

SHADOWS OF OURSELVES

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First three chapters

CHAPTER 1
Why Does it Always End in Death?

“I’m not saying that we should, I’m saying that we eventually might”, said North.

South vehemently replied, “Don’t be stupid.”

North bullishly continued, “After everything that we’ve been through over the last eight months, you’re telling me that there’s no situation that would mean sharing our actual names?”

South shot back, “We stick to the plan. No personal information. We’re not family.”

North and South were arguing again, slipping into the cycle they’d grown accustomed to over the past few weeks. East and West watched the verbal battle escalate as all four of them sat around a dying fire in the middle of the desolate desert they’d reluctantly had to call ‘home’ for a month.

As the two men continued their argument, the women – East and West – barely took any notice, both tired of the dreary routine they had all fallen into. A fearsome group of four individuals who would’ve considered each other close friends, or even family, had fallen apart.

West sat on the sand, hugging her legs and staring into the vacuous star-lit sky. When she helped form this rag-tag vigilante group, she was fearless and witty, but their time in the desert, and reflection upon everything that had happened, turned West into an emotional husk of the exuberant character she once was. As thoughts started to swirl around her head she felt herself becoming overwhelmed, so decided to wordlessly retire to her nearby tent while North and South continued their squabble.

East sat cross-legged, with her hands rested on her knees. She was as still as the air around her, thinking about the group’s next steps and running through all the possible outcomes meticulously. She had become particularly bitter about the group’s actions, not just the tragedy that led the four to their desert hideout, but the initial formation of the group.

East had always seen herself as an intellectual lone-warrior, always one step ahead of everyone else, but their predicament caught her flat-footed. Although the regret of ever meeting the group was weighing on her mind, she wanted to think forward towards clearing their names and moving on from the people East now saw as anchors, dragging her back from her full potential.

East decided to follow West’s lead and headed to her tent to try and get away from the squabbling voices arguing across the campfire. As East drifted off to sleep she thought about how much she wanted things to change, and as soon as possible. She’d need all her strength and energy to wrangle the others into listening to her.

“East, get up”, said West. East’s eyes darted open to see West in her tent standing over her, frowning. It was early in the morning and East didn’t like to be woken up, but she could tell immediately from West’s posture and blank stare that something was wrong.

East enquired, “What?” West opened her mouth and her lips trembled but no words came out. East got up in a huff, scowled at West, and exited her tent to leave West standing inside alone. Only then did West managed to get the words out, “Murray’s dead.” Tears ran down her face and she watched them fall to the floor. It had been a long time since West had dealt with the death of someone she knew, and it was more significant still, since West saw Murray as the only person on the outside who could have helped.

Things used to seem so simple and straightforward for the aspiring vigilantes. To the public they were the good guys, the clean-up crew, the ‘fearless four’ who thought their city desperately needed them. But the police force and local government saw them as stray citizens taking the law into their own hands and breaking it in the process.

Public opinion of the group skyrocketed, and the public opinion of the police force plummeted. Just when the group thought they were beginning to make a difference, copycats started popping up, which caused the police to crack down on all vigilantes hard, but the mimics fought back harder, turning the affair into a tug-of-war that spiralled out of control.

North, East, South, and West knew they had to do something to help, so they decided to work with the local government to try and put a stop to the copycats. The four of them knew that the government only wanted to fuel their political campaigns with some good PR, but if it could stop the escalation of violence on both sides, they knew it had to be done.

The only hitch to this alliance was a handler to hit them on the nose whenever they stepped out of line, Murray. But he truly believed in what those four wanted to do, he wanted it to grow beyond a temporary truce and establish a new branch of civil protection, but that seemed irrelevant to West as she cried in East's tent. For the first time in a while, she felt like their situation was truly hopeless.

West wiped the tears from her face and tried to calm herself, then she turned around and walked out of the tent to see North, South, and East discussing a plan.

She walked to the ashes of the previous night's fire and sat down, contemplating what had gone wrong and led to such a predicament.

Soon after the trio's discussion, South stood still and thought to himself. He suspected they'd been set-up, but couldn't narrow down the perpetrator. The police? The copycats? Some other group? He kept juggling possibilities in his mind, wondering where it all started to go wrong, but his thought process was cut short as North barked at him, "South, we need to talk. Follow me." South obliged, and the pair walked away from the camp.

After a long while of walking in silence in the baking sun, South fired off at North, "You said 'talk', not 'walk'."

North shot back, "Just keep following me, South."

"North. I can't see camp. NOBODY CAN HEAR US!"

"Shut up."

"What did you tell the others?"

"..."

"Fine. I'll go back."

"I told them we're going hunting."

"We're clearly not."

"Just trust me for once in your life!"

"You know. You could've brought hunting gear. I wouldn't have said anything. Then you could take me far away. Then murder me."

"Stop being stupid. I didn't tell you that because I don't want to hear your stupid hunting songs, and if I wanted to kill you I'd do it in your sleep."

"They'll know. You didn't bring traps or knives."

"Just shut up and keep following me."

"Then answer me. It's not difficult."

"You need to see it or you won't believe me."

"See what?"

"South! I'm actually trusting you with something very important so shut your mouth and just keep following me."

South didn't trust North at all, but curiosity had its hooks in him. Almost an hour after their trek began, South's mind began running different scenarios, but his thoughts kept tracking back to the idea he jokingly blurted out, 'He *is* going to kill me.'

North approached a tall slender rock about twice his height, and South trailed a few metres behind.

North leaned on the rock and turned back towards South with a look of regret in his eyes. South thought ‘Is this where it happens? Is this where one of us dies?’ North walked behind the rock, completely out of sight. South’s brain kicked into high gear, ‘He’s got the advantage. Even if he’s got no weapons. The rock is too smooth. I can’t climb from this side. He’s thought this through. But I can surprise him.’

South took off his sandals and approached the rock slowly. He threw one sandal up over the rock, and threw the other around its right side as he scrambled round the left face. South clenched his fists in anticipation, but stopped abruptly as one of his sandals fell onto a corpse in front of him.

South exclaimed, “What the fuck, North?”

North deflected the comment, “What the hell is wrong with you? I just told you to follow me.”

“Jesus... That’s Jane.”

“She was my contact for information, but nobody can be trusted now. We’re past the point of no return.”

South began to breathe heavily. North steeled himself for a punch, but South simply turned around and walked back towards the camp.

North tried to get his attention, “South. I needed to show you, because you wouldn’t have believed me.” South ignored him and continued to walk away. North shouted, “Tell the others when you get back!”

North picked up the blood-stained spade next to the young woman’s body and began to dig. He had never dug a grave before, but the task seemed particularly difficult in the sand.

No-matter how deep he dug, North knew the shifting sand dunes would eventually uncover her body but all he wanted to do was buy them more time.

North always considered himself the leader of the group despite none of the others agreeing. They had only spent a few weeks in the desert but had all drifted so far apart from each other, and North felt responsible for pulling them back together.

His hands were sore and almost blistered by the time the hole was deep enough. North brushed off South’s sandal and unceremoniously rolled the corpse into the sandy grave. As he covered the body, North thought about the charm and wit she used to exude, almost second-guessing his decision to kill Jane Shilling, the warden’s daughter.

North’s walk back to camp felt like a long one, and it gave him time to think about what would happen next. North was glad that South came along to see the body, so he wouldn’t have to convince the others he wasn’t telling a sick joke. But convincing them that he did the right thing was another matter entirely. If North could clearly explain to them why he did it and how they’d get out of their mess, then he figured everything might just turn out okay.

CHAPTER 2
Seeds of Doubt

North walked towards the campsite, anticipating anger, confusion, disappointment, or resentment towards him, but as he moved closer, East was sitting on the sand reading a book, while South and West lay outside their respective tents sunbathing. Nobody seemed to care about his approach.

As North drew within earshot of the camp, he broke the silence, "I guess South hasn't told you guys yet." East raised her head from the pages in her hand, looked at North without her usual angst-laden glare, and calmly responded, "Nobody can be trusted now. We're past the point of no return. That's what you said to South."

Trying not to trip over his words, North paused before beginning to argue his case, "I just said that to get my point across before South did something rash."

East riposted, "Something rash? That's not the way South told it."

North sputtered, "Well he didn't, but I thought he would." North was caught off guard, expecting questions about the body and not his choice of words in the spur of the moment. He added, "So I guess the body doesn't bother you as much?"

East parried, "How long until none of us can be trusted?"

North was startled, "Jesus, East. I'm not trying to kill you!"

North looked around to see if the other two shared East's sentiment, but they ignored the argument so he tried to gauge their feeling towards the subject, "Do you guys hear what East is saying?" Unmoving from her reclined position on the ground, West answered, "Yea, we heard."

North responded, "And?"

West calmly stated, "You did say 'nobody could be trusted', right?"

Beginning to feel his frustration rising, North took another brief pause to collect himself before he continued, "Could you two please sit up so I can explain the situation and my bad phrasing." West sat up and shook the sand from her hair while avoiding eye contact with North. South lay still. North tried to appeal to him, "I don't care if you're giving me the silent treatment South, but just listen to what I have to say."

North took a deep breath then sat down on the sand, hoping his explanation would dismiss their mistrust, "As you know, Tuesday's are when I get news from my source, and now you know why I kept it a secret."

West interjected, "How does murdering Jane help?"

North replied, "I'm about to explain. Let me finish." North composed himself and carried on, "As you know, Murray was arrested after we went into hiding, and they had him locked up in maximum security. That was good. That was part of my plan." South scoffed loudly, but North didn't want to regress into quarrelling again. He ignored South and continued, "That was part of my plan. I anticipated that would happen which is why my source was the warden's daughter. I started building a relationship with her before we disappeared and I was the one who persuaded her to take the managerial position at the prison, so you're welcome for that."

West lay down again, and East had enough of his self-aggrandising so she butted in, "Stop stroking your ego and get to the point."

North smirked and continued, "After Murray was arrested, what I didn't expect from Jane was silence about his arrest. Jane didn't even give me a reason why. Just 'no prison info'. Until this morning when she told me that over the past month, Murray had killed several guards and inmates..."

"Bullshit", exclaimed South, still laying on his back.

North tried not to get drawn in, so he kept going, "I know. Then she told me he had been executed two days ago. I asked her why she's only telling me all of this today, and she didn't have an answer."

South interrupted again, "How do you know? She might've lied. Murray might be alive."

North replied, "I... knew her too well. I know she wasn't lying about his death. But unfortunately, the only thing that makes sense is that she turned against us at some point."

South responded sarcastically, "Oh of course. Couldn't be anything else. You just *had* to murder a civilian."

A small part of North was relieved he was no longer accused of being a traitor, but he still had an uphill battle convincing them that his actions were right.

North rebutted, "OK South. Tell me the tons of possibilities that were more likely?"

Knowing where the conversation was headed, East grabbed her book and resumed reading, while South finally sat up to respond, "Misinformation. She could've got bad Intel."

North retorted immediately, "She wasn't. Next Suggestion."

"You didn't answer."

"I did answer. What's your next suggestion?"

"You can't prove it. So you avoid answering. Like you always do."

"One, you didn't know her like I did, and two, what the hell do you mean 'like I always do'. I've always answered your stupid questions."

"Do you have amnesia?"

"Give me one example!"

"One? I can list dozens!"

Their back-and-forth once again devolved into immature bickering. As with most of their arguments, neither one would convince the other of their viewpoint. As they argued over semantics that morning, all four of them began to form their thoughts about the situation and how they could handle it.

West stood up and walked to her tent, tired of hearing North and South argue over each other.

She walked in, zipped the entrance shut, put on her ear muffs and lay face-up on her air-mattress, studying the creases in the tent's ceiling. Her eyes watered, blurring the ceiling's sandy-camouflage pattern into a yellowish swirl. She tried to hold back the tears, even though she wanted to cry. Partially because she felt their situation was hopeless, partially because she didn't believe North, and partially because she loved the warden's daughter.

West tried to distance her vigilante persona from who she was before they formed their group. She tried to keep her real identity and past from the people she spent the most time with, while keeping her secret identity from everyone else. One person almost managed to ruin that unintentionally; Jane Shilling, the warden's daughter.

All they shared was one little kiss, and West was smitten like a school-girl. A moment so inconsequential to Jane, had such a profound effect on West, who replayed that moment in her head over and over again. She thought about the emotion that kiss wrapped her in, and for that brief moment she felt like the world crumbled around her until only the pair of them were left.

She felt so connected to Jane, and yet had no idea if Jane even knew about her infatuation. Even so, holding back the tears when South told her the news was difficult. West kept trying to tell herself it was just a silly crush that didn't matter, but she still felt deeply hurt. She didn't think any of the others would understand, and even if she wanted to tell them, West kept her feelings to herself because of the secrecy they upheld.

Learning of Jane's murder by North sent West into emotional shock, and the weight of it all kept bearing down on her. As she lay on her air-mattress, she tried not to think about it,

she tried to get her mind away from it or get over it, but she couldn't. Tears streamed out of her eyes, followed by exasperated sobbing.

North and South arguing drowned out West's crying, but it didn't matter to East, who was so used to blocking out those sounds that they might as well have been white noise.

East was still sitting on the sand, reading the only book she had brought to the desert. She had read 'The Fly That Caught the Spider' dozens of times before but she still found herself inexplicably drawn to its pages every now and again. A simple pocket-sized book, documenting the rise and fall of a business, decades before she was born. A cautionary tale of sorts, but even though East had drawn all the caution from its ink a long time ago, she kept reading.

Whenever anybody asked her about the almost compulsive habit, she'd come up with a smart quip or rhetoric, and after years of repetition she could almost recite the entire thing by heart. Each time she read it, she gained no new insight or understanding, but she couldn't put it down. All the elements in her life she believed she controlled, and this simple book spanning under a hundred pages was one thing she couldn't stop, and as much as East hated to admit it, she had no idea why.

Stuck in the desert among those people, East was glad she still had her book. An easy enough read that she could block out North and South squabbling, or West's periodic crying sessions.

This group had become so predictable and stagnant to East that she resented it. Cycles of arguments and crying she no longer did anything about, because any reprieve she facilitated was only a brief hiatus until the cycle started again, and she'd grown tired of interacting with them. They offered no insight or understanding, but unlike her book, they had lost the ability to capture her attention.

Over time, the group of people East considered the most intellectually thrilling, had become like every other person she knew, but she couldn't just leave them behind and start again as she often did. She had to clear her name before thinking about that.

As she turned another page, East's stomach grumbled, and she realised she hadn't eaten anything yet, so she closed the book and returned to the real world, where she was sitting alone outside. North and South had finally put an end to their time-wasting and returned to their tents.

East stood up and shook the stiffness from her legs, as West's sobs became audible. East was unsurprised, but the crying still irritated her nonetheless.

East guessed it had been a few hours since she started reading, judging by the shadows the tents cast along the sand, slightly longer than her usual sittings.

It was early afternoon as she crawled into the small tent they used for curing meat. She picked three slivers of snake jerky before noticing grime building up on the tent's solar-powered fan. An issue easily resolved by replacing the thin fan filter, but they were in West's tent and East didn't feel like trying to communicate with a crying mess. Instead, she grabbed a handful more of the meat before returning to her own tent, then she ate a few more pieces and sat on the ground to think about the situation she was in.

This wasn't the first time East had uprooted her life or concealed her identity, but being with this group was the longest she had voluntarily associated with the same people. Keeping close ties with only three people, who all vowed to share almost no personal information seemed too perfect for the lifestyle East wanted to live. But she wanted to hold on to existing in the stasis of anonymity for as long as she could.

She sat on her air-mattress and planned out the possibilities of the following days. She contemplated having to relay their plan to West, who was too busy crying to participate. She contemplated the trek to refill her water supply at their solitary oasis, a journey she came to cherish because of the time spent away from the rest of the group. She contemplated an end to

her journey as East, since she yearned to move on and start again as she had grown accustomed to.

With the sound of sobbing still in her mind, East remembered how much she resented West, and how much she resented the rest of them. Then, for a moment, her mind slipped into thinking about her past. Something she rarely wanted to do.

Although she acted like a loner, East relished the company of people she considered interesting. In the past, before her reinventions, others told her that she acted ironically since they found her stale, which pushed her to prove them wrong. She taught herself survival skills, climbed two mountains, and took part in an arctic expedition *just* to prove them wrong. After she returned to recount her tales, she shed that skin and moved to another identity, beginning her lifestyle as a wanderer. But from then on, there was always the small thought in the back of her mind that they were right, and she just using others as a way to fill the uninteresting void in her personality, so she buried that thought as deep as she could.

East snapped back into her present and wanted to take her mind away from her past, so she lay down on her back and imagined North killing Jane. She could only imagine him strangling her. Wrapping his large hands around Jane's neck and pressing his thumbs down on her throat, watching the colour drain from her face as she struggled for the last time.

The dark thoughts that crossed East's mind usually manifested in someone she detested, but she quite liked Jane. East found her mind wondering about the incident since the details she knew were vague. She didn't quite know how to feel about the event itself, but had no doubt about North's irrationality in the situation, adding to a list of reasons she had no faith in him anymore.

North was the first person in their group to kill someone as far as she knew. They had all discussed the possibility that it might occur; that one or all of them may be forced into taking a life. At the time they all nodded their heads and naïvely accepted the eventuality, but now that it had happened, the reality of murder didn't seem as gallant as any of them had imagined.

Although the rest of the group wouldn't have known it, North was having a difficult time coping with what he had done. He was distressed at the possibility that he may have done the wrong thing and taken a life unnecessarily. He thought about it as he returned from burying the body, but having the others unanimously question it made North afraid of his actions, and of himself.

CHAPTER 3
Desert Enmity

South sat on the fold-out stool in his tent and thought about how much he missed civilisation. The smoggy cityscape, the hustle and bustle of city life. Things he didn't realise he cherished until he left them behind.

Spending weeks in the desert with North, East, and West made him miss something above all else: working out, his method of relieving tension. After the first few days in the wilderness, South realised that strenuous exercise sessions don't mix well with desert heat, rationed jerky, and a limited water capacity, so he strived to find a new outlet to replace it, not realising he already found one in his arguments with North.

His thoughts soon turned to the situation the group had gotten themselves into, but unlike East thinking about her future plan of action, South wanted to trace their problems to the origin. It helped him gestate ideas about how to tackle tasks and it kept his mind busy. But he was stuck trying to figure out one piece of the puzzle that he couldn't quite fit into place: Murray.

South took it as fact that Murray couldn't have killed anyone, and even when he entertained the idea that Murray might have taken a life, it didn't make sense that he had supposedly been executed within a month.

South was relatively familiar with the judicial system, and he knew that there was no way someone could be fast-tracked from arrest to death sentence in such a short span of time.

Something was severely wrong with the situation, but without any more information at his disposal, South could only speculate. He thought of at least a dozen possibilities that he considered equally likely and in his mind he just had to whittle them down by process of elimination until he had the right answer, then he could follow that path to the genesis of their problems.

Although South grew to constantly argue with North since their arrival in the desert, up until that day, North was the person South trusted the most. He found North to be the only other person in their small vigilante brigade who still seemed to care about the group and what they wanted to do, even through the hard times. But South knew that killing Jane was a step too far.

His thoughts reverted back to reminiscing about city life, then he heard West shouting profanities. South dragged himself away from his recollection and walked outside to see the jerky tent ablaze, and nobody in sight. Seconds later, East emerged and they both shared a look of weariness before she walked up to the fiery tent. West subsequently ran from her tent with her canteen of water to douse the flames.

East held her arm out and stopped West from pouring out her water supply, then South approached the two of them, standing metres from the fire.

All three of them stared into the smouldering pile of plastic and meat for a moment, then South spoke, "I guess it's now. We should head back. Figure a way out of this mess." West gave a curt nod, and East enquired about North, "Has he gone to the oasis?" South replied, "Not yet." East gestured to him and the pair of them walked over to North's tent, while West remained to gaze into the flames.

South and East unzipped the entrance to North's tent and walked in to find him sprawled across his semi-inflated air-mattress, face down and fast asleep.

South kicked the edge of the air-mattress, causing North's body to jiggle, but he still lay dormant. East knelt down beside North, turned his head, and held his nose closed. After a few seconds he jostled to life, coughing and looking around, confused.

East stood back up and addressed him, "Start packing, it's time to leave." North was still a bit dazed as he responded, "Why?" But East had already spun around, and was walking

out of the tent. South remained to elaborate, “The jerky tent’s on fire. Seems like a sign. We should leave.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“But... we still need to finalise the plan.”

“I know.”

“Shit. It’s too soon.”

“Not soon enough... Start packing. East and West go to the oasis first. Give me your canteen.”

South walked out of the tent with the canteen in hand, while North sat on his air-bed with his head in his hands, slowly shedding the remainder of his grogginess.

South made a detour to his tent to grab his own canteen as well before he went to East’s. The entrance to her tent was unzipped and open, so he walked in.

East was facing away from South, standing in the middle of her tent with her arms crossed, staring into space. South took a few steps in before she spoke, unmoving from her stance, “What?” South walked in front of her and responded, “Go with West. Let North wake up.”

He held up the canteens, and East pointed at the floor next to her bag, which she’d already half-packed. South knelt down to place the canteens on the floor, then he stood up and turned to East to ask a question, but she had already turned back away from him. She was stretching in preparation for the trek that lay ahead of her, so South exited wordlessly.

South admired East’s skills and efficiency, but as time elapsed in the desert, he felt her becoming more distant towards the entire group, almost to the point of hostility.

South initially made the naïve assumption that it was East’s period and stayed out of her way, but as time drew on she became more reclusive and apathetic, and he noticed there was more to the situation than he first thought. He noted that it wasn’t just a change in her mood, it was a shift in her personality.

At first, he tried to reach out to her and offer help in any way he could think of, but East’s repugnant attitude towards his attempted assistance soon made him indifferent to her situation. He just hoped there was still enough of the old East he knew to be as adept as needed when the time called for it.

South walked outside to find West staring at the dying embers of the fire, blank-faced and almost calm. He walked towards West to tell her about the oasis trip she had to make since he assumed East wouldn’t bother. He stood behind her and whispered, “Exit plan’s happening. You and East fill-up first.” South didn’t mean to whisper but his voice became unexpectedly muted, almost against his will. West nodded and South walked back to his tent.

He grabbed his rucksack and walked around looking for items to stuff into it, then he heard the sound of rattling. He stopped and looked down to find his left hand shaking, something he hadn’t felt in quite a while. South took a deep breath, forced the rucksack out of his grip, and sat on the ground, rhythmically breathing in and out, with his eyes wide open. Whenever he closed his eyes during those moments, he pictured times in his past he didn’t want to experience again.

South came from a happy home with loving parents, two siblings, and an upper-middle class lifestyle. Reflecting back on his childhood, he had nothing but great memories and no complaints. South’s only obstacle was his ineptitude for education, scoring ‘D’s and ‘F’s regularly but still maintaining his place in school because of his parents’ generous donations.

His older sister and younger brother both being top students, as well as his parents’ similar track record, should have pushed them to disappointment, but they were understanding and compassionate. They gave him private lessons in whatever he wanted to try; painting,

playing various instruments, singing, photography, and more, but he didn't have the ability to master them, or even grasp the basics.

His parents never rushed or cajoled him but South felt an immense amount of pressure on his shoulders. He felt like the reputation of his entire family rested with him, and all he did was squander the wealth and opportunities he'd been granted.

Every week he'd research a new option that could possibly unveil a hidden talent he had, but if there was one, it never showed. Even through his parents' unyielding acceptance, South felt like he had something to prove to them, and to himself.

He kept searching for something that could validate his existence, until his sixteenth birthday when the answer seemed so obvious to him; the army. He thought about the training it entailed and knew it would require an immense amount of determination, but to him it seemed like that was all he had, so it was worth a try.

After four weeks of basic training, South was struggling to keep up. His body was being sculpted into a machine, but the early mornings, repetitive drills, and memorisation of tactical commands mentally drained him. South felt like he was back at school, except there was no 'end of the day.'

The drill sergeant made a habit of sending home several recruits every week; people who didn't have the aptitude to keep up the pace, but as much as South resented what the experience became, he wanted to stay and prove that there was something he could achieve in life, even though he feared he'd be next on the chopping block.

Training had temporarily moved into the nearby woods as the first live-ammunition demonstration was approaching, and South needed to impress the sergeant. He planned to wake up as early as possible and cook up the sergeant's morning meal of two boiled eggs and two rashers of bacon, but he hadn't properly thought his plan through.

After he stayed up all night to make sure he was the first to get up in the morning, South foraged for dry branches and twigs to make kindling, but still hadn't quite learnt how to start a fire from scratch. So, he borrowed a bunk-mates hidden lighter, drained some of the lighter fluid, and ignited the fuel-soaked wood. He then proceeded to the food tent and tried to think of a way to break in without damaging the lock or cutting the fabric. But before he could figure that out, he heard the sergeant shouting, and turned to see that the fuel-doused wood had built up into a roaring fire.

After being ordered to extinguish the blaze, he explained his honest intentions to the sergeant, hoping it might net him some points for ingenuity, but the sergeant just stood and laughed.

His punishment was running behind the sergeant's car, tailing it back to base, picking up one crate of ammunition and following the car back to their woodland camp. He was exhausted as he returned but the sergeant told him to keep making the journey again, alone, until he delivered the remaining five ammo crates.

The entire trek back to base, he cursed and spat, but this punishment was something he could do, a physical exercise that required no learning.

Upon returning to camp with the second crate, he witnessed a sight he'd never truly escape from. Everyone lying motionless on the ground, filled with bullets and shrapnel. Tents were ablaze and bodies were smouldering, while smoke and the smell of cooked flesh permeated the air. It took him a while to figure out what had happened, but he soon pieced it together.

After his first journey, South had absent-mindedly placed the ammo crate on the remnants of his make-shift fire, heating until it lit up and the bullets inside began to fire, bursting through the crate to send bullets and crate-shrapnel flying across the small camp.

After that incident, it took a month for South to sleep without waking up in the middle of the night, in a cold sweat and soaked in his own urine.

Months of litigation concluded in the courts to give him community service for negligence, and the ordeal made South an emotional husk of his former self, resulting in bouts of uncontrollable arm-shaking. His spasms initially lasted hours, but the entire experience made him weary and untrusting enough to avoid seeking medical attention, leaving him to self-diagnose and eschew medication of any kind. That point in South's life was rock-bottom.

The memories and melancholic emotions of that juncture in his life reminded South how fallible and vulnerable he was, so he tucked that part of his life away in a small room in his mind, almost separating those thoughts as if they belonged to someone else; the old, feeble South who should have died long ago. But on the rare occasion that the trembling returned, all he had to do was close his eyes and it all came flooding back.

Sitting cross-legged inside his tent, the shaking in South's hand began to subside, while his eyes were glassed over and almost tearing up as he rarely blinked during the ordeal, attempting to keep his mind as blank as possible.

Before the occurrence in the desert, it had been over a year since South had lost control of his arm. He wondered whether he should tell the others about its recurrence, but he was so exhausted that he crawled onto his air-mattress and left the decision unchosen, as he fell into a deep sleep.

While South slept and North was in the process of waking up, East and West started their journey to the oasis, each with a small messenger bag containing two canteens, a towel, a plastic bag, and a clean change of clothes they had kept unworn for their exit strategy. The desert heat meant that most of their clothing consisted of bikinis. The swimwear meant there was less material to capture the sweat and grease built up over four weeks of showerless desert life. It only took the group five days to get used to the collective smell of musk that they created, but the tackiness of dead skin and dirt all over their bodies made them look and feel horrid didn't go away.

The temptation to soil their solitary watering hole grew stronger as each day passed when they kept making the half-hour trip to the oasis, almost taunting themselves with each journey.

As East and West finally made the trek to rectify that situation, they never uttered a word to each other. West wanted East to be at ease, but even in the stark desert silence East felt like she wasn't alone enough to enjoy the solace of her deep thoughts, leaving both of them uncomfortable.

When they arrived at the oasis, West rushed to fill the two canteens she had, drinking and refilling half of her own in the process. She finished quickly, then disrobed and eagerly waited for East to be done.

As soon as East sealed her second canteen and stood up, West tempered her anticipation and walked slowly past East into the oasis, savouring every moment that the relatively cool water touched a new region of skin.

East blushed and was uncharacteristically stunned at the sight of West strolling past her nude. East had seen naked women before, but something about seeing a person nude that she had spent so much prior time with, felt strange. She turned around and slowly placed the canteens in her bag, waiting for the blood to rush away from her cheeks.

When her fluster subsided, she took off her sandals, stood up and turned to see a sight she hadn't witnessed in a long time. West had a huge smile on her face. It was almost enough to wash away the pent-up frustration and angst in East.

East stood on a large nearby rock, which was perched slightly over the water, and dove into the oasis. As she raised her head above water, West giggled then East finally cracked a smile. The refreshing oasis coolness and prospect of leaving the desert made the two of them forget the problems they had, and allowed them to enjoy the moments of freedom they felt in the water.

After swimming about and washing away some of the dirt from themselves, East emerged from the water. But West tried to coax her back, "Come on, East. Let's hang around for a bit." East turned around, with the return of the dour look on her face. Then she abruptly turned back and began to towel herself off.

Watching glimpses of East's pre-desert attitude suddenly disappear frustrated West, so she waded to the edge of the oasis and vocalised her frustration, "Don't pretend you didn't have fun. Your moody, distant attitude doesn't help anyone. Especially not yourself."

East whipped back, "Don't presume to know me."

West scowled at her for a moment then returned fire, "*Presume?* We've spent eight months around each other. Just because I don't know your name, doesn't mean I don't know you, because I do. I know how you talk, the way you walk with a very slight left-leaning tilt, the way your eyes squint when you try to think of a lie, and the fact that you push people away because they remind you that you're empty inside." Although West was correct about her last point, she was just grasping at straws to try and get under East's skin. And it worked.

East retorted, "Is your tantrum over? Why don't you run to your not-so-secret love North and cry yourself to sleep you feeble bitch."

West over-emphatically laughed aloud before responding, "I'm gay. And if you stopped trying so hard to be brooding and mysterious and shit, maybe you would've been alert enough to figure that out."

East span around, grabbed her bag, and stormed off. West sank back into the water, upset at herself for being so brash, but relieved and almost jubilant at the control she had over the argument. Only a few minutes passed until West began to feel the remorse sink in at the thought that she may have destroyed the hope of retrieving the version of East she was having fun with, moments ago.

The oasis trip for North and South didn't fare much better. After some light arguing scattered throughout their journey, they ended up in a bout of unfriendly water wrestling, resulting in North receiving large bruises and South almost drowning.

Although none of the four verbalised it, they all knew the desert was a toxic place for them that would only create more problems as time drew on. Nobody knew if it was the heat, the maddening silence, or gut-wrenching diet, but they all wanted to escape the barren, sandy wasteland as soon as possible.

[End of Chapter 3.]