew she would have to grovel for forgiveness and there were no guarantees he'd give it – not after what she'd done. Especially considering the fact that (despite what she said) she didn't regret her actions one bit. She would do it again in a heartbeat.

No. She remembered her father's face as she was being dragged to the van – the locked-in, hard look in his eyes. He was fully committed to this. He must have been spoon-fed promos like the one on the screen in front of her. He must have liked what he saw. He must have...right? To send her here?

Liv wrapped her arms around herself tightly.

Fuck it. She'd go to hell before she'd beg for her dad's help. That option was off the table.

So, what else? What could she do?

And with the help of nature's loving hand...blah blah blah...find their path back to a healthy, normal childhood.

Cue drippy music. The letters WTC morphed into the words *Where They Care* as the promo wrapped up with an uplifting finale. After a brief pause, a basic list appeared on the screen. This looked businesslike, and a lot more sinister – no touchy-feels here. Liv had the impression that this was the first thing they were seeing that wasn't aimed at their parents.

The list was titled simply: *The Programme*.

Chipmunk moved up next to the screen, a completely unnecessary microphone now clipped to the neck of her yellow T-shirt. She spread her hands wide and paused, looking at her three new victims.

"All right, campers. It's time to get real." Her low voice caught in the mic and resonated around the empty room. Liv winced. "I haven't been officially introduced. My camp-name is Chipmunk.

I've worked for the WTC for seven years now, in five different camp locations, and I will be your head counsellor for the duration of your stay with us. It's my pleasure to welcome y'all to Camp Smiling Skies!" She threw out a little bark of a "whoop" before turning back to the screen and pointing to the list. "Now this is *The Programme*. It's going to be your handbook at camp. You're gonna want to study this list and memorize every word. This is your healing path now. Only when you have completed all four levels of *The Programme*, will you be ready to return to full and meaningful lives at home with your loving families."

Liv shifted uncomfortably in her seat, reluctantly side-eyeing the screen.

THE PROGRAMME

Beginner Level 1: Rock Squirrels

Unlearning bad habits. Re-training the mind.
Silent contemplation.

Intermediate Level 2: Bighorns

Acquiring new skills. Morality re-education.
Service to others.

Intermediate Level 3: Ringtails

Teamwork development. Processing regret.
Atonement.

Advanced Level 4: Condors

Leadership. Promotion of camp values.
Commitment to the new you.

Morality re-education? Atonement? What was this place? A cult? Get your parents to donate the lease to their house or you'll be stuck here for ever. Who would be stupid enough to buy into this shit?

Well – there was Chipmunk. She was reading out the list, word for word, without needing to look at the screen. Clearly, she'd drunk the WTC Kool-Aid.

Liv tried and failed to focus on the words, but a heightened feeling was bubbling inside her head, a pressure in her ears, as she processed the subtext – complete *The Programme* or you won't go home.

Play or stay.

Chipmunk had taken to marching up and down now, thumbs tucked into the belt loops of her trousers. A happy drill sergeant in front of their newest recruits. She pointed at the screen as she passed it.

“Now, you're probably thinking – where am I on this list?” She walked up to the screen and pointed at the wall above it. “You are up here. You aren't even in *The Programme* until you have proven that you are ready to start doing the hard work to fix yourselves. Only when you have shown a willingness to improve will you be eligible to start your journey through recovery.” She lowered her finger to point at Beginner Level 1. “You have to earn the right to call yourself a *Rock Squirrel*.”

Liv snorted, loudly.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Olivia Walker?” Chipmunk said sharply, glaring at her. “Do we have a problem here?” She narrowed her eyes.

“No,” Liv muttered sullenly. “Allergies,” she added, dropping a theatrical sniff onto the end of her sentence and glaring back. “Chipmunk” didn't suit her. She should have called herself

Rattlesnake or Scorpion. Something mean. Liv liked chipmunks.

There was a long awkward moment as Chipmunk stared at Liv, a familiar look of distaste on her square face. Liv recognized that look. She was being put into a box labelled *troublemaker*. After just a few more encounters, the box's lid would be nailed shut and that's who she would become, once again. Liv Walker – the troublemaker.

Whatever.

Chipmunk pointedly turned to address the others.

“Now, I know y'all are feeling pretty confused right now.” She moved in front of the screen, the blue light illuminating the back of her head, creating an ethereal halo around her ski-mask hat. “I know you're scared. I get it. Let me share something with y'all. When I was your age, I had struggles too.” The halo slipped to the side as she turned and started pacing up and down. “Oh yes, you may not think it, seeing me now. But I was lost...messed up in my own head, taking drugs and partying like there were no consequences to my actions. Outta control. *Delinquent* – just like y'all.” She nodded earnestly, looking around at them in the darkness, clearly trying to make that one hit home.

Liv rolled her eyes and shuffled in her chair, tuning out the words. She didn't need to take this on board. Not from some low-life goon who worked in the troubled teen industry – not exactly a life goal.

Chipmunk continued, “The difference between you and me? I had a reason to be like that. I didn't have a family. I spent my childhood moving from foster home to foster home, and I can tell you, my life was hard. So dang hard. Not like y'all with your big homes and rich-ass families. I know your type. Spoiled, entitled brats. Y'all got everything: good food, a roof over your heads, a family. Goddam it – *a family*. A family that loves you so dang

much, they paid more than I earn in a year to send you here – to me. To heal you. Because they care.”

Liv glared at her. They clearly had a very different definition of care. Getting your kid forcibly kidnapped in the middle of the night and paying a huge amount of money to get them out of your lives for as long as possible didn’t seem *caring* to Liv. Caring was holding them on a bad day and loving them, despite themselves. Caring was her mom. Not this.

Chipmunk was still talking. “...and that’s why I’m here – a re-educator for the WTC. Committed to fixing you. Each and every one of you. That is my promise. By the time you have completed *The Programme*, I promise you will be fixed.”

Fixed? Like a broken toy?

Liv bit her lip. A cold, empty feeling was settling inside her. How many times had she felt it this past year? Sitting in the principal’s office, at the dining room table, at the police station. Her father and Carianne talking about her in front of her, like she wasn’t there. A problem child...unacceptable behaviour...consequences... Now here she was in *Utah*, trapped, and it was just more of the same. She’d heard it all before. Too many times.

She was bad – broken.

She needed “fixing”.

She got it.

Shifting in her seat, Liv pointedly faced the wall. Tears were prickling behind her eyes, but she wouldn’t give in to them. She wouldn’t cry. She heard Chipmunk’s words droning on, but didn’t let them in. Something blocked them, pushed them out of her head before they could take hold and cause more damage. She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands, focusing on the sharp pain.

“...and with that, do we have any questions?” At long last, Chipmunk was wrapping up her self-indulgent waffle.

Shasta’s hand went up, tentatively. It was shaking slightly. Chipmunk nodded in her direction.

“Um...so, when can we go home?” The girl’s voice quavered.

“Well, that all depends on you, Miss Shasta. On top of completing your camp activities, you’ll have weekly sessions with a psychologist, who will evaluate your mental state. She’ll provide an assessment for my approval, before you can graduate. But if you want a rough estimate of how long this takes, some of our best campers have completed *The Programme* in as little as three months.”

“*Three months?*” Shasta gave a short whimper of despair and shook her head.

Three months. Liv swallowed down a rising wave of nausea. As little as three months? Oh Jesus. She would miss the rest of junior year. She would miss *too much*. Her grades were bad enough already. There would be no catching up from this. She’d have to retake the whole year...or flunk out of high school. This couldn’t be happening.

“No!” Liv heard her own voice, surprising herself. She was standing now. Something inside warned her to just sit down and shut up, but she couldn’t. She waved her hand towards the others. “We have rights.”

Did they, though? She had no idea. But it was wrong – she knew that much. So wrong. If this were a prison, at least she’d have had a chance to defend herself in court. A chance to tell her side of the story. This just wasn’t fair.

“Olivia Walker.” With scary, speedy efficiency, Chipmunk covered the space between them.

Liv bundled her hands into fists and tucked them under her arms but didn’t sit down. She jutted out her chin defensively. *Bring it.*

“Oh, I know all about you, Miss Olivia Walker. I know everything. I’ve spoken with your family. I’ve seen your arrest record. I know what you did...” Chipmunk shook her head disdainfully, leaving it hanging.

Liv looked down. She knew what she’d done too. And she knew she didn’t look good on paper. Not good at all.

Chipmunk was smiling, too hard. She leaned in and dropped her voice to a gravelly whisper. “I’ve seen all sorts come through *The Programme*. Really rough, nasty pieces of work. But believe me, if I’d been your folks, I would have pressed charges, and you wouldn’t be in a cushy ‘therapy programme’. You’d be in juvenile detention, where you belong...with all the other thieves and criminals.”

“*I’m not a thief!*” Liv’s cheeks flushed.

There was a familiar tightness in her chest. She couldn’t bring herself to look around, to see if the other two were watching this play out – to see what they thought of her.

“Really? Forgive me if I find it hard to believe a known liar.” Chipmunk was smiling, clearly aware of the power her words had. “I have a file full of evidence that says you are trouble, Liv Walker. Bad news. But your antisocial behaviour stops here, young lady. Starting today.”

Liv’s hands were shaking now. With difficulty, she bit her tongue. She couldn’t win this. It wouldn’t help to deny it. No one ever believed her anyway. It would just look pathetic and the one thing she had learned was to not show weakness. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.

“I have a question.” The voice was close behind Liv.

The boy.

While she had been focused on Chipmunk, he must have moved up behind them.

Chipmunk looked equally surprised to see him standing there.

“Yes, Lucas?” She reluctantly shifted her gaze from Liv and turned to him.

“When do we eat?” Lucas smiled a wide, easy smile. He was tall – much taller than Liv had thought. The surfer-dude impression was accurate – athletic, broad shouldered, tanned. He moved closer until he was standing next to Liv. “It’s just I’m hungry as all hell, and I bet you’ve got some good food lined up for us.”

“Of course!” Chipmunk’s full attention was on him now. She smiled back, a girlish smile. “Yes, of course. I know y’all are hungry. I’ve got everything ready. Right after we get you in your uniforms.”

“I knew you’d have us covered.” Lucas moved forward again, stepping between Chipmunk and Liv. “So, what are we talking here? Bacon and eggs? Pancakes? Please don’t say it’s avocado toast. I might cry.”

Chipmunk actually laughed. “Oh, Lucas Cole. Don’t bring a slimy avocado near me! Heck no. I’ve got some real food for y’all, just as soon as the uniforms are sorted.”

“I bet you do. Let’s do this!” Somehow Lucas had shifted the direction of the conversation, inching them both towards the door, away from Liv.

Chipmunk propped the door open. The stony-faced man from the van held out a small pile of white envelopes. She took them and nodded.

“Thank you, Lomax. All right, let’s move it! Lucas, you go with Lomax. Girls with me.”

Lucas went first, walking through the open doorway. For the first time, Liv noticed he had a pronounced limp and bore his weight heavily on his left leg.

As he passed her, Chipmunk counted out three of the envelopes and handed them to him. He stuffed them into his back pocket, then, pausing for just a moment, he looked back across the room, at Liv. She felt the look go right through her. His eyes were unnerving – ice blue and bright – as he coolly took her in for just a second too long. He smiled a sweet dimpled smile before turning to follow Lomax down the hallway.

That look. He knew how to use it. Clearly her first impressions of him had been right. Lucas Cole was a player.

He already had Chipmunk eating out of his hand. And after his little intervention just now, Liv was starting to feel things she didn't want to feel. He was good. Very good.

Liv made a mental note – she was going to have to keep her guard up around Lucas Cole. The boy was dangerous.

CHAPTER 5

“Jewellery,” Chipmunk said flatly, holding a drawstring bag in front of Liv.

They were standing in a restroom where a pile of clothes had been set out on the counter. Shasta had been escorted to a separate room, leaving Liv and Chipmunk alone.

“Jewellery? Seriously?” Liv glared at the bag.

“Oh yes. Camp rules. No jewellery allowed.” Chipmunk nodded at the bag.

This was so stupid. Why couldn’t she wear jewellery for camping? Liv pulled out her earrings angrily and dropped them in the bag. This was so messed up.

“Ahem.” Chipmunk cleared her throat pointedly and nodded at Liv’s hand. Instantly Liv closed her fist protectively.

“No. Not my ring.”

“All jewellery. When you complete *The Programme*, it will be returned to you.”

“Come on. It’s not expensive or anything. I don’t mind if it gets damaged.” The prickling feeling was back behind her eyes, but she angrily pushed it away. No crying. “Please. The ring was my