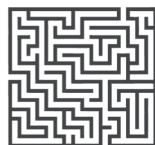


CHAPTER 3



I *'m never getting out of here.*

Alexis slid down the stone wall to the concrete floor and hugged her knees to her chest. For the first time in days, she'd gotten a signal—only for her phone to die.

For all she knew, her brother was in Myanmar like he'd planned. She should have gone with him. Shoulda, coulda, woulda ... Too late for regrets.

I wanted to prove I could do this on my own.

Look where she'd ended up.

Another chill shook her until her teeth hurt. Colder than she'd ever been in her life. She clutched the threadbare blanket around her shoulders, and though exhausted to the point of nausea, forced her heavy eyelids to remain open.

How could anyone sleep in this place?

The last time she'd closed her eyes, she'd woken up here. At least, that's what she thought had happened. She remembered a hallway, and a staircase, and nothing else.

The feeling of being watched stole over her. She lifted her weary eyes to the camera in the corner.

"I know you're there. I know you're watching."

She licked her dry, cracked lips and tried to swallow. “My canteen is empty.”

Dim lights flickered in medieval-style iron brackets, bright enough to hold back total despair. Rusty chains dangled from the stone walls scrawled with chalk markings—foreign scripts, mathematical calculations, and architectural schematics. Shallow puddles pocked the cracked floor. The air reeked of must, mold, and ... something far worse.

A loud creak split the silence. A slender silhouette filled the doorframe, backlit by a harsh glow, her long, dark hair spilling to her waist.

Alexis squinted blurry eyes against the brightness. “Please let me go. Why are you doing this to me?”

The woman stared. Unmoving. Unblinking. Her posture remained stiff, like a statue. Did she feel any emotions at all?

Without a word, she placed a tray and a canteen on the floor, then slipped out. The lock clicked.

A pleasant aroma drifted through the stale air. At least she wouldn’t starve.

Alexis scrambled up the stairs on hands and knees. Two steaming biscuits waited on a flimsy paper plate. Her stomach growled, and she seized the first biscuit, tearing into it like a starving animal. The warmth. The softness. Sheer heaven.

When the worst of her hunger dulled, she slipped the second biscuit into her skirt pocket. Even stale, it would be a treasure later. Who knew when food would come again ... or if she’d ever be free again?

Lord, please let him find me ... before it’s too late.