

## THE CRAVING

### AN AWARD-WINNING INSPIRATIONAL YA ROMANCE

J F SAXBY

\*\*\*

## PART ONE

### 1

---

Will Sutherland clanked up the stadium steps of the Maddock Arena. He clutched enough cartons of popcorn to last a week. The smell of fried food and sweaty bodies wafted through the air, and the setting sun bathed the arena in a wash of liquid red-gold.

Will flicked back his hair, still salty from a morning surf, and glanced up at the Aporto Bay News helicopter piloted by his father. It swung in from the coast and thundered toward the arena. It was an unwelcome reminder of how his family had imploded. How his father had cheated on them.

A cold emptiness seeped into Will's gut. This sold-out concert should have been the top event of the year for him. Ryder, his favorite singer, was about to perform. Will gritted his teeth and joined Mitch, Chen, and the other guys in the middle of the stand and handed out the popcorn.

The crowd shouted in time with the beat of the music. "Ry-der, Ry-der." The supporting act was performing and sounded lame, but nothing else was going to spoil this concert. Everyone stomped their feet in time to the bass pumping through the main stage amplifiers.

Three girls pushed along the row to the empty seats in front of him.

"Wow." Will nudged Mitch and gave a low whistle, pointing at the girl in the middle.

Stunning. Honey-streaked hair swept around her waist as she moved. But he couldn't see her face.

"Pull your jaw off the ground and get her attention," Mitch said.

"Ha. Why don't you?"

The grating on the metal floor shifted and creaked, and the girl's denim jacket slipped off the back of her seat. Will laid it over her chair, uneasy about the floor's odd movement, but no one else seemed to notice.

"Hey, Will, there's Ben Maddock." Mitch pointed toward the front of the stadium. "You won't want to see who he's with."

Will searched the crowd. Ben had his arm wrapped around a girl with auburn hair and purple streaks. *Stella*. That explained the unanswered calls. No wonder Stella didn't want to see him now she was with Ben, the girlfriend-snatcher. He choked on a mouthful of popcorn and crushed the carton until his fingers went numb. Life was the pits. He needed a drink.

"You have to do something about that jerk." Chen yanked at his black-brush hair. "He trashed your car, and now this."

Mitch shouted over the music with a screwed up face. "I bet Stella just wanted to ride around in Ben's Ferrari."

"And let's face it, the Maddock family's in the spotlight because they built the new stadium." Chen thumped his feet on the steel floor. "It's not exactly top quality. How many millions did the bay fork out?"

Will shrugged. "Stella wasn't my type, anyway." But jealousy and a new resolve throbbed in his neck and throat.

Reverberations pulsed through the venue as the frenzy reached fever pitch. Ryder leaped onto the stage. His studded vest flashed in the laser lights, and his dreadlocks whipped around his head as he opened the set with "Ride or Die." The crowd was a sea, surging and swaying. Will allowed the deep-toned thud of beats reverberate through his body, and numb his pain.

A harsh, wrenching screech cut through the music. The stadium shuddered and cracked in staccato bangs. Something was wrong. Will's stomach did a dive.

Mitch gripped his arm. "What's going on?"

Before he could answer, the grating at their feet split open. Rivets sprang out and scattered. The girls in front of him shrieked as their row of chairs swung away. Will leaned over and tried to pull them back, every muscle and ligament of his body stretched to its limit. Skin scraped off his fingers.

The seats wrenched out of his hands and tipped over. The girls disappeared into the void in a volley of anguished voices. The floor bent and slanted down. Heartbeats replaced drumbeats pounding in his head. He gripped his chair, but was slipping.

Falling.

Every organ in his body heaved toward his throat as he dropped underneath the stadium, arms and legs flailing.

Like the bungee jump at Valley Springs.

Without a harness.

And nothing to bounce him back.

He slammed into the ground, his body in a spasm of pain. The edges of his vision distorted. The stand above fractured and swayed in slow motion, like a scene in an apocalyptic movie. A girl lay nearby, crumpled like a broken mannequin, dust-filled hair tangled over her face.

*The girl with the honey hair.*

The entire stadium was imploding now. A long beam dangled from a swaying row of chairs. It dislodged and dropped toward the girl.

Shock spread in a bolt through Will.

He ignored the agony in his back and grabbed a sheet of metal lying nearby. He launched toward the girl, shielding her body with his, and pulled the metal on top of them. The falling beam hit the side of his head.

A bone-dry crack sounded inside his skull.

## 2

---

Will forced his eyes open. They were gritty with sand. He lifted his aching head to look around and took a sharp breath at the barren landscape. Not a blade of grass in sight, and nothing but sparse bushes and the occasional light-colored boulder.

Where was he? He dropped his head back to the ground, light-headed. Had he missed the concert? Where were Mitch and Chen and the others? An agonizing, pulsing pain flashed through his skull. Something trickled down his face and into his mouth. A coppery taste.

Birds screeched in the sky above, huge and circling. Vultures. Heat seared his skin. Mountains spread out in the distance under a purple haze. An expanse of still water lay in the other direction, reflecting the mauve-tinged sky. Panic hollowed out his stomach. He rolled over and tried to stand, but his legs crumpled. Why was he in this hellhole?

An odd squeaking noise came from the left. Two thin men walked toward him. One pushed a wooden trolley carrying a man who looked like Jabba the Hutt. He wore a grubby cloth stretched under his stomach to his upper thighs. His flesh flapped over the edges of the trolley, almost scraping the dirt.

The gaunt men cursed as they approached. Their torn, stitched-together clothing looked as if it hadn't been washed in months. He could smell it already.

"It's our lucky day." The shorter man jabbed Will with a stick. He had three fingers missing from his left hand. One long bone earring hung from an earlobe and his beard dangled in a long plait down to his waist.

Will struggled to stand again, but fell.

"Got anything to eat?" The man on the trolley puffed out the words. "First things first, Striker." His chins hung in folds onto his stomach. He took a long sip from a curled tube stuck in a pottery jug tied to his loincloth.

The plaited-beard guy, Striker, gestured to the taller man. "Search his pockets, Flack."

A freshly stitched wound ran across Flack's cheek and into the back of his neck. He had a tattoo of a blackbird with outstretched wings on his arm and wore a necklace of assorted teeth. Will writhed as the man ripped off his jacket and rummaged through his pockets. The man pulled out a wallet, Chen's empty cigarette packet, and a squashed chocolate bar, then stuffed the wallet into his trousers.

The man on the trolley spat the tube out of his mouth. "The sweetie's mine."

"We can't have our little Grunter fading away to a shadow." Flack threw the chocolate to him, then dragged Will's phone out of his other pocket.

"Give me my phone." Will croaked through the sand in his throat.

Flack sneered at him and threw the phone on the ground, then smashed it with a rock. Will's heartbeat pounded in his ears. He dug his nails into the dirt, trying to hoist himself upright.

"Where's your gold, scum?" Striker wiped drool from the side of his mouth with his plait.

"Don't have any."

The man kicked him in the ribs. Will recoiled. He could only imagine the super-punch he could have given him. Was he in some sort of dystopian reality movie set?

“What’s the blood from?” Striker asked.

“I was in an . . . an accident.”

Flack bared stained gums and black front teeth stumps in a sneer. “Another little one won’t make any difference then. Good time to add to my tooth collection.” He gestured to Striker, who stood on Will’s arms, crushing them. Flack pulled a pair of pliers from his belt and leaned over Will, forcing open his mouth. A waft of putrid breath hit Will as he stuffed the filthy pair of plyers through his lips. He jerked his head away.

A wind gusted across the arid plains. A tall man strode toward them from the other direction. The three men froze.

“It’s him again,” Striker said. “Hurry up, losers. Have to get to Stone Ridge for our supplies.”

As the man yanked the tool out of Will’s mouth, it cracked against his front teeth, and he flinched.

“Till next time.” The man straightened and pushed the plyers into his belt before Will could lash out. Striker rolled the trolley away, dodging rocks as though being chased. Flack followed. They headed toward an outcrop of red-ochre rocks in pillar formations.

Stone Ridge? Where was that, and why did they leave so quickly? A bronzed man in a light khaki shirt, trousers, and a hat walked toward him. A shaggy gray wolfhound with a torn ear loped at his side, and the vultures flapped away.

The man crouched on the sand next to Will. His eyes were a hypnotic steel gray, and his clothes smelled of pine and wood smoke. The dog sniffed at the blood on Will’s clothes, snorted, moved away, and watched them. The bronzed man pulled a leather satchel from his shoulder.

“You must reach the hills before nightfall. Night in Cawl Desert is not a place for humans.” The man frowned as he pulled a jar out of his pack. He applied cream to Will’s head and tied a strip of cloth around it, then passed him a container of water in a pottery jar.

“Who are you?” Will drained the last of the water.

“I’m the Counselor.” The man helped him stand.

“I think I can walk.” Will breathed a sigh of relief.

“Your legs should get you to the mountains. You need to leave now, Will.”

How did this guy know his name? The man passed him a skin bladder full of liquid and a cloth-wrapped package and draped his shoulders with a shawl. He looped the provisions into the shawl and tied the ends around Will’s waist. “Keep your arms covered. You don’t have the raven mark, which means you could be in danger.”

When Will looked around, he’d disappeared.

Will staggered toward the mountains. The pain in his head had dulled, and although exhausted, his legs carried him well enough. He scanned the alien-looking landscape and sky. Something was wrong with this place. The sky was an unusual tinge of purple. The sand and rocks were a different color and texture than anything he’d seen before.

A huge red-tinged moon, filling a third of the sky, was rising in the distance as the sun set with a strange rainbow of hues. The whole place was weird. He kept a nervous watch for the men who threatened him earlier, searching the plains ahead and behind. How did he get here

from Aporto Bay? Mom and Jess would worry about him. What happened to the girl with the honey hair, and to her friends?

Dusk fell. A sweeping constellation of stars and galaxies was overwhelmingly close. Too close. His lungs burned, and his head pounded with every step. The menacing vultures were back. If he didn't get to the hills soon, he'd be cactus. Foreboding raked through his stomach at the sound of their flapping wings. The birds were huge and looked like some kind of demonic creature out of one of his video games. Maybe they weren't vultures after all.

Will struggled on. An eerie dark magenta clothed the desert. The trees on the mountains were visible now, even in the dim light. Weary with the exertion, his foot caught on a rock. He stumbled and fell. Three of the creatures plunged from the sky, screeching. Claws ripped at his flesh and clothes and their feathered wings whipped his face. He grabbed a stick lying nearby and slashed at them, then scrambled to his feet and ran like a crazed animal toward the mountains.

Trees. At last.

He crashed through the undergrowth until there was no sign of the birds and threw himself under the thickest vegetation he could find. Dead tired. Every heartbeat exploded the pain in his head. He tore some bread and pushed it into his mouth, hoping it might revive him, but every mouthful was an effort. At least he still had his teeth. He sipped the water with chapped lips, but it wasn't the sort of drink he craved at the moment.

Next time he opened his eyes, dry leaves half-buried him. Insects with zig-zagged orange markings crawled over his body. Pain still hammered his brain. Brushing away the insects, he rolled over and grabbed the lower branches of a tree, trying to stand, but without success.

His head was still resounding with the screaming of the crowds and the screeching and the crashing of the stadium as it went down. He wanted Mom and Jess. They'd be beside themselves with worry. His Mom would be bouncing off the walls by now. As if she didn't have enough problems. Will gritted his teeth. If he went missing would his father have any regrets about leaving them for home-wrecker fancy pants Maureen?

He checked his sand-filled pockets, wishing he had his phone.

The sun's rays waned, and a soft-breeze whisper rustled leaves. Will jumped as a shadow fell across him. A man as tall as a giant, with hair to his shoulders and eyes as bright as torchlights, loomed over him and scooped him up. Will yelled and struggled, but the man's muscles felt like rock.

He caught his breath at the man's face, luminous in the dim twilight. Was he even human? Things were getting more bizarre by the minute. Like reality had fractured, and he'd fallen through a crack. He'd never believed in the supernatural, but maybe the rift in the stadium had been a portal into another world.

He must have slept because the land around was different now. The giant carried him up a mountain of boulders and caves.

"Who are you?" Will called out, but the stranger didn't answer or react. They came to a rocky outcrop with a couple of sparse trees outside. The man bent low and carried him into a cave smelling of burned logs, then lowered him onto a soft bed of furs and left.

Will ran his hands over the seams of what looked like a pile of rabbit pelts underneath him, sewn together and flecked with white and gray. An oil lamp, dark-colored fruits, and a

rough clay container of water lay on the sandy stone floor next to him. There was also a makeshift metal oven with a flat top, with a flue pushing through the roof of the cave.

Will stumbled to the entrance and peered outside at a rocky terrain. The cave was on a hill that loomed high above a forest of trees which spread out like a choppy green ocean. Wispy smoke floated from a village below, the smell blended with the waft of a salty ocean. A jagged snow-capped mountain range stretched out in the distance, like the one on the calendar in his kitchen.

He sat outside, listening to the soft rushing gusts of wind in the forest and the bleating of goats on the peak of the hill. A mix of foreboding and homesickness formed a lump in his throat. He wouldn't make it to his shift at White Sands Cafe. Rob would be depending on him to help with the writing of their psych essay. The essay would be a dog's breakfast without his input. He grimaced. Rob was great with ideas, but he didn't have a way with words. Also, he'd miss the grading test for his black belt at Belmont Martial Arts. Being here was a waste of precious time.

He reached for a drink, but there was nothing. He was certain it had been there a moment earlier. His hands and feet tingled. Stomach cramps racked his body and a wash of desperation poured through him. If he didn't get a drink soon, he'd probably die. Thanks to his father's betrayal, he'd got used to numbing his pain with alcohol. Now he couldn't manage without it.

After a fitful sleep, he woke the next morning to find fresh water in a pottery jar and a pile of apples. The last thing he felt like was eating. He ran his fingers over the scabs of congealed blood on his head and crawled to the sandy entrance to relieve himself.

There was a sound. An enthralling sound drifting up from the valley. A girl singing. Notes resonated and filtered into his consciousness. They wrapped a silver thread through his thoughts. It was spine-tingling.

He had to meet this girl.

The singing stopped and memories from the day of the concert came crowding back. They raced through his mind like a parade of mice on a treadmill. After an early morning surf, he'd finished his overdue English assignment, and met the guys at his place. Lenny gave him a bag of drinks, which he'd sneaked through the dining room and into his bedroom for later. After that, they'd walked to Maddock Arena.

Then the disaster. It played in his head, over and over. How could the best day of his life become the worst day of his life?

\*\*\*

### 3

---

*Aporto Bay Hospital: Coma Ward.*

Erin maneuvered her wheelchair to the front doors of C Block at Aporto Bay General Hospital. Balmy air swept in from the bay. She took a deep breath, enjoying the freedom after being in suffocating A Block. If she could call it freedom when both of her legs were plastered from ankle to thigh.

She had a plan, and she needed to carry it out before the staff on her ward discovered she'd gone. She lifted her arms to tie her hair into a thick ponytail and winced at the pain in her bruised pelvis.

The glass entry doors swished open and cool air washed over her body. She rolled through and searched the directory on the left-hand wall.

"Need help?" A guy with freckles, wiry brown hair and a bandage wrapped around his head, leaned on crutches nearby. His gaze lingered too long on parts of her thin hospital gown.

"I'm visiting someone in the coma ward."

"It's on the right, next to ICU. Pretty full at the moment. Hi, I'm Mitch."

"Were you injured in the stadium collapse?" she asked

"Just going in for my electric shock therapy and lobotomy."

She gave him a crunched-up smile.

"Shame we're out of action. It's ace weather for a surf." The lift opened, and he stepped in.

Her wheelchair made a zinging noise on the polished vinyl floor as she followed his directions. She pressed a red button on the wall. The doors to the ward swung open, and she peered inside, holding her breath.

Morning light flooded the room, accentuating the whiteness of the cotton blankets on the beds. Breathing apparatus, an extensive plumbing of cords and drips, linked to the ghostly bodies of the patients. The disinfectant didn't mask an unpleasant stench in the air.

A nurse approached. She had pulled her brown hair back so tightly that her face had a cling-wrapped look. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Will Sutherland." Erin checked the name badge on the nurse's lapel. Skye Baxter.

"Are you family?" Nurse Baxter asked. She lacked the bedside manner Erin had expected.

"No, an acquaintance."

The nurse pressed her lips into an invisible line. "You aren't permitted in this ward. Does the staff in your ward know you're here?"

"I slipped out. Can I see Will, just for a minute?" Erin bit her lip.

The nurse glanced toward a bed with a patient attached to a wall of machines. His lanky frame lay dead still. A knife-sharp spasm flashed through Erin. So he was the guy who'd saved her.

"Entry's not permitted. It's a matter of privacy."

“Okay. Sorry.” Erin wheeled herself down the corridor. Her stomach clenched as hard as the plaster casts on her aching legs. The painkillers were wearing off. But she’d see Will Sutherland, no matter what anyone said.

\*\*\*

Two days later, Erin returned to the coma ward. She pushed through the swinging doors to the nurses’ station.

“Who are you looking for, dear?” A nurse with short gray hair looked up from the observation desk. “Do you have a pass?”

“My name’s Erin O’Connell. Here’s a letter from Susan Sutherland, Will’s mother. I was in the stadium accident, and she’d like me to visit him.”

The nurse looked at the letter and Erin’s plastered legs. She nodded and pointed to Will’s bed.

“I’ll organize a pass for you. We’re doing all we can for him.”

Will’s sun-bleached brown hair spilled onto the pillow. Stubble covered his chiseled jaw. A sheet draped his body. Erin gripped the handles of her wheelchair, struggling to breathe. Various drips and tubes pierced his muscled arms. There were enough machines and screens around his bed to run a spaceship.

Good-looking guy. Shame he was out of action. She touched his hand, avoiding the lacerations. It was unresponsive and cold. Hot tears sprang to her eyes. She blinked them away, pulled a laptop from a bag hanging on her wheelchair, and flipped it open. She set it to play soft music. She checked him regularly for any movement. But there was nothing.

An hour later, she pulled out her water bottle and gulped two smuggled pills from her bag. The staff in A Block would be looking for her, but she wanted to stay.

“Can you hear the music, Will?” she whispered. “I’m so, so sorry. It should have been me in this ward. I’ll make it up to you. Promise.”

Did his eyelids flicker? Erin held her breath, wondering if she’d imagined it. A nurse tapped her shoulder. It was Nurse Baxter, with two hypodermic needles on a tray.

“You need to go now. It’s time for Will’s next treatment.”

Before she left, Erin leaned over him and whispered in his ear. “Please wake up, Will. Please.”

\*\*\*

**These are the first three chapters from *The Craving*, which is due to be launched towards the end of 2021.**

For news about the release of *The Craving* and other books to be launched this year, please subscribe to my newsletters, at no cost to you. They will come with the offer of free gifts/resources for readers and writers, such as timesavers, journals and planners. The newsletters will be emailed every two or three months—so you won’t be inundated.

When you first subscribe, you’ll be sent a free, illustrated short story titled *The Hunted*, written by me. *The Hunted* is set in a dystopian world.



*How could five friends disappear and survive in a world of surveillance and attack  
drones?*

*How will they keep in contact with others who don't follow the hegemon government?*

I would love to have you on my subscription list!

Jean Saxby.

\*\*\*

Another way to keep in touch is to subscribe to my *Live a Better Life* website:

<https://towardsrecovery.com.au/>

This website has free regular wellbeing content and help for addictions, cravings and anxiety.

\*\*\*