

Savage Run

Book 1

E. J. Squires

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For my children.
May freedom and love
be the inspiration behind
every choice.

Chapter 1

Biking up the same mile-and-a-half long asphalt hill is so much harder when I know that at the end of the journey I'll either be an outlaw, or I'll be dead.

Rippling wind tugs at my black uniform as I push the pedals on my bike, one after another. The rhythm of the squeaky, swooshing sound is as familiar as the fragrance of the seemingly never-ending lavender field to my right—the purple meadow that divides the Masters' estates from the Laborers' slum: the slum where I was born, the slum where I live, the slum I hope to escape from soon.

I glance down at the prescription bag lying in the rusty basket attached to the steering wheel. The bag is supposed to hide my father's kitchen knife, but it has shifted and catches the sunlight, winking at me from the bottom. After a quick scan of my surroundings to confirm that no one is watching, I reach down and readjust the bag over the blade. And just in case, I glance over my shoulder to make sure the change of clothes is still attached to the back railing of my bike. It is.

Zooming up the wide, cracked road, I pass countless Laborers—nameless, faceless shadows—scurrying to their Masters in the mountains or toward the factories and fields. The muted, gray line of men, women, and children winds toward Mount Zalo, and will eventually

disintegrate as each person disappears into the white, gated estates they are assigned to. This long walk is the extent of a Laborer's freedom. Most are forbidden to go anywhere without their Masters—unless they are traveling to or from work, before dawn—after sunset.

I pass a few young men, guys I thought for sure would have signed up for the Savage Run, a grueling, new obstacle course program that for the first time in history, allows inferior class teenage boys to demonstrate their worthiness to become Masters.

As I continue to bike ahead, I see my best friend's mother, Ruth. Since Gemma left last year, Ruth has diminished into a walking skeleton. Not that she ever had any extra weight on her anyway. All Laborers pretty much have the same build with sunken cheeks and concave bellies grumbling on and on because the measly amount of food we're rationed could never be enough. But unlike all the other Laborer women, Ruth's hair is still short—even after a year—an indication that she's been in trouble with the law. Normally I welcome any meeting with her, but because of where I'm headed, and because of what I'm about to do, not so much today. Yet gliding right past her and pretending not to see her is just not right, no matter what. Not after what she's done for me.

I slow my bike as I approach her and say, “Nice day for a walk.”

“Ah, good morning, Heidi. You already running deliveries?”

I eye the bag in the basket to make sure the blade isn’t showing again. “Yes, I’m on my fifth one.”

“Where are you headed?” Ruth smiles, and the sides of her brown eyes crease like the wrinkles on a scrunched up paper bag.

Should I lie to save her feelings? I decide on the truth. “To Master Douglas.”

“Ah...” The edges of her lips rise upward a little, but the rest of her face is like a dry ocean.

I should have lied.

“Tell Gemma I say...hello.” Her words carry the weight of our late-night conversations. But rehashing how her only daughter serves a Master who is rumored to have beaten two of his Laborers to death won’t help. I wish I could tell Ruth what I’m really doing—what I’ve been obsessing about for months. And I would if I knew I could pull it off. If I could look her in the eyes and promise her nothing would happen to her Gemma. But I can’t.

“I will.” Then I quickly change the subject. “So, did you see anyone heading toward Culmination this morning?” President Volkov decreed today to be Savage Run registration day, a day off for male Laborers and Advisors ages

thirteen through seventeen. “To give the least of us a chance at liberty.” I thought for sure every Laborer who fit into those categories would jump on the opportunity. As I left, I didn’t see a single soul do anything other than depart their squat, aluminum trailers and join in the march.

“No. Trusting President Volkov’s words is like digging your grave with three sticks of dynamite.”

My stomach sinks. A lot. “Well, I should get going so I won’t be late.”

“It was good to see you, Heidi.”

“You, too,” I reply with a smile.

On my way to the mountains, I pass the tail end of the Laborers’ sector. In front of our sector there are light waves that everyone calls “the veil.” They hide our less than aesthetically pleasing buildings from the Master side of town. It would be a shame to ruin their view. I can’t see it from here because of the veil, but each ten by twenty, squat aluminum trailer is stashed on top of another, three high, and side-by-side, fifteen long. When they built our housing, each trailer was intended to house one family. Now, two families occupy most trailers, though a few of us are lucky and don’t have to share. Outside of work we spend our free time around campfires preparing lackluster meals or doing laundry. If we once in a while manage to have a few moments

for ourselves, we huddle together around bonfires or visit with neighbors.

I approach downtown and ride by the Colosseum where many of the national sporting events are held. The cultural hub of Newland, Culmination is one of the country's most esteemed towns and is the home of the Porto Tower—the tallest building in the world. It's a town brimming with sculptures, mosaics, paintings, museums, and art academies, and it's even rumored that the ancient statue of David and the Mona Lisa are kept beneath the Culmination Historical Museum. In Newland's early years, many world-renowned architects and artists settled in Culmination, drawn here by President Volkov's offer of immediate Master status by President Volkov Sr., and the dramatic countryside. Now a little Rome, Culmination is the place to send your Master kid for an education in art.

As I let my bike roll to a stop a generous distance away from Master Douglas's gate, the wind whistles through the trees, sprinkling some of the leftover raindrops on my hands and face. I've been here hundreds of times before to deliver medicine, but I have to admit that my hands have never shaken so much that I had to white-knuckle the handlebars just to steady them. Dare I go through with my plan?

Lifting my gaze, I see the ivory stonewall that encases the white, oval mansion. The abode itself is at least fifty times larger than the trailer my father and I share, with six thick marble columns and more floor-to-ceiling windows than I would ever want to clean. Poor Gemma.

Most girls my age are already stuck inside a mansion similar to this one—cleaning, cooking, serving, or washing clothes. But since my father worked the majority of his life as a pastor at Culmination Hospital, he submitted my name, hoping I would qualify as one of their prescription couriers. And I did. I quite enjoy my work. Although, I don't like being under my father's scrutinizing eye. He reminds me almost daily that I should abstain from all appearances of evil. Whatever that means. As Laborers, my father and I are fortunate to have such great jobs since working in the oil rigs off the coasts, sorting trash, harvesting fruits and vegetables, or laboring in sweatshops are the norm.

Venturing into the woods with my rusty three-speed, my feet sink into the damp forest floor. The scent of the sodden, musty earth rises into my nostrils, and the earthy fragrance reminds me of when Gemma and I used to hang out in the woods behind our lane, commiserating about how unfair life is for Laborers. Her spontaneous laughter would vibrate off the sidings and bring life to all of the rusty trailers on our street. It's

been almost a year since Gemma received her vocation, since I heard her laughter—that free and careless sound. Now, whenever I see her, her eyes are like dead stars.

I never truly questioned my obligation to submit myself into the service of a Master—it's a Laborer's place, my God-given contribution to society. My father has pounded this fact into me before I can remember. However, when I came here a couple of months ago and saw Gemma's eye crusted with blood and swollen shut, everything I so blindly believed, lived, and trusted—the entire framework of our society—all came tumbling down at once.

I sneak around the towering wall and all the way to the back of the Douglas household. Carefully, I slip my sandals in my bike's basket for easy access just in case I have to make a run for it. And before I proceed, I glimpse at the knife and the tan plastic bag to ensure they are still there. They are.

Grabbing onto the lowest branch, I press my feet against the trunk, hoist myself up, and climb high enough that I can glimpse into the backyard. I see Master Douglas sitting outside on a garden couch, wearing a black silk robe over red silk pajamas. He's drinking beer and reading the newspaper. The man is well known and highly respected in Culmination, and from his charm and charisma, and the fact that his name is on the

majority of art museum contributor plaques, it's not hard to see why. But even without considering the rumors I've heard, there's just something about being around him—or even just thinking about him—that makes my skin crawl.

I find a wide spot on one of the thick, lower branches and straddle it. Still keeping Master Douglas within eyesight, I see him tearing out a Savage Run advertisement from the newspaper. He rips it to shreds and scatters the pieces so they fall to the white marble floor. I've talked to a few Masters about the Savage Run program and it's funny how all of them insisted that the survival of our nation depended upon individuals remaining in their class of birth. They couldn't understand what President Volkov was thinking creating a program that made it possible for inferior class citizens to receive Master status.

My chest squeezes when I see Gemma come out with a silver tray filled with all sorts of heavenly pastries. She's wearing a ruffled, peach, above-the-knee length dress that has a low neck, showing off her cleavage. Riding around town, I see more and more Laborers wearing fine clothing. And it's funny how in the past few years, it has almost become a competition among Masters to see who can have the prettiest and most well-dressed Laborer. A Laborer doesn't get to keep the clothing, but changes into it when arriving at their Master's and leaves it when they

head home. Some Laborers, like Gemma, are forced to live with their Master and wear whatever they're told whenever they're told.

Gemma approaches Master Douglas with slumped shoulders and her gaze is down, as if she can't take a breath. Seeing how she has turned into one of these nameless, faceless shadows makes me want to scream at the man.

"What took you so long?" Master Douglas yells. She opens her mouth to answer, but a gust of wind rustles the leaves above my head, overpowering her reply. He hits the tray out of her hands so it lands on the ground with a crash.

My stomach clenches with anger.

He demands that she clean it up and tells her to go get another platter with the crumpets. Gemma apologizes, cleans up the mess, and scurries back inside the mansion, her face as ashen as the scattered clouds above.

Back when Gemma found out who she was being sent to work for, we joked that if things got too bad, we'd run away and somehow miraculously gain our freedom. I never dreamed that one day I'd actually find a way to make it happen.

It's not only Gemma who needs to get away, though. This morning my father woke me, shouting from the living area, asking where his lazy good-for-nothing daughter was. As I served him breakfast, he continued to lecture me about

how it's not like I can skip a day's worth of work and sign up for the Savage Run or anything. I'm just a girl—the wrong gender. And besides, the hospital needed me to make an “emergency” prescription delivery to Master Douglas by 7:00 a.m. Yelling after me as I left, he said he'd pray that I'd swiftly repent of my irresponsible ways.

Like my father, Gemma has no clue about my plan, and I'm not even sure she'll go for it—it's kind of like jumping from the lion's den into the valley of death. However, being dead can't possibly be worse than enduring the life I'm living now, or the life I'll soon be forced to live. When I turn eighteen next week, I'll be assigned to my own Master. My father says he'll miss me, though he won't miss having another mouth to feed. What he'll soon realize is that he doesn't even have to wait until next week to be rid of me. I should be well on my way when he finds the note I left under my pillow, explaining that I won't be returning home.

Birds sing freely around me as I wait for Master Douglas to finish pigging out on the sausages. I peruse the forest, making sure no one's around. If caught straying from my responsibilities, I'd receive a harsh punishment like solitary confinement or beatings. Though these types of reprimands are fairly common, they're still dreaded among Laborers. Not to mention degrading. But occasionally there's a

Laborer who for whatever reason openly defies their Master or tries to run away. In those instances, the retribution is much worse. It's always a heavy day when we're forced to Skull Hill to watch a beheading.

Sitting here is awkward and my leg is starting to tingle. I shift a little to get comfortable and to prevent it from going completely numb. I peer over the wall again, but still no Gemma. What could possibly be taking her so long? Doesn't she know that Master Douglas will ream her out again if she doesn't hurry? And the longer she takes, the more likely it is that my plan will fall completely apart. Finally, Gemma comes out with a new tray overflowing with pastries and crumpets and sets it on the marble table. How much breakfast does the man need? Even for a Master, he has an exquisite taste for gluttony.

From studying Master Douglas' routine, I've figured that the best time to get Gemma and make a run for it is right after he leaves for his hour-long walk. Around that time, the front gates will be left open for about ten minutes to let in a shipment of goods. The Unifer guarding the gates will be busy with the delivery and will take time to chat with the delivery driver. With a little luck, Gemma and I will slip behind the truck unnoticed.

I lean my head back onto the tree trunk, and let out a soundless sigh. This is taking way too

long. Then suddenly, a lighthearted laugh catches my attention. I peek into the courtyard and see Master Douglas' seven-year-old daughter hopping onto his lap and planting a kiss on his pudgy cheek. She's always smiling and laughing, especially around him.

"Hi, sweetheart." His black, round eyes fill with adoring love for the child. "Will you be coming with me this morning to go horseback riding?"

"Not today, Dada," she says, hanging on his neck and stroking his graying hair. "I want to go swimming."

"Swimming?"

"It's so hot, and Gemma promised she'd take me."

"She did, did she?" He twirls her golden braid around his finger, while staring at Gemma. "I'll make sure I tell Gemma that she needs to take extra good care of you."

"See you later, Dada." She slides off his lap, and skips back into the house.

Master Douglas gulps the rest of his beer, pushes his palms against the armrests, and rises to his feet. He flicks his wrist toward Gemma. "Get lost!"

Gemma bends her head lower, and without a sound, she shuffles back into the house.

Heading inside, Master Douglas lets out a loud belch. I'm not quite sure, but I almost think I

can smell his beer breath from all the way over here. I cover my nose with my hand and feel pressure rising at the back of my throat. Well—at least he's on the move.

I hop down from the tree and shove my feet into my cold, wet sandals. When I arrive at my bike, my whole body is shaking. This is it.

Chapter 2

I once heard that if I run toward my fears as fast as I can, my fear will transform into courage—and courage will lead me to freedom. But as I sit down and wait with my bike behind the thick hedge in front of Master Douglas' property, my whole body is quivering. Where is the courage now?

I have a heightened awareness about everything—from the soft rushing sound of the leaves to the squirrel in the tree chewing on a chestnut, to the damp spot on the back of my legs. The pit in my gut is growing wider by the second, festering like an untreated ulcer. Is this a ridiculously bad idea? After all, it isn't called

Savage Run for nothing. I shouldn't even be considering signing up. If I'm discovered, as a female Laborer—the lowest ranking citizen in our nation—I'll immediately be taken to Skull Hill.

No. I can't second-guess myself now.

Hearing the whirring sound of an aircraft above, I look up. It roars loudly as it makes its final descent into Culmination. Red, yellow and white stripes—the official colors of the Savage Run—decorate the tail. My father says billions of newkos have been spent on the Savage Run program and it disgusts him. Although I'm sure that if he had a son who could honor him by becoming a Master Citizen, he'd think differently.

Suddenly, I hear the gates creak open and my arms clasp my chest, just above my racing heart. Master Douglas jogs past me in a green jumpsuit and continues down the road. I undo my ponytail and pull back my black, wiry hair, looping the elastic band around so tightly that it tugs at the edges of my already slightly slanted eyes. I wait until he disappears around the bend, and when I'm sure he's gone, I push my bike out onto the road. Grabbing the concealed knife from the basket—just in case I need it—I slide it up my sleeve and head straight for the gates.

A transporter zooms by me, and I pretend that I'm just doing my job as usual, delivering medicine. This transport is one of the newer

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