

Caged in Darkness

J.D. Stroube

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my Father, who taught me that no matter how many times life beats me down; I can rely on him to pick me up. To my Husband, who is unfailingly patient with my peculiarities, and who pushes me to succeed at every step I take. I love you both. To my Papa, for being the greatest Grandpa I could have ever wished for. You're still alive in my memories and I miss you every day. I would also like to dedicate this book to my cats, who spent endless hours curled up with me on my rocking chair, as I wrote this. Their company is a safety blanket for my soul and my family is the rock that keeps me grounded.

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PROLOGUE

Sludge caked my bare feet and slowed my passage. Nature hindered my flight, as though wanting me to turn back; to go to *him*. It had turned hostile. The stillness that calmed me during sleepless nights, the breeze that cooled my angry flesh, and the moon that guarded against nightmares were now my enemies.

My sanctuary no longer comforted me. It was a predator and I its prey. My heartbeat broke its ordinary rhythm and cried in its claustrophobic state. My lungs smothered the worn organ, utterly failing to provide oxygen as I flew through the forest. I refused to stop even though my veins melted away to acidic fire. I needed freedom.

My dress strap caught on a branch and was torn free. I felt a twinge of pain as the edge pressed into my shoulder and drew blood. Chaotic laughter trailed behind me. It turned the ageless trees into a bitter menace. They loomed around me to conceal *him*. Branches tore again at my skin in an effort to bind me, while weeds sought to shackle my ankles. The pain they caused was minor when compared to the searing inferno at my core. I clawed through the barriers, crying out when I came to a dead end.

Towering rocks blocked my passage and *he* was gaining ground. I made an attempt to pull myself over the stone barricade, but they sliced through my palms. I desperately tried to find leverage, but I was winded and my strength had left me.

My mind was betraying me; my natural instincts at war with my purpose. My body and soul screamed for survival. Though it wasn't mine I was fighting for...

1: SAVANNAH'S JOURNAL

First entry: Recounting my past

I would love to say my life in Meadow Falls was blissfully ordinary, but that would be a lie. I yearned to wake in the morning excited for the day to begin, instead of waiting for it to end. It is said that you can't miss what you've never had, but I think that is what people say to make themselves feel less guilty about their own happiness. Personally, I conform to the saying "the grass is always greener on the other side." The grass on my side is stale and brown with patches of dirt that have never seen the sun.

There are people in the world, who are just *wrong*, and then there are the masses that are *right*, or at the very least they lie in between. I do not belong to any group. I don't exist. It's not that I have no substance; I have a body like everyone else. I can feel the fire when it burns against my skin, the rain when it caresses my face and the breeze as it fingers my hair. I am just empty, *inside*.

How does someone's psychological makeup create the person they become? Why did I have to be barren of emotion? Why did my parents conceive a child when they never should have? I have yet to find a book that can explain to me, why I picked the short straw. How does fate decide who will be given a life of privilege, against the child

who must scavenge through the garbage to find their weekly dinner? Why couldn't I have won the celestial lottery and been given an entirely different life?

The world is not fair. If it were, I would have been given a choice on the life I would lead. Life is supposedly filled with paths that enable unlimited choices. That is a blatant lie. No one has freewill until they are an adult, and by then the choices that were made for them have already set them on a passage that limits the choices they have yet to make. Adults are merely given the illusion of free will. The course of their lives has a set destination, which was dictated by their previous experiences and the foundation their parents built for them. Although, some might say that is just my excuse to ignore the person I have become.

I have rules that govern my life, which have kept me from being the type of person that harms others. They are numerous and often overwhelming, but there is one rule that supersedes all others, which is to never become a *monster*. The day I look in the mirror and see a monster, is the day I give up my struggle to survive.

I prefer to keep to the fringes and watch while others attempt to make connections. The fewer I have, the easier life is. I have perfected the art of matching the emotions of others, but always wearing a mask is tedious. Some relations were chosen for me; my guardian, Maye and her foster son, Ash. There is only one link I chose, and her name is Willow.

I saw Willow be beaten down by society and forced into the same shadows that I inflicted on myself. I loved the shadows; the feel of them slithering over my body and curling around my limbs was comforting. Willow hated them. She longed for the light, but was only allowed to touch the fringes.

I was ten years old, when I made the decision to become her friend. At first, I was afraid that she would ask questions about *before*, but she never did. Eight years later she has never asked and I have never offered. She seemed to naturally understand that I needed a portion of my life to remain separate from my past.

I think of my childhood in two separate stages: the time before I was safe and the time after. I didn't always live with Maye. I was born with a mother and father. It wasn't until I was a bit older that I understood my parents were different from other parents. Other children did not need to raise their hand to ask permission to talk. They were not locked in a cage to keep from complicating their parents' lives. They were given typical punishments, such as being grounded or having a time out. Other children did not have parents who practiced the dark arts.

My parents were raised in a community of witches. The coven did not practice the dark arts, and instead used their gifts to the benefit of others. My parents were inordinately powerful witches, but were not satisfied with the power they had been gifted. The more they used their gift, the more addictive the magic became. They were similar to drug addicts. They built up a tolerance to their particular drug, and now required more power to sate their cravings. My parents were drawn to the dark arts to sate their addictions. They didn't seem to mind that black magic comes with a price.

When the community discovered my parents' use of the dark arts, they were repulsed and banished them. They firmly removed my parents from influencing the other members of the coven, but didn't realize my mother was pregnant with a daughter.

Those who practice black magic are not always evil. Usually, dark witches fall into shades of gray. However, my parents were firmly grounded at the darkest end of the

spectrum. Twice a week, until I was nine years old, I witnessed my parents sacrifice the lives of innocents. Their screams would echo through the house and reverberate against my eardrums until my mind would fracture. With each fracture I lost a piece of my soul until I became lost and empty inside.

When my parents were without an innocent to sacrifice, they spent their time finding other ways to entertain themselves, which usually included focusing their powers on me. Living energy would emerge from their flesh and envelope them in a haze of darkness. When they focused the mist on me, the evil would gather around until it found a fissure to wither through. It would invade my body and corrupt any piece it could find that was still pure. When the darkness dispensed itself from my pores, it would take that bit of innocence with it. My soul screamed at the loss as it was torn from me.

When I was nine, my parents made a mistake. They allowed me out of my cage. Nine years of being subjected to their never ending abuse had turned me into a feral being. Luckily, my intelligence was not hindered by my feral nature. My parents were distracted when they released me from my cage to bathe. The smell emanating from their neglect had become obnoxious.

I learned years before that fighting them was senseless. They thought me meek and obedient. *I wasn't*. When my mother shoved me into the bathroom, I landed on my side and allowed a breath of pain to escape. I knew that was what she was waiting for. She enjoyed my pain; monsters usually do. The bathroom on the main floor had a small delicate window in the shower stall. It was bubbled glass, which ordinarily provided privacy, but now provided my escape. My parents were about to perform one of their

rituals, and I knew from experience that this one was loud. The house was enspelled to contain sounds, but that didn't stop the noise from spreading to every corner within it.

This was my chance. I turned the water to full and I examined the metal towel bar. Over the years I loosened it, in expectation that I might use it to escape. Grabbing hold of the toilet plunger to use as leverage, I managed to pull the bar loose. It didn't take long to burst through the glass, and use a towel to brush away the stray pieces that remained.

The opening was petite, but so was my frame. Nine years of neglect and malnourishment had ensured I would be tiny. I grasped the edges of the frame and pulled myself through. It was difficult. I made it through the window by pure determination.

My feet hit the ground and I tore across the grass. I was surrounded by homes, streets and signs. I didn't understand this world. It was loud, due to a lifetime of sensory deprivation. The sound of cars flying through intersections and children screaming as they played in the street disoriented me. I covered my ears in a halfhearted attempt to block out the unknown. My mind was swallowed by the rush of senses I was experiencing.

I knew the name of the village my parents grew up in, and had seen a picture of their old coven. My escape plan was limited. How would I find freedom in an unfamiliar world? Who would help me? I was quickly realizing that my escape was short sighted

I knew I needed to make a decision. My parents were distracted by their ritual, but I didn't know how long that would last. I looked in all directions, and noticed a woman loading her trunk with some luggage. There was barely enough room left for me to fit, if I squeezed into a tight ball. I waited until the woman went back into her house, ran over to the open trunk, and squeezed my small frame into the back beneath a blanket.

I tried not to panic at the length of time I was entombed within the trunk. I could hear each car that passed, faint country music from the radio, and occasional noises I didn't recognize. The trunk was filled with a pungent odor: a cross between stale bread and mildew. Eventually, the car came to a stop. I held my breath as the trunk opened. The woman let out a squeal when she saw me, and then a sigh when she realized I wasn't a threat. It took her a few minutes to take in my appearance, before she raised her hand to her mouth.

A building beside a large highway lay behind the woman. Benches danced around the building beneath the sparse trees, and cement walkways led to a set of doors. A sign next to the walkway, directly behind the woman, said "Rest Stop".

"I need to get to a place called Meadow Falls." I rarely had opportunity to speak, and wasn't sure how to greet a stranger, let alone a woman who unknowingly aided my escape.

"Little one, what happened to you? Where are your parents? Why are you in my car? Did someone hurt you?" She looked around at the only other people near the rest stop, and lowered her voice. "Do you know your home phone number or address?"

The woman had kind eyes, but she was overwhelming me. Her questions were stringing together and I couldn't process them. My hands lifted to cover my eyes from the blinding sun. My parents rarely allowed bright lights within our home, and the sun was like needles in my corneas. I swung my feet over to sit on the edge of the trunk and considered what to say.

"I needed to escape them. My parents are..." I paused, swallowed, and began again. "I need to get to my other family. I didn't know what else to do." I paused, while I

waited for her to say she was going to call my parents, but she had a knowing look in her eyes.

She sighed. "What's your name?"

I wasn't sure if I should give her my real name, but decided she couldn't do much with a first name. "Savannah."

I knew what she saw when she looked at me. I was nothing like my name. Savannah sounds exotic, beautiful and special. I was a nine year old child, who looked closer to seven years old. I had long ratted hair that hung in clumps down to my hips. It was impossible for her to tell the color of my hair with the grime that coated it. I wasn't even sure I knew what color it was. I knew that the woman saw a child, who looked closer to a skeleton with a layer of skin. My eyes were bruised, lips cracked, and my cheeks were sunken. The only redeemable trait, that made me look more than a pile of rags, was my liquid silver eyes ringed with violet.

In that moment, with this kind woman framed by the sun's rays, I felt that my life could someday be different. That it was possible for a malnourished waif to turn into someone completely ordinary.

2: ESCAPE

Second Entry: My Escape

The kind woman, who unknowingly aided in my escape, dropped me off outside of the town Meadow Falls. She tried to convince me that I was far too young to be on my own, but seemed a bit relieved to have me off of her hands.

I stared down the stone road that led into town. I could see lights in the distance, but I had no idea what waited for me at the end of this path. As I walked, the sky blanketed over into a dark indigo mist, while the breeze became swift; it was pulling me towards the town. If the town were a black hole, I was the helpless star being sucked into oblivion. It was an oblivion I craved.

These were people who had stood against the wrongness that my parents represented. For me, this town represented an entire lifetime or a swift death. I could not go back. I could not be the frightened child chained to a cage of solitude. I needed freedom. I needed a home. Most of all, I need to know what safety felt like.

I came to the edge of the town. It was dark, except for the lamp posts guarding the road and a few lights that had yet to be extinguished. It was a secluded town that was much smaller than I expected. It was nestled within thick woods, housed a handful of residences, and an equal number of shops. The shops were not the sort that was expected

in a small town, but instead had signs that said “Herbs and More” or “The Art of Divination.”

In the center of the town was an enormous circle. The circle embraced the wildlife and yet seemed to remain apart from it all. Stone boulders, large enough for an adult to sit on, rested at five points on the outside edge of the circle. Dark black stones acted as a conduit between the boulders. My knowledge of performing rituals was limited, but I knew more than most about watching them. The stone boulders would act as the five points of the pentacle, which was a five pointed star within a circle. The circle is a crucial tool for a witch, because it acts as a spiritual protection when witches are at their most vulnerable.

In the middle of the casting circle was an altar. My parents’ had an altar, though it was very different from this one. My parents’ altar was dark like their souls. They kept a bowl filled with the blood of the innocents they had sacrificed, an athame to use as their sacrificial tool, and a dark black rose that bloomed eternal. These items were placed on a small table covered with a black cloth. The cloth served a separate purpose; to hide a compartment. In that tiny chamber, where they kept their grimoire and other assorted items they deemed important.

The altar that this town kept was the polar opposite of my parents’ altar. This altar was as large as a coffee table, but stood much higher. It didn’t make me feel as though spiders were crawling across my skin. This altar didn’t make me feel as though evil whispers surrounded me.

The town altar was covered by an ivory cloth. On the cloth stood a slightly tarnished copper goblet with a bright sapphire stone imbedded in its spine. The athame

was unmarred silver; the divination bowl was made of wood and did not have any contents that I could see. Still, it was dark and I knew I would see much more when the sun chased away the demons that were tracking and burrowing their way into my soul.

Where did I go from here? I didn't know who I was looking for or even if they would help me. It was obvious by the dispelled lights that most of the houses were not an option. Past the stores lay three houses with lights still on. The first house was a one story ranch styled home in a sky blue shade with a stone porch. The second house was two stories, and had a light on in one of the upper windows. This suggested to me that the person was about to sleep. The third house was much bigger than the others in the tiny town. It looked as though it were the grandfather of houses; towering over the others and insisting on their obedience, while at the same time it seemed to tilt towards them to offer comfort. This house was one of protection. It spoke to me as it lurked in the corner, beckoning for me to approach.

I inched towards the grandfather house at a snail's pace. My own emotions were bombarding me, smothering me in their intensity. Why would these people help someone they didn't even know? Why would they risk their lives against two powerful dark witches?

I was almost to the door when I began to inch backwards. I wasn't looking where I stepped and my ankle caught on something near the path, but hidden within the grass. I heard more than felt the crack, and it evicted a strangled cry of alarm. I tried to use my hand to cover my mouth, but the tears began streaming down my face leaving dirt tracks that carved out forking paths. When the pain tore through my ankle, I fell to the ground. I

attempted to stand, but each time I put pressure on my right foot, lightning streaked through my nerves and up to my knee.

As I focused on trying to stand, the porch light came on. The glow shoved away the shadows to reveal a small garden, and the sprinkler that caused my accident. An elderly woman stepped out the door and onto the porch. She hobbled down the stairs and over to where I was cowering. Upon seeing my tear stricken face, and the way I was holding my ankle, she immediately swept into action.

“Ash, get down here!” She shouted through the open doorway. In a matter of minutes, a boy came stumbling through the doorway with a groggy expression on his face and came to a halt.

“Whoa, what happened here?” His brows furrowed in confusion, as he peered around the woman’s broad backside.

“Well, don’t just stand there! The girl is hurt. Help me get her inside.” As the woman said this she pushed upwards from the ground in a pained movement and gently pushed Ash towards me.

When his arms cradled me against his body, I ceased breathing. My vision turned black, and I began to struggle. I couldn’t concentrate on my surroundings or the rumbling from his chest. I could only see the evil that had invaded my body. I could see it sweeping over my hands to grow against his chest; it climbing towards his face to settle in his eyes and frame them with black. I didn’t want to taint him. I didn’t want to allow my parents darkness to touch anyone else. What had I been thinking? I began to whimper. I knew that what I was seeing was a hallucination, because my parents’ evil

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