

# PART ONE

## ***Summer: Nearly Thirty Years Ago***

### **Chapter 1**

He's leaving me! I jolt up inside the cage just as his face disappears through the window. No. No. No. He can't leave me. I scramble out, my legs weak and wobbly from the hours or days we've spent in lock-up. She's gonna be so mad!

I scramble to get to the box he has pushed up under the window, banging my shin against the corner. I bite my lip to stay quiet. He's leaving me!

I pull up, and I see him running across the yard. I want to call out, but then she may hear, and we'd both be in trouble. So I don't.

I pull up and push my shoulders out through the open window. I'm falling, and I hit the ground with a thud. All the air whooshes out of me, and I gasp like a fish out of water. When I can breathe again, I get up and start to run across the back yard, tucking tight into myself so I am small, and if Mama or Dr. Curtis look out, they maybe won't see me. Dr. Curtis lives in the house next door, and I'm even more scared that he will see me. He doesn't like me; he only likes Slim. We were in the cage because of something Slim did to Dr. Curtis, but he wouldn't tell me what. He is a long way ahead of me, not looking back. His long legs stretch out in front of him and behind him, and he is barely touching the ground. He is almost to the trees. Then I will lose him. Fear rises, and I stumble but keep running.

I want to call out, but I don't because she might hear me, and then we would be in trouble—because we are outside and we're not supposed to be outside during the day. I pump my legs as fast as I can, trying to find flight the way he does. I have to catch him, but my legs feel weak, and I can't run as fast as he can.

He is passing into the trees, eaten by the shadows. I can't see him anymore, and I don't know what to do. I am scared to go into the woods alone, and how will I know which way he has gone? Should I go back to the trailer and get back into my cage? She's gonna be so mad! Dr. Curtis will kick us out if he knows we've been outside. He's only letting us stay because Mama promised we'd stay out of sight. Dr. Curtis doesn't like children, Mama says. That why she's training Slim to be a man.

I stop just at the edge of the trees, looking into the dark shadows. My feet prance ... Where is he?

I call out in a loud whisper, "Slim!" He used to have another name, but we haven't used it in so long that I don't remember what it was. It's just like everybody calls me Baby, but I think my name is really Shiloh. Slim doesn't answer, and I spin in a circle, glancing back at the trailer, seeing the window high up on the side. There is no way I could get back up and through it. My legs buckle at the thought of going to the front door and interrupting Mama. A man is in the house, and Mama

doesn't like it when the men see us—it's one of the rules. Only Dr. Curtis can know we are here. I sprawl on the ground, trying to flatten myself, so I will only look like a pile of dirt if she looks out and sees me.

I sob, but no tears flood past my crusty lashes.

I am going to die.

Hands lift me around my waist, and I ball myself inward, expecting the smack that I know is coming. She has seen.

It's Slim. He hasn't left me; he has come back for me. I spring up and wrap my legs around his waist, like a monkey. I bury my face in his neck.

We are out of the yard and into the shadows of the trees. I know because all the warmth is gone. He carries me, stepping through bushes. The brambles scrape against my bare legs and make them bleed.

He stops when we are well into the shadow. "You have to walk." He pushes against my hips, and I release my hold on him and slide down the length of his body, careful not to touch the long painful-looking welt going down his arm, until I am on my own feet. "You shouldn't have come. You're gonna slow me down, and then we'll get caught."

He turns and walks away from me, and I don't say anything, just run to keep up with him. I don't want him to leave me behind here; then the wolves would eat me. Mama says there are bears out here, too . . . and tigers. Panic rises, and I glance at the trees around me, looking for glowing eyes. I scrape my bare foot against a rock and hop on the other one, unwilling to stop. I run. Keeping my eyes on his back, I climb over a fallen tree that he only had to step over.

We finally stop, when Slim thinks we have gone far enough that they won't find us. He drops to his knees and cups his hand in the stream, drinking the water in great gulps.

I do the same, squatting beside him. It is only then that I know how thirsty I am, how empty my stomach is. I drink, and when I feel my stomach stretching against the water, I splash some on my face, washing away the crust from my lashes.

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know," he says, finally looking at me squatting beside him. "I wish you hadn't come."

I shrug my shoulders and look away from him. I am used to never doing the right thing.

Dirt and blood crust my feet. An angry red scratch weeps a thin stream.

We are on the move again, and I have to keep up or he will leave me behind. He is angry, and I'm scared, because sometimes when he is angry, he hits me. Sometimes he does other stuff, even if he says it's training.

But I won't go back. She will be so lonely without us. Guilt climbs from my ankles to my chest, and my heart squeezes. I make some sound, and his head ratchets around, scanning the woods, but then he jerks forward again, saying something under his breath. He is very angry.

I run behind him keeping my mouth quiet, because, otherwise, he'll stop and push me down and run on without me, and then the wolves or bears or tigers will eat me. We run, and we run.

My stomach is churning, angry as the water sloshes. It rumbles, and when I can't run anymore, I stop, putting my hands on my knees, bending over, trying to catch my breath. All the water I drank

at the stream comes rushing from my mouth, splattering on the leaves and dirt, making a slurry of mud.

A chill runs through my body, and my legs feel heavy. I'm afraid I won't be able to lift them again. It's cold, but only because we're not inside anymore and I don't have my blanket. I forgot my blanket. What am I gonna do without my blanket?

When I look up, I can't see him; he is gone.

"Come on!" I hear him hissing ahead of me. "I'll kill you if you get me caught," he says, mumbling under his breath, and I stumble forward, my arms outstretched in the dark.

I finally find him at in a ditch between the woods and the empty road. "We made it," I whisper.

My brother nods, and I can tell he is trying to figure out what we should do next.

Lights flare in the distance, and we watch as a lone car travels toward us and then past. I'm happy to be squatting beside him, not to be moving. I am so tired from the run through the woods.

We wait, our breath slowing, becoming lighter and less strained.

Another car comes from the other direction, and we watch it pass.

"What are we going to do?" I whisper.

"We're going to catch one of those cars and make them take us away."

I nod.

Minutes pass before we see another car, and when it gets close enough, Slim stands up from the ditch and starts waving his arms.

My heart jolts in my chest as the car slows.

"No!" I call because the light is bright in his eyes. He cannot see the car.

He glances back to me. The car comes to a stop and the passenger-side door opens.

"I reckon you got your sister hidden back there somewhere?"

Slim's shoulders slump and he turns to run. Dr. Curtis is out of the car and takes three long steps toward my brother, catching him by the length of his hair, drawing him back and to his knees. Slim is crying.

"Baby," she calls from inside the car. "Come on, Baby. It is time to go home." She is so pretty, sitting in the glow of the car. The car looks so safe and quiet.

I stand up from where I am crouched in the ditch, pulled by an invisible thread.