



# Hidden Inside - Prologue

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Trevor lay beside me in the tall grass. The gentle, summer, breeze was swaying the thin blades enough to brush the bare skin of our legs. My shoulders shook with laughter, from a joke he'd just told. Warmth filled my bones, from both the burning sun above and the steady calm from our friendly banter. The humor melted away in an instant, stolen from my chest as I noticed the plume of smoke spiraling upwards in the otherwise clear, blue sky. My eyebrows knitted together as I took the shades

drawn over my eyes off, to get a better look at it. Motorcycles were roaring below us in the sandpits, ripping loose, golden streaks this way and that. Their riders hooted and hollered to one another, content in their tomfoolery. The sound was lost on me as my curiosity grew. Trevor noticed the shift in my focus, quietly asking me what was wrong, but I couldn't speak. I could only stare. The smoke cloud was coming from somewhere in town. A pang of fear tightened my chest. Somehow, something just didn't feel right. Faintly, the wailing of a siren pipped up over the roar of motorcycles, snapping me into total awareness. I lurched to my feet, flying towards the new sound, anxious to find out what was happening. I scrambled through shifting sand, all the while trying to avoid careless teenagers raising cane on their bikes. A few of them yelled at me, screaming for me to get out of their way. None of them were aware of the ongoing commotion just a half mile from where they were. Sweat beaded against my forehead as I ran. My back was burning just as hot, as the glowing sun above. My ears ached the closer I got to the heart of town, the faint wailing of sirens, now an active jackhammer, pounding away in my skull. Smoke covered the ground, thicker than any fog cloud. I could barely see a few feet in front of me. My lungs rattled in my chest as I hacked, trying fruitlessly to get a breath of clean air. Flashes of red and blue bloomed out from somewhere in the fog. Their lights were dull compared to the white smoke consuming everything around me. I ran towards them, thinking that maybe I could find where all the smoke was coming from. My heart was frantically pounding with exhaustion and panic the closer I got to the flashing vehicles. Their lights were washed out compared to the orange hue coming from the burning factory looming overhead. I whirled around, barely making out the group of onlookers to the side of all the authority vehicles. Every worker from the burning building was huddled together in that tight knit group. Their cries of fear could only faintly be heard over the barrage of police officers, ambulances and firetrucks. I was fairly confident I was going to be permanently deafened after this ordeal was over. Through the haze of all the chaos, I realized that this was the factory my Mother worked at. My feet moved in the direction of my new mission: Find her. I weaved through the crowd of workers, desperate to do just that. Most people stood and watched as the firemen unleashed their hoses against the rising flames. Police stood nearby, trying to console the individuals that were breaking down from the scene happening in front of them. My eyes began to water as pure terror flooded through me, I still couldn't see my Mother after searching through the cluster of workers. Ash fell like snow under the glaring hot sun. A man accompanied by two officers on either side of him, broke from the crowd, making their way to me. I stood separate from the cluster of people, still trying to scan heads for my Mom. The one man, dressed more casual than the other two, had sorrow etched into the lines of his face. His eyes were vacant, hollow as he approached me. Recognition kicked in and I realized the one man between the officers, was my Mother's employer. The big boss. I closed the distance between us to demand where she was. My screaming sounded like a meek whisper over the roar of all the commotion. My voice was hoarse, gritty from all the smoke in my lungs. The burning building was growling louder, crackling before the windows exploded as its heat increased. I flinched but kept my attention focused on the three men in front of me. One cop turned his gaze to his feet, suddenly uncomfortable while the other gently shook his head. My Mother's boss stared at the building that was now completely engulfed in flames, mouthing something

I couldn't hear. But I didn't need to. I already knew. My legs wobbled as shock set in and the rocky gravel made sudden contact with knees as I fell to the ground. Pain laced through them, but I didn't care anymore. I cried out in anguish, as my whole life went up in smoke. I woke and sat upright in bed, my breathing labored. Damp strands of my hair clung to my cheeks and forehead. I kicked the blankets that had slid down to my waist, off of the bed completely. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, familiar beads of sweat rolled off my clammy skin. I slipped back down into bed, pressing my head into the lifeless pillows; setting my hands over my face before sobbing soundlessly. Horror and anguish squeezed my heart in excruciating pain. My sobbing turned into wet hiccups as I tried to convince myself it was just a dream. A horrid, miserable dream, but a dream none-the-less. My breathing stabilized as I lay there, trying my hardest to get it together. The cross around my neck was firmly in my grasp. As I toyed with the smooth wood, a surge of strength washed over me. I sat upright again and swung my legs over the twin sized bed. I glanced at the alarm clock sitting on the dresser in the far right corner and a sigh blew past my cracked lips. The steady red numbers told me it wasn't even three in the morning yet. The option of rolling over and slipping back into la-la land had vanished. I couldn't risk delving back into that nightmare. Being sleep deprived for a day, seemed like the lesser of the two evils. Not that it mattered anyhow, I was wide awake now. Carefully, I rolled off my bed, avoiding the creaky springs and gathered to my feet. Katie's chest slowly rose and fell as I timidly watched her from her side of the room, her peaceful snoring was reassuring. I could breathe easier, knowing she was sound asleep, oblivious to the hell I'd just endured. Avoiding the soft spots in the floor, I tiptoed to the only window in the room, brushed back the pink curtains and crawled atop my second-hand desk. The window slid open with little objection, although flakes of white paint came flying off with the one swift motion. I peeked back at my sister once more, making sure she was still asleep. She'd rolled over, her long blonde hair hanging over her bed. She'd barely stirred from the noise, but was otherwise unfazed. I quickly stole into the night air, one leg at a time. My heart was still racing from the dream as I jumped down from my window. The hard ground rushed up to my feet, eager to meet me. I tried my best to ignore the flow of torturous memories that haunted me. They tried in every waking moment they could, to seep into my thoughts with the brutality of a jagged knife to the throat. I jogged towards the woods that branched out behind the rows of trailers in our park. Stealing away from home was the easy part, but sneaking through the rows of nosy neighbors, was not. I'd been accused of stealing tomatoes from gardens and for 'destroying property' in the warmer months, more times than I could possibly count. No one really seemed to care now that fall was spread across the land, preaching its viscous tale of a brutal winter. Everyone was too busy preparing for the beast around the corner to bother with the neighbor girl. Once I was past the last house of the park, I broke through the tangled mess of bushes and trees and the dark woods finally surrounded me, its silence soothing. Not even the sound of a single heartbeat filled the restful night. I sucked in a deep breath, filling my lungs full with the cool, crisp air. It tasted heavily of the earth around me. Damp blades of grass tickled my bare toes as I continued down my path to the pond. The moon hung high in the sky, its light offering me little guidance on my journey. I walked on memory and where I'd worn my path to soft soil in small patches. Cold nipped at my bare toes, but I didn't care. I was

grateful for the distraction. Trees loomed over my head, their gangly branches reaching downward. They looked as though they were ready to ensnare me in their wooden grasp at any moment. Light layering of fog covered the overgrown terrain. Just enough to make it feel as though I were walking in another world. The soft baying of wolves in the distance snapped my head to attention. My ears pressed to hear it again, I didn't. While I knew they wouldn't hunt me specifically, it was still wise to stray away from the animals while they were on the hunt for food. Sometimes, I liked to trek the woods when the humdrum of everyday life was bearing down on me harder than a hammer. On occasion, it was a dream that woke me from my slumber and my brain demanded a break, so I would come out here and forget. Or try to anyway, there was no forgetting. The guttural croaking of frogs grew louder along with the light chirping of crickets as I neared the pond. I tore through the high bushes concealing it, their thorns digging into the bare flesh of my arms and snagging the loose material of my pants. I tripped and almost fell tugging them free. I regained my balance and brushed my long, thick hair out of my eyes. Creeping closer to the water's edge, frogs scattered everywhere. Some took cover by jumping into the water, to hide under the surface, waiting and watching for me to leave; while others merely ran for the thicket of trees to seek their temporary refuge. Once it was apparent I wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon, they either swam about or inched out of their hiding spot with a hesitant matter. The pond rippled from the frog's previous plight, the moon's reflection in it now wavy. Pebbles and stones lurked under the surface of the water's edge, glistening like a million diamonds. They blinded me as I stared in blissful awe. The bed of stones only covered a foot or so out of the water before grass poked up between their crevices, slowly overwhelming the gray rocks completely. I carefully sat, stretching my legs out enough to put the tips of my toes in the cool water. I threw my head back and exhaled, closing my eyes and allowing the night to steal my thoughts from me. The water lapped over my toes before it fell back in on itself, the tiny, amphibian made tide somehow calming. The rocks were hard underneath me, pressing into my spine. The cool grass was soft against my palms when I sat back, facing my closed eyes towards the star speckled sky. I was at peace, purely and simply so. I'd stumbled upon this place by accident, once upon a time and found myself coming back to it because of its seclusion. If anyone were to come looking for me, they would find themselves lost in the maze of trees, but it wasn't as if anyone had come to my bedside in the middle of the night before anyhow. If they had, they hadn't cared enough to try and find me, once they'd found me missing. Nor had they asked my whereabouts when I eventually turned up. Somehow, that didn't wet my eyes. I was so used to being alone, it was second nature to me. I lay back in the grass, reopening my eyes to stare at the starry sky. Each ball of light was winking brightly from far above. I winked back with a chuckle to myself, a giddy pleasure filling inside of me. I knew the feeling would soon fade, only to be soiled with entrapment. For now, I enjoyed the few sounds around me and the serenity of the night. I could feel myself nodding off, slipping back into the dangers of slumber. The moon's light beamed down on me, brighter than usual after I'd jostled myself, back into a complete state of awareness. The position of the moon had changed, it was slowly beginning to fall to the other side of the sky. Daybreak would be soon behind. With a sullen sigh, I gathered to my feet, figuring it was as good a time as any to head back to the house. I started on my way, whispering

my goodbyes to the frogs and imagined their croaks afterward to be their farewell. I shook my head at the ridiculous notion of frogs talking. The thought of Kermit forced a strangled laugh from the pit of my knotted stomach, the sound echoed around me. I walked back slower than it had taken me to get here. I was in no rush what-so-ever to get back to the blankets that no longer offered me warmth. I couldn't keep walking around forever though, my arms were stinging from the bitter cold and each of my toes were icicles at their breaking point. Before I knew it, I found myself outside of my window. The pink curtains billowed gently in the breeze. Quietly, I jumped up, climbing back in. My beaten up desk a helpful step down. I turned, about ready to close the window when the moon caught my eye. It silently begged me to come back out and play with the animals of the night once more. I shook my head, as if to tell it no, before shutting the passageway to my safe haven.