

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest at night. A person is seen from behind, running along a path that leads into the distance. The path is illuminated by a bright, ethereal light source, possibly a full moon or a distant light, which creates a strong lens flare and illuminates the person's path. The trees are tall and thin, with their leaves appearing dark against the lighter background. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

THE GIRL WHO SURVIVED

A.J. RIVERS

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SURVIVED

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The Girl Who Survived

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When we last left Emma Griffin . . .

The amnesiac woman known as Doe disappeared without a trace. Emma searched frantically for the woman, still not sure of her identity, still not sure what happened to her in the long years she was held captive. But even that search had to be put on hold, as a rash of brutal murders of high school students rocked Stoneville to its core. Emma plunged deep into the depths of the internet to find evidence of vicious cruelty and hatred against a girl simply trying to fit in. Her mother avenged her daughter's suicide, but at the cost of so much destruction.

But now, Emma cannot delay any more. With Doe still missing, it feels more urgent than ever to find out who she is and how she crossed Emma's path.

And maybe, just maybe, Doe is starting to remember...



PROLOGUE

How it began...

She couldn't tell the difference between the raindrops and the blood. Both streamed in her eyes, ran down her legs, dripped from her fingertips.

She shouldn't have so much skin exposed, but she had no choice. She could only wear what she was given, and the tiny scraps of fabric that supposedly sufficed as a skirt and top had been torn as she fought her way out of the car and further shredded by the branches and thorns she clawed through on her way down the mountain.

The cold of the air bit into her skin. But in a way, it was soothing.

At least that pain was different from what she was used to. Somehow that stinging, frostbitten kind of pain took away what she had been suffering. Her wrists and ankles didn't hurt as much. The open wounds felt less angry. Even though every bit of her skin felt like tiny bits of ice were burrowing deep into it naked, as she tried to keep pushing herself forward, she would rather feel that than what had been inflicted on her. At least this pain was the pain of being outside. Of breathing fresh air. Of being in her own space

without someone touching her, without a chain linking her to someone else, without the threat of steel pressed into her spine. This was the pain of freedom, and it was worth it.

She didn't know how long she had been running. Clawing her way out of the car seemed at once like it was days ago and so recently that she could still see it if she turned and looked over her shoulder. She wasn't going to do that. She couldn't bear to check. It didn't matter anyway. Whether she could see it or not, she wasn't going to stop. Never again. There was nothing they could do to her that would make her comply. She was empty because they'd taken everything from her.

But in that emptiness, she finally found the strength to take hold of what had been kept from her for so many years.

Choice.

She finally realized she wasn't choosing to live or die when they systematically broke her down and she robotically did as she was told. She wasn't given that choice at all. She refused them and died quicker, or she complied and died gradually. It was all the same end—just their choice of how she would get there.

Not now. Not anymore. In that flash of a moment when she realized the car door was unlocked, with the blood still fresh on her face and the heat of the body chained to her dissipating into the cold night, she had a choice.

And that choice was to live.

It didn't matter if it had only been long enough to take in one breath of air or if they hunted her down right then. She chose to live. For as long as she could hold on to it, her life was going to be hers.

That was what kept her going as the woods around her reached out to scratch her skin and shred what little protection from the elements she had. At one point, a low branch tangled in her hair and yanked her backward, nearly tossing her to the ground, like she had been so many times before. In that second, the branch was a cruel hand, and she could feel the shadow of her captor looming over her. This time, though, she didn't cower. She didn't

curl up and try to protect herself in any way she could. When her body hit the rocky ground, she turned and looked up defiantly.

There were no hate-filled eyes staring down at her, burning into a spirit already scalded and scarred. There was only moonlight.

It brought her to her feet. It kept the pain from stopping her. This was pain she embraced. Pain she chose. And with every step, every cut, every bit of agony, she was choosing her life. She didn't know how long it would last. She didn't know where she was or where she was heading, only that gravity was pulling on her. The rocks rolled beneath her feet, telling her she was moving down the mountain. This was the opposite way that the car had been going, climbing higher along the slowly curving road as the pressure filled her ears and made her chest feel heavier, but she was sure they hadn't just kept going.

By now they would be searching for her. But it didn't change the drive she felt. She might last only a few more minutes. The blood running out of her might be too much for her body. The cold sinking through her skin and into her bones might overcome her. They might find her. But until any of those things happened, life was hers.

When she tumbled down the embankment away from the car, she got to her feet and kept going in that direction. It kept moving her away from the road and the car she could hear roaring behind her. She wasn't paying attention to how she was moving through the woods until she heard something ahead of her and looked up to see she was almost at the road again. She hesitated. Maybe she should turn back. She could go the other direction and disappear further into the trees. But the glow of stronger moonlight drew her. It reflected off the pools of water on the road and seemed to shimmer in the thin, cold night air.

The way back up to the pavement was steep and slick. She clawed her way up until she felt the mud at the edge of the road under her fingernails and the rocks crumbling from the mountain turned to gravel. She looked across the pavement.

It was like a dark, still river. Her eyes moved over it to the other side. The trees didn't seem as thick there. The branches didn't look as broken and jagged. The ground seemed like a gentler slope. If she could get to that other side, she could get further away, faster. It wouldn't be predictable. She wouldn't be moving along the path that they would think she was.

In that moment everything shifted again. She was still choosing. She was still choosing to live. But now she was choosing to survive.

She wasn't just breathing in the moment and waiting to burn out like the tail of a comet. She was brought to this mountain. She was no longer willing to die on it.

From a distance, she heard a car coming and stepped onto the pavement. She'd taken only a few steps when headlights coming from behind caught her. At some point, they'd turned around and were now headed up the road again. She stumbled out of the brightest point of the light and tried to run away again, but the intense glare had blinded and disoriented her. Hearing the tires against the wet pavement, she knew the car had turned sharply to come after her. This time she turned to look over her shoulder.

Through the windshield, she saw him. The wild look in his eyes. Hands gripping the steering wheel in black leather gloves. They looked like stylish driving gloves, but she knew he wore them to cover the blood. The car shot toward her, and she could see beyond him into the backseat. She saw Selene's body haphazardly covered with a blanket. Her hand was outstretched, like she was still reaching for her help, the chain hanging from her wrist.

Above the curve of her shoulder, there was nothing.

Breath shot into her lungs like shards of ice. The highly saturated, visceral memory from just a few hours ago burst behind her eyes brighter than the headlights. She felt the blood. She heard the bones crack. She saw his eyes.

She ran until she couldn't. Until the hard dark pavement rose up to meet her. Her legs pulled up beneath her, her head dropped... and then there

was nothing. The world around her seemed to explode in a rush of sound, brightness, and heat too intense to bear.

The wake left behind was like a tsunami. Destruction, oblivion.

She heard the screech of tires and the sound of screaming. But they meant nothing now. She was terrified, but not of the voices or the thought of people in the cars.

Absolute blankness. She had no recognition. No understanding. No past. No name.



“Get out! Get out of your car and face me. What the hell do you think you’re doing? Don’t you understand the point of driving lanes? You almost drove right into me!”

She heard a man screaming from somewhere further down the road. She didn’t lift her head toward the sound. He wasn’t yelling at her. She couldn’t get out of anything. She was sitting on the wet road, feeling her skin slowly freezing to the pavement, with no idea how she got there. She didn’t know where she was or how long she had been outside. When she forced the feeling of the cold rain and the pain out of her mind, she could see brief flashes, quick moments in her thoughts. It was like looking through the tattered pages of a scrapbook rather than remembering anything. She knew she came out of the woods. But from where? And why?

The car that had stopped close to her sped away, taking the light that had surrounded her away with it.

“Are you kidding me?” the man’s voice she had been hearing screamed after him.

“Grant,” another man said. “Look.”

She heard footsteps pounding on the ground, coming closer to her. Something deep in her core said she should react, but she couldn’t. It was

like she wasn't fully in herself. She was standing at the bottom of a deep well looking up, with no way of climbing to the surface. The men were shouting as they came toward her. They were trying to get her attention, asking if she was all right, probably terrified. Did one of them hit her? Maybe the car that just drove away? Was that why she was here?

But then why was she so cold, so wet? It would explain the pain she was feeling and the blood streaked across her skin, but not the tattered clothes, the bare feet, the fact that she had no answers to the simplest, most basic questions. She stayed where she was, curled tight on the pavement, willing anything and nothing to happen. Maybe if she squeezed her eyes tightly enough and delved deep enough within herself, she would find... something.

The men got close to her, and she could sense them crouching down near her. Her body tensed at the thought of either of them touching her. She didn't know why. A battle raged within her. Part wanting to run. Part wanting to disappear down into the road. Part wanting desperately to be saved.

"She's breathing. Go to the truck and get my flashlight. We need to let other cars know we're here."

"Ma'am? Ma'am, can you hear me?"

It was the voice of the first man she'd heard. He wasn't shouting anymore. There was fear and worry in his voice, but it was softer now. She knew he was speaking directly to her. Somewhere, though, she heard the faint, muffled sound of a woman. It didn't sound like she was beside her. The voice was distant, but the man was responding.

"How old is she?" the distant voice asked.

"I don't know. I don't know her. Probably... late teens? Maybe early twenties? I don't know."

"How did she get there?"

"I don't know. I just found her here. She's in the middle of the road. Another car nearly ran into her."

"Who was in the other car?"

“Some guy. I don’t know him. I was just driving down the road, and he was in my lane. He nearly hit my truck, and I drove off the road. When I got out to confront him, my buddy I was driving with saw her on the road. The other guy took off.”

“He left?”

The conversation carried on with the distant voice droning, the emotion never changing, not sounding like any of this was much of a bother, and the man sounding more desperate, more frustrated with every word. She felt trapped within herself, unable to interact and at the same time unsure if she wanted to.

She was so tired. With every second, she felt like she was melting into the ground, like she would never move past this moment. She felt herself shaking and couldn’t stop it. She didn’t know if it was from the cold or something else. Both.

“And where is this friend now?” the distant voice asked.

“He’s standing in the middle of the damn road, waving a flashlight so that another car doesn’t come and run this woman over. You need to get somebody here now!”

The man was shouting again, only this time the pitch was higher. It wasn’t the same kind of exasperated, angry shout from when he was yelling at whoever was in the other car. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized he was trying to get help.

“I’m trying to get you help, sir. The woman is breathing?”

“Yes, I told you that.”

“Do you see any signs of injuries?”

“Yes. I don’t want to touch her, but I can see cuts and scrapes on her. She’s not wearing much, and her clothes are all ripped up.”

“Does it look like she might have fallen out of a car?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what that would look like.”

Further down the mountain, a new sound cut through the rhythm of the raindrops on the road. It was loud and piercing, designed to get attention and force compliance. Even through her closed eyelids, she could see the

intense flashing red lights wash over her. Seconds later, there were more voices. They blended together, layering and fighting for volume. She couldn't understand most of the words, but one of the men who had been there with her was close enough for her to decipher what he was saying. He sounded angry and defensive, disbelieving of whatever they were saying to him.

"Why would we stay here? Why would we try to stop cars from getting near her and call you?"

"Why would I lie about there being another car? I didn't say it hit her."

She didn't understand what was going on. They didn't know why she was here either? Someone should know. Someone had to know why she was here on the road. It made her feel more alone, more afraid. In that moment, she recognized the deep terror that filled her. She wasn't afraid of the men. The fear went far deeper than that, sitting in the depth of her belly, stinging along her spine. Not knowing what she was afraid of amplified it. Without knowing why she was so afraid, she didn't know how to combat it. She didn't know what she was supposed to do to protect herself or stop what was threatening her.

Another screaming sound echoed in the distance, and she saw more lights around her. Now the voices that battled with the sound of the raindrops on the pavement were directed at her. The tone had changed. Heavy words pelted her, and she felt like they were accusing her of something. They didn't have to say it. They weren't shouting direct accusations at her, but the command behind the words was enough to keep her shut down.

"Ma'am, what happened?"

"Did you fall out of a car?"

"Where do you think you are?"

"What did you take tonight?"

"Where are you injured?"

"What were you doing tonight?"

"What is your name?"

That last question was like a screw digging into her heart. She wasn't not answering because she didn't want to. She wasn't trying to hold anything back from them. There was nothing for her to hide. There was no reason for her to stay silent. But she had no choice. She had no ability to take her voice and form the words she needed to say. She was still standing at the bottom of that well, still staring up and unable to climb out. Her body had become an inescapable shell, a hardened wall that kept her contained.

But even if it didn't, she couldn't answer those questions. Especially not that last one. She knew she should be able to. It was her name, as much a part of her as her breath. Yet it wasn't there. When she searched her thoughts, they were empty.

The questions kept coming. The same ones over and over, just getting louder and more aggressive. There was force behind the words, like they were trying to compel her to answer. Other voices were simply louder, like she couldn't hear them.

"Let's just get her out of here," one of them finally said.

"Get her out of here?" one of the men asked.

She knew he was one of the men she had been hearing since she first became aware of being on the ground. She thought it was the one who had stayed beside her and talked to the distant voice—what she realized now had to be emergency services. But even as that was reassuring, the more she heard him talk, the more the realization twisted into deeper confusion. She didn't know if she only knew his voice because she heard it while they were there on the road or if it was one she had heard before.

No, she couldn't have. They didn't know why she was there. They asked for her name. If they'd known her before, they wouldn't have asked.

"She clearly needs medical attention. We're going to transport her to the hospital."

She heard a strange metallic sound and felt hands on her. Her body tensed at the touch. She tried to pull away, to keep herself firmly rooted to the ground. She couldn't explain the fear. She couldn't put specific words to it. It was more her body telling her to resist than her mind. Something in the

wounds still bleeding, in the scars around her wrists, in the ache in her bones, told her to resist their touch, to not let them take her. But there was nothing she could do. There were more of them, and when she fought the hands on her, more appeared.

“We’re going to get you on the stretcher. Can you get to your feet?” a woman asked.

“She isn’t going to cooperate,” someone else said. “She hasn’t been responding to anything. Just pick her up.”

They pulled her up off the ground, and cold wind touched the parts of her skin that had been kept warm when she was curled together. She shivered harder as they placed her on the stretcher and secured her with straps. The stretcher rolled roughly over the pavement, jostling her and making a new nauseous feeling rise in her stomach. Stiff fingers tightened painfully around the metal bars on either side of her as the stretcher was lifted to go into the back of the waiting ambulance. She felt like she would crash back down, and her heart pounded harder, making it difficult to breathe.

As much as she tried to keep them closed, her eyes snapped open as they secured the stretcher to the floor. The lights above her made them sting, and new pain cracked across her forehead.

“Her eyes are open,” the woman said from beside her. “Can you look at me?”

She turned and looked. A kind smile shone out from beneath pale-brown eyes. “Hi,” the woman said. “I’m Caitlyn. What’s your name?”

There it was again. She stared at Caitlyn, waiting for something, anything.

The smile wavered only slightly. “Can you tell me what happened tonight? It looks like you have some injuries. Do you remember how you got them?”

“She has to be on something.”

Caitlin’s eyes snapped over to the man on the other side of her, the kindness in her look gone. “Stop.”

“What? Isn’t that part of what we’re supposed to do? We have to know what’s wrong with her so that we know what to do to help her.”

“If you want to help her, Matt, why don’t you stop talking about her like she’s a problem?” Caitlyn’s voice was lower, almost like she thought she couldn’t be heard.

“I’m just making an observation. Look at her. Look at what she’s wearing and where she was and the way she’s just staring. She hasn’t said a single word since those guys found her.”

“What I’m looking at are the scars around her wrists and ankles and the open cuts all over her body. Or did you miss the blood all over her?”

“I didn’t miss the blood,” the man she called Matt said with a note of bitterness.

Caitlyn looked at her again, and the soft look was back. “I’m going to take your vitals, okay? We’re going to get you to the hospital, and they’re going to help you.” Caitlyn took a breath, her eyes briefly flickering back to Matt. “Are you under the influence of anything? Have you taken any kind of medication or had any alcohol?”

When there was only silence in response, Caitlyn reached for a blood pressure cuff and put it around her arm. She stared down at it, processing the odd reality of knowing what it was, what it was doing, why it was there squeezing around her arm, but having no memory of ever having seen one, ever having one around her arm. As she stared at it, her vision started to blur. Her mind swam, and everything around her seemed to warp and melt. She saw Caitlyn’s eyes widen and felt a hand press to her arm.

“Come on. Stay with me. Don’t close your eyes again, okay? You need to keep your eyes open. Just a little longer. We’re almost at the hospital. Just keep your eyes open. Look at me. Try to talk to me.”

She fought. She stared directly into the bright lights and focused on the tight, pinching feeling of the cuff on her arm. It was grinding raw flesh together and compressing down on bruises and deep injuries she didn’t know she had. Rather than trying to distract herself from those feelings, she leaned into them, put every ounce of her energy on finding each pinpoint of

pain throughout her body. The discoveries kept her conscious and dropped her into the middle of a story with no beginning. She didn't know how she got any of these wounds. She could guess that some of the scrapes and shallow cuts on her legs and the palms of her hands were from the pavement. The stinging feet and legs were likely from the woods she could vaguely recall walking through.

It seemed to take far too long for them to finally pull under the portico at the emergency room entrance. The door opened, and the stretcher was wrenched out. Suddenly, several people were on either side of her, looking down at her, repeating the same questions she'd heard so many times already. The rain had stopped, but the cold was still biting.

It was warmer when they got inside, and the walls made her feel protected from the wind. The paramedics had handed her off to the nurses and a doctor, who ran along beside the stretcher as it was rolled down the hallway. They'd stopped asking her questions and were now just yelling over her, trying to get a grasp on what exactly was happening. They got her into a room, and more people in scrubs came in.

"Hi there," a nurse in dark-green scrubs with a vibrant neon rainbow lanyard around his neck said to her. "I'm Cory. What's your name, sweetheart?"

She rocked her head back and forth slightly.

"You're safe here. We've got you now."

Her lips cracked at the corners of her mouth, and her voice came out dry, barely above a whisper.

"I don't know."

They were the first words she'd managed to say, and she didn't know how long it had been since she'd said any others.

"You don't know that you're safe?" Cory asked, stepping aside as another nurse removed the blanket from over her and released the buckles on the straps.

"My name," she said.

She saw the nurses exchange a look. Cory looked at her again, a slight smile on his lips. It was the kind that was meant to be reassuring rather than outwardly happy.

“We’re going to move you to the bed. Can you get up?” he asked.

She nodded. She didn’t actually know if her body would cooperate, if her legs would hold her up, but she wanted to try.

“Okay. We’re going to help you.”

He tucked a hand gently under her arm while another nurse did the same thing on the other side. They carefully pulled as she sat up, then guided her as she moved her legs around to the side of the stretcher. Her feet touched the floor and instantly protested. She sagged, and Cory scooped her up against his side, quickly and seamlessly moving her onto the bed as if she weighed nothing. He lifted the metal rails on either side and then adjusted the height of the mattress so that they could more easily access her.

She wanted them to put another blanket over her.

It wasn’t the cold. She wanted to be covered. She was too aware of her exposure, of the amount of skin that was showing and the damage on nearly all of it. The darkness of the mountain road and then the blanket draped over her in the ambulance had shielded her. The paramedics weren’t as focused on the injuries. They were just keeping her stable until they were able to get to the hospital. But now that she was here in the bright, glaring light of the emergency room, there was nothing to hide behind. Nothing to cover her and make her feel less exposed.

“You’re going to be all right,” Corey said. “We’re going to take care of you. What can you tell me? What do you remember?”

“Nothing.”

She expected him to push. She expected another barrage of questions, but it didn’t come. Instead, his hand found hers and squeezed.

