

# BITE RISK

S.J. WILLS

SIMON & SCHUSTER

‘*Bite Risk* will have you turning each page feeling sheer horror and laughter.’ **A. M. Dassu**

‘Pure, thrilling brilliance!’ **Louie Stowell**

‘I inhaled this book. A concept that crackles, watertight world building, characters you care deeply about, and then the twists & turns . . .’ **Nicola Penfold**

‘Fun, gripping and deliciously gory.’ **Amy McCaw**

‘I devoured *Bite Risk* with ruthless ferocity, or perhaps the book devoured me – I’m not too sure!’ **Sophie Kirtley**

‘Smart, pacy, twists and turns with a hero who feels real. Exciting, thrilling but not too scary.’ **Emma Norry**

‘A gripping, fast-paced thriller.’ **Nizrana Farook**

‘*Bite Risk* sinks its claws into you and doesn’t let go until its page-racing end.’ **Maria Kuzniar**

‘Fresh, exciting and just what teenagers everywhere need!’ **Catherine Emmett**

‘Incredible. Astonishing. Sweeps you away and afterwards, there is just SO much to think about.’ **Rashmi Sirdeshpande**

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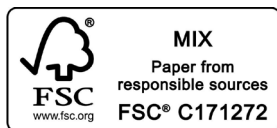
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*For Rob, Fraser, and Cameron*

# CHAPTER ONE

## APRIL - CONFINEMENT NIGHT

I'm so busy repairing the tripwire across the front porch that I almost forget to take Mum her dinner. It's only when I hear her clanging about downstairs that I realize it's nearly eight o'clock. The street lights cast a feeble yellowish haze as far as the house, but I don't need them - the moon is more than enough. It hangs heavy and ripe over Tremorglade, watching everything we do.

At least the explosive charges are finally set round the outer perimeter, and the graphene nets are checked. Satisfied, I sit back on my heels and watch the neon warning bunting flapping in the breeze. All safe for tonight, even if I did leave it a little late. Dangerously late, Mum would say, if she knew. She always complains that I never change, and I point out that I definitely will, just not this month, but it never makes her crack a smile. She doesn't think we should laugh about that stuff.

My eyelids feel like sandpaper and my fingers are sore from twisting the wires, but I shuffle to the fridge and haul out tonight's meal, wrinkling my nose as ever at the smell. In my haste, I pull the shelf out too far and it tips forward, its contents thudding wetly into my chest. Great.

The clanging downstairs is louder now. Mum's getting antsy, like she always does around this time. I should've left dinner with her ages ago, but I got distracted.

The basement stairs are steep and the light stays off when I flick the switch. It happens from time to time. We don't always keep up with the bills and occasionally the electricity company notices. Mum will ring them first thing tomorrow and plead for mercy until she gets paid at the end of the week.

I hold the tray against my chest with one hand and feel my way down the wall with the other, treading super carefully on the stone steps. I don't want to fall and injure myself right now. Especially not before Mum's eaten.

There's a soft moan as I approach the bottom of the stairs and I feel guilty for my lateness.

'Sorry, Mum, it was just really fiddly tonight.' Plus I reached level twenty on Happy Trappers, but she doesn't need to know that.

Silence. I get the feeling she's not in the mood to hear excuses.

I can't see a thing in the darkness now, so I take my phone out of my back pocket and fumble to turn on the

torch. I accidentally shine it right in her eyes and she rears back. A flash of white teeth.

‘Sorry, sorry.’ I place the tray and the phone on the basement floor so the beam of light points up at the ceiling and pick up the slab of raw beef. It’s as big as my head, and I realize I’ve forgotten to cut it up. The bone is still in it. It might not even fit through the bars of the cage.

Too late now, though – she can smell it. At once, she looms out of the darkness, fast and hard. There’s a sharp metallic clang as she throws herself against the door, making the whole cage rattle, then she retreats a little.

Better get on with it.

I throw the meat on the floor and stamp on it to flatten it, trying not to splatter the neatly folded clothes she’s left to the side, then pick it up and step forward, holding it next to the cage at arm’s length.

She doesn’t move from the shadows.

She’s waiting for something.

If she thinks I’m going to open the door she’s got another think coming, although I doubt what’s going through her mind right now could really be described as thoughts.

Sensations, maybe. Hunger. Rage.

Blood from the meat is oozing over my wrist, dribbling down the statutory notice welded to the middle of the cage door: **CAUTION – BITE RISK.**

‘Come on, will you, it’s heavy.’

My arm’s getting weak, I’m dead tired. Even though it’s Confinement, I was seriously considering staying in tonight and just chilling out in front of the TV. But now I can’t, plus she’s messing me about. A wave of irritation overtakes me and I shove the meat in further, the bone resisting against the bars, then finally pinging through.

It’s all she needs.

A millisecond later her teeth are bared and snapping, claws ripping at my sleeve as I struggle to withdraw my arm through the bars.

Adrenaline surges through my veins as I yank back in panic, eventually remembering I need to let go of the meat. But my knuckles are in the way, bashing against the iron cage. At last my hand slithers through and I crash-land on the floor into the puddle of bloody meat juice.

I sit there for a moment letting my heartbeat return to normal. It’s okay. She’s tearing into the beef, crouching, watching me with her yellow eyes.

My arm still seems to be attached to me, though there’s a thin red line down the back of my hand where the tip of one fang has caught it and drawn a neat incision. It’s just a scratch. Could have been a lot worse. Stings so much, though.

I rub my back and tut. ‘Mu-um.’

Chunks fall from her jaws, and a pink-tinged string of saliva drops to the floor as she makes short work of



her dinner. In my annoyance, I'm tempted to take a photo right now and put it on the internet, but she'd kill me.

It's ten past eight, according to my watch. There's a dull throbbing at the back of my head and around my shoulders - the usual Confinement headache - but I'm wide awake, thanks to that little shot of adrenaline.

Too fidgety for a movie now, and with no electrics anyway, I decide to hang out with Elena after all. Unlike me, she'll have had her dad and brother sorted out hours ago.

I leave Mum to it and head gingerly up the stairs, out of the door and through the garden, skipping neatly over the tripwire and heading to Elena's house across the road, where there's a faint light seeping between her bedroom curtains. Earlier, when I was setting the tripwires, I could hear her singing. She has a pretty good voice.

It's a warm spring evening; the scent of the first cut grass is in the air. The bunting and luminous DANGER signs mark the hazards at every house, like twisted birthday-party decorations. Up and down the road loads of kids are out, the younger ones playing, older ones standing and fiddling on their phones or talking in groups, tranquillizer guns slung over their shoulders. Even little Mika, who started Caretaking only a couple of months ago, is already settled on her front porch in the wheelchair she's using while she recovers from her operation, cleaning the barrel of her X50 like a veteran.

Rudy and Asim are in the middle of a ten-pin bowling game in the street. A few toddlers have been plonked in the handy fenced-off area around the hazel tree, where they're happily chucking handfuls of grass at each other and eating bugs. They've all been ready for ages.

I should be more organized, I know. *Set up, lock in, watch out.* The protocol we all need to follow.

Here in Tremorglade, because we're so isolated, we don't have to put up with many of the horrors that the rest of the world does – deadly weather, plagues, violent crime and marauding pirates.

We just have to live with each other's mistakes.