

OUT TO FIND FREEDOM

SNEAK PEEK

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

STOP. Before you read on, I highly suggest for you to listen to a song called “Beautiful Crazy” by Luke Combs. You’ll know why when you get to the part. It’s also the only song I listened to when writing this story.

Out to Find Freedom starts out intense and dark, then moves into a very slow burn romance. It’s also set six months after *No Way Out* (Stoke and Malinda’s story from the Hawks MC: Ballarat Charter) but it can be read as a standalone.

CHAPTER ONE

EMERSON

When my sixty-year-old father died six months ago, it was the day I stopped living. It honestly felt like my world ended in that ambulance when he took his last breath. He'd been my father, my friend, and my confidant all rolled into one.

Life wasn't fair.

My heart still ached. Like, with every breath I took, my chest compressed painfully, as if wrapped tightly by a boa constrictor.

I didn't remember my mother. She passed away when I was two from a snake bite. Living out on a property meant we'd been too far away to get help. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was gone. At least, that was what my dad told me, and he was a man I believed with my whole heart.

When dad passed, I had no one except Gloria, my mum's younger sister who was twenty-five—eight years older than I was—and her sleazy boyfriend, Lenny, who was around the same age as Gloria. I didn't actually know because I didn't really care. Dad and I had nothing to do with Gloria. I knew

nothing about the woman beyond what Dad had told me. That she was a young fool, and always in trouble with the law after her and Mum's parents died a year apart of one another.

I couldn't even bring myself to call her my aunt. To me, she wasn't family. I only had one person who was, and he was gone.

Thankfully, my estranged family kept to themselves and let me mourn. My routine was set in stone since the day I moved in with them. Go to school, back to the house, make myself dinner, eat it in my room, study, and go to sleep.

When I'd first walked through their door, they'd told me I could do what I wanted, but I had to be home by nine, in bed by ten, and make sure I cleaned up after myself. Gloria then went on with a bored expression and said she wasn't my slave, so I would be making my own meals. Which I was fine with. I'd been independent for many years since Dad would be busy taking care of the land on our fifty acres.

One year and I could be out of the place.

One year and I would be old enough to live on my own. I was going to use the money Dad's life insurance paid out, also what he had in his bank account, and then there was the amount I had saved from helping him out around the property, to get away from them.

Then in seven years, I would have access to my inheritance.

Dad wasn't stupid. He'd known how to invest his money, and it had paid off. By the time I turned twenty-five, I would be a millionaire.

Only I would have given it all up, *all* the money, if I could have kept my father with me.

"Hey, how about we head to the lake and chat?"

I wanted to groan, but I withheld it and turned to Donny. Why I agreed to a date in the first place, I didn't know. I was seriously thinking of getting my sanity checked. Though, I did

have a little red-haired devil sitting on my shoulder, which often encouraged me to do some daft shit. Harriet White, a close friend from my new school, had talked me into giving Donny a chance. In fact, she'd begged me to because he was best mates with Walt, the guy she was interested in.

However, with Donny bringing up the lake, the known make-out place, I knew he only wanted one thing, and I wasn't about to give it to him.

"No thanks. I'm not feeling the best." I had to sit through an hour of him talking about football. I was about ready to fall asleep. "I only live up the road. Do you think you could take me home?"

He frowned. "I thought you were staying at Harriet's?"

Damn, I was supposed to. I even dropped my bag off at her place, but right then I didn't want to face her and all her questions.

"Yes, but if I am coming down with something, I don't want to stay there. I'll text her." I took out my phone and waved it in my hand.

"Fine." He sighed.

Me: Sorry, can't stay. Not feeling well. Must have ate something bad.

Harriet: WHAT? No way, you have to tell me how it went.

Me: Tomorrow at school. Promise.

Harriet: I'm eye rolling so hard right now.

I didn't bother replying since Donny was already driving up my street. "Just in the next block, number eight."

He hummed under his breath. When he pulled up, he turned off his car. "I'll walk you in."

That was sweet but unnecessary. "You don't have to—"

"Emerson, just let me."

"Okay," I whispered, and suddenly felt bad for not being

attracted to him. He'd been nice to pick me up at Harriet's, opened doors for me, made sure I was happy with the place we ate at. But I didn't feel a connection.

Maybe I was broken.

I didn't want to put all the blame on Donny because he talked and talked about a sport he was obviously into. I was at fault as well. I'd let myself be pressured into a date with him when I wasn't in the right frame of mind.

When he walked around the car, I quickly opened my door and got out before he reached it. "I'm sorry about tonight."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I..." I shrugged. "I know it's been a while since my father died, but it still hurts, and I can't see past the pain just yet. Maybe when I can, we could revisit this?"

Finally, he was back to smiling. "I'd like that."

In the meantime, I would hope someone else caught his attention. At least we weren't leaving the night on a sour feeling. We walked slowly to the front door, Donny's hand on my lower back. He was such an old-school gentleman, and I was kicking myself for not liking football. Maybe then we'd have a better connection.

However, I wasn't in the mood to force anything between us. Thankfully he wasn't forcing the subject.

Turning at the door on the front porch, I smiled. "Thank you for dinner."

"You're welcome. I hope you feel better soon."

I gave him a thin-lipped grin and nodded. "So do I."

"Do you mind if I kiss your cheek?"

See, he was such a sweetheart.

"I don't mind." His smile was bright. Gently, his hands landed on my shoulders. He leaned in and softly laid his lips against my cheek.

When my body didn't react in any type of way, I wanted to punch myself.

He shifted back, still smiling. I reached out for the door handle and twisted, checking it wasn't locked. "Well, thanks again."

"Thanks for coming."

I pushed the door open, ready to step through backwards to stop feeling awkward. Only a scream ripped from my mouth when my neck was gripped hard. My body got yanked backwards. I saw Donny's eyes widen, and he yelled, "Hey!" and came my way.

Only once he was through the door, it got slammed closed. Silence.

For all but a beat, until I cried out when I was forcefully pushed to the floor, landing on my knees.

"What the fuck? What the fuck?" Gloria, my aunt, ranted in front of me.

It was then that I took in the room. In all of a second, I saw a younger teen lying on the couch half-naked. She seemed out of it. A man stood before her doing up his pants. There was a camera, extra lights, and two other men in the room. One was Lenny, my aunt's boyfriend.

"Get to your knees" was growled out. I looked back to Donny and the man behind him.

No. No, no, no. A gun was pointed at Donny's head. He sank to his knees. His eyes, brimming with tears, were on me.

"Please, please, just let him go," I begged.

My hair was gripped, my head jerked back. Gloria got in my face. "You weren't supposed to be here." She shook my head roughly using my hair.

"Please, let him go," I pleaded. Bringing my arms up, I used my shaking hands to hold her tee. "Please. He won't say anything."

“I won’t,” Donny whispered.

“Fuck!” Gloria yelled. She dropped her hold on me and spun to face the others. “We should have gone to the warehouse.”

“Babe, you know we couldn’t. It’s hot. Got people watching it.”

“We need to find somewhere else,” the man behind Donny said. “But...” He glanced down at Donny.

Gloria ran her hands through her hair. Then she nodded.

“No!” I screamed, but it was too late.

I didn’t even hear the gun. All I saw was Donny’s body fall to the floor. He didn’t breathe. Didn’t blink. Didn’t move. His lifeless eyes stared my way.

I gagged. Dropping to my hands on the carpet, I heaved. I couldn’t drag my eyes away from him. Donny. I’d killed him. It was my fault.

Blood soaked the carpet. *His* blood dripped from the hole in his head.

Another heave erupted as tears ran down my cheeks. My body shook, and a noise hit my ears. Whimpering and keening. I realised it was coming from me.

“What about her?” someone asked. I didn’t care who. I didn’t look. All I could see was Donny. Dead before me.

My fault.

All my fault.

Because he wanted to go on a date with me, and now he was dead for it.

“Shut up” was roared.

I clamped my lips closed, but I couldn’t stop the whimpers, the tears. My throat thickened, and I heaved again.

“We can’t kill her.”

“Why the fuck not?” he demanded. Gloria stomped over to

him and dragged him into a corner for a huddled whispered conversation.

Slowly, I crawled to Donny. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry," I uttered. I started to reach out to him but pulled my hand back.

The blood. It was everywhere. My body shook. My chest ached in such a painful way that it caught my breath.

A new whimper caught my attention. I glanced behind me to the girl on the couch. She moved but then stilled once more.

"We got to get her out of here before she wakes."

The man with Gloria, who seemed in charge, grunted. "You and Lenny take her. Dump her in an alley somewhere."

"W-what did you do to her?" It was obvious, and yet I didn't really want to know or hear their answer. But I couldn't help asking.

"She knows too much," the guy with Lenny said.

"Gloria has a plan," Lenny said.

"Maybe she'd let her be in the next movie."

Lenny smirked. "That I'd pay to see."

I cringed at his dark look and scooted back on the floor. While they dressed the girl, my eyes drifted to the front door. I could run, scream, fight.

Jean-clad legs entered my view. It was the man who'd been talking with Gloria. "Don't even fucking think about it. If it was up to me, you'd be dead."

Dead.

Like Donny.

I heaved, then vomited onto the carpet. A boot landed in my side, and I grunted and gasped. People yelled, argued, but I couldn't hear any of it.

My ears rang as thought after thought screamed into my mind.

Gloria, my aunt, was a part of something so vile it churned my stomach again, and I let another load of spew loose.

A girl was drugged. Raped. Filmed.

Here. In the house. She was violated in a way no woman or man should be.

I had to do something.

For her.

For Donny.

The man stepped away from me to roll Donny's body over. Gloria stood with Lenny and the rapist arguing. They were distracted.

I took the chance.

For the girl and Donny.

Knowing I could end up like either one of them.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I flashed up and ran for the door. The man tried to grab for me, yelled. I made it, touched the door handle... and then saw nothing but stars.

Somehow I ended up flat on my back on the floor. I blinked slowly, my vision dimming as I looked up at Gloria with a baseball bat in her hand.

"You really shouldn't have done that. Take her to the basement," she ordered, just before everything faded.

CHAPTER TWO

EMERSON

For over a month, I'd been in the basement. Tears always remained close to the edge, and I lost count of the times I would break. It was only the previous day when Gloria unchained me so I could move around the room more instead of being only near the bed and to reach the toilet. I learned my lesson to stop shouting and screaming. I needed to move more, and the way I got the privilege was to keep quiet. So I did.

The night *it* happened, when I woke in the basement on the floor, Gloria had been crouched over me. She told me I had to be good, or I would end up dead. If that didn't give me enough incentive, she then informed me that she used my fingerprint to get into my phone. Gloria read my messages, looked at everything, and in the end, my aunt threatened Harriet's and her family's lives if I didn't do as I was told. She mentioned how she messaged Harriet pretending to be me and told her things to make sure she got the picture I wouldn't be back at that school. Gloria didn't tell me what Harriet replied with, so I didn't know if she believed Gloria's lies... or "my" lies.

Harriet knew Donny more than I did. She'd suspect something was wrong when he didn't show for school too. Unless they had that covered. I didn't have a clue.

Honestly, I couldn't understand how or why no police showed. I didn't know for certain what Gloria had said to the school or authorities about me, or if they came looking for clues to Donny's disappearance.

God. Donny.

They killed Donny.

Right there in front of me.

They killed him... all because of me.

Because I came home.

Guilt ate at my insides each and every day.

Nothing like this seemed like it could happen in reality, but it had. I was a part of it. Gloria and Lenny were bad, toxic people. How and why they did what they did was a shock to my core. I could never understand the reason for sinking to an act only the Devil himself would love. How many girls had suffered? How many were taken, drugged, defiled, and dumped? Remembered nothing beyond knowing they'd been touched?

Just the thought of my so-called family had bile rising in my throat. The knowledge twisted and tore at my stomach.

I wanted them gone.

Dead.

I wished I could make it happen. They deserved to die for what they'd done.

Standing from the camp bed they'd provided, I walked over to one of the many boxes in the corner in the hope it would give me some type of weapon; over the time, I had only managed to go through half of them because there were that many. Only I knew they wouldn't be so stupid to leave something down here like that. When I opened the box, I saw

nothing but clothes, old magazines, and records. Another one showed me piles of wool, but no knitting needles. The ones I'd already opened were similar to the others, nothing that could help me.

Though, when I moved to a smaller one, I found some notepads, two pencils, a pen, and some romantic paperbacks.

I huffed out a breath and wiped at my eyes again. Maybe I could read them to death or stab them with a pencil before they could kill me.

Useless.

That was how I felt.

Utterly useless.

Why were they keeping me around? Why hadn't they killed me like Donny?

Why did they even have to kill Donny?

I should have fought more. Saved him somehow.

A sob caught in my throat. I moved to the tiny basin in the toilet room under the stairs and washed my face, trying to get my emotions under control. I knew it wouldn't last. I had nothing but time to think about what had happened. About seeing Donny's lifeless eyes stare at me.

I gripped the sink. Another sob had my body jerking.

This wasn't fair.

None of it.

I stormed from the room and flicked my hand out at a box. The box crashed to the floor. I kicked another and it flew forwards. I picked up another and threw it across the room. I screamed, yelled, and cried. My pain took over as I gripped my hair and tugged.

Why Donny?

Why that girl?

Why did Dad die?

Why was I left here?

Why wasn't anyone coming to help?

Why, why, why?

Another scream rattled out. I dropped to my knees and pounded my fists against the concrete floor.

I didn't care if they came down. I wanted them to. I wanted to punch, kick, stab, and hurt them in every way. They needed to feel the pain I was in, the pain they inflicted on others.

Only there weren't any footsteps... so when I heard a tapping sound, I stopped still, and through the tears, I looked up and over to the small rectangle window, the size of a book, above my bed.

There, on her knees, was Mrs Minna. The eighty-something next-door neighbour.

I shook my head. "No," I whispered. If they saw her, they wouldn't let her go. Snapping up to my feet, I rushed over to the window. Standing on the bed, I unlocked it and pushed it the few inches open it would allow. "Go. Please, go," I begged. Fear clutched at my chest. If Gloria or Lenny heard, the risk of it was unthinkable. Harm would come to me, Mrs Minna, or Harriet. I couldn't let any of it happen.

"I knew you didn't run off. I'm going to call the police. Wait there—"

"Mrs Minna, please don't, they'll—no!" I screamed. Lenny came up behind Mrs Minna. His hands wrapped around her head, and he snapped it quickly to the side.

I saw the shock in her eyes before nothing.

Dead.

Blank. Like Donny's had been.

Because of me.

"You fucking cunt," I screeched. I tried to reach for Lenny through the window. Of course it was fucking useless. Just like I was.

My body rocked to the side from a force to my waist.

Something cracked on the inside. I could feel it, hear it, all before I hit the ground hard. I rolled to the side, wincing, whimpering, and crying to see Gloria standing over me.

“You fucking bitch. We leave to get some shit and you’re calling out to the neighbour. Her death, like your friend’s, is on you.”

I sat up and cried out, grabbing my side just below my breast. Gloria snorted. “Probably cracked a rib or two. Your fucking fault. All of it. Damn, everything is your fault.”

Through a panting breath, I wheezed, “Y-you killed her. Police will know.”

Shaking her head, she rolled her eyes. Kicking out at my foot, she told me, “Don’t be stupid. Lenny’s already taking her body to her house. I told him to snap her neck. Those stairs in her house aren’t good for an eighty-year-old. Really dangerous, actually. She’s likely to fall down them and break her neck.... Huh, guess it just happened.” She laughed.

Gloria was a lunatic. She wasn’t only crazy but vicious.

How did she become the way she was?

Dad had told me Mum’s parents had been nice people. The only option I could guess was drugs had screwed Gloria up.

But still, with not knowing how drugs worked, did they really cause a person to become a disgusting monster like Gloria?

“Why?”

“No one fucks with my life. Least of all Marilee’s little precious Emerson. You need to understand I don’t give a fuck you’re my sister’s daughter. I didn’t care about her. I don’t care about you. What I care about is Lenny, money, and making sure people do as I say. I get paid for what I do, but my boss even knows to do what *I* say. Especially when I bring money into the business game.” She smiled. “Thanks to you and your bank account.”

My chest clenched. “T-that’s my dad’s.”

That money was what I would have lived on until I turned twenty-five. It was his life insurance and his money from his account. It was meant to help me.

She’d stolen it.

Stolen another part of my dad.

She’d already taken his watch, something I accused her of, but she blamed me for misplacing it.

She may as well take me.

End me and my misery.

“Kill me,” I whispered.

Her head dropped back and she laughed up at the ceiling. Her arm wound around her waist as she kept laughing. Her humour waning, she shook her head and looked down at me with hostility. “Another thing you’ll learn. You die when *I* say.” She brought the bat up and swung it. I closed my eyes cringing, waiting. When nothing happened, I peeked out to see her smiling once more down at me. She scoffed. “Pathetic. She should have killed you in her womb.” She turned and walked away.

I didn’t move. Instead, I listened until I heard the basement door bang closed. I knew I wouldn’t be getting any food that night, and honestly, I didn’t think I could eat.

They killed again because of me.

Another life lost, and it was my fault.

When would this nightmare end?

If I had a knife, had something sharp, I would end it all myself.

Then again, I probably would be too weak to do it.

Maybe she was right. I was pathetic.

Slowly, I got to my knees as my anguished cries for Mrs Minna turned into pain stabbing through my side. I crawled to the bed and slid into it, breathing harshly.

Mrs Minna may have been eighty, nearing the end of her time on earth, but she didn't deserve to have it end so quickly. She had children, grandkids. Ones she'd spoken of the first time I met her. She'd heard why I'd moved in with Gloria and had felt sorry for me. She even asked me in for a cup of tea and cookies. I didn't accept, but I was grateful for the offer. Grateful she'd cared enough to ask. Gloria hadn't cared when they'd brought me here. She never asked if I was okay, yet a stranger had. Mrs Minna was a good soul, and now she was lost to the world, to her family.

I should have gone in. I should have gotten to know her.

Now it was too late.

Because of me.

A cough jerked my body and I cried out, curling into myself, holding my side.

I wasn't lying when I told her to kill me. I wished she would.

Then the pain would stop.

The hurt would end along with my life.

Maybe then I would see my dad, even my mum, again.

ALSO BY LILA ROSE

Hawks MC: Ballarat Charter

Holding Out (FREE) Zara and Talon

Climbing Out: Griz and Deanna

Finding Out (novella) Killer and Ivy

Black Out: Blue and Clarinda

No Way Out: Stoke and Malinda

Coming Out (novella) Mattie and Julia

Hawks MC: Caroline Springs Charter

The Secret's Out: Pick, Billy and Josie

Hiding Out: Dodge and Willow

Down and Out: Dive and Mena

Living Without: Vicious and Nary

Walkout (novella) Dallas and Melissa

Hear Me Out: Beast and Knife

Breakout (novella) Handle and Della

Fallout: Fang and Poppy

Standalones related to the Hawks MC

Out of the Blue (Lan, Easton, and Parker's story)

Out Gamed (novella) (Nancy and Gamer's story)

Outplayed (novella) (Violet and Travis's story)

Out to Find Freedom (Emerson and Warden's story)

Romantic comedies

Making Changes

Making Sense

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Trinity Love Series

Left to Chance

Love of Liberty (novella)

Paranormal

Death (with Justine Littleton)

In The Dark

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