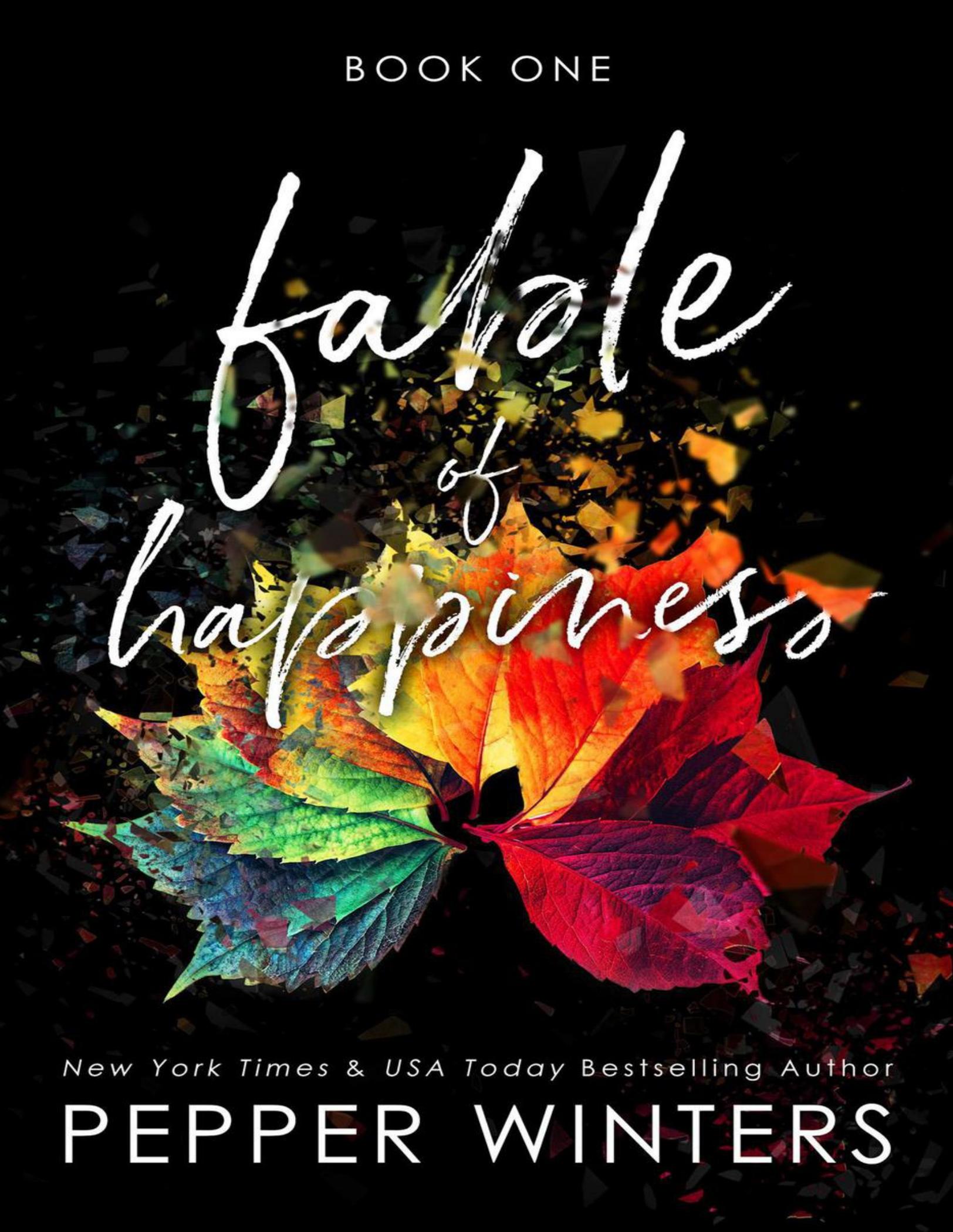


BOOK ONE



*Fable
of
Happiness*

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

PEPPER WINTERS

Fable
of
Happiness
Book One
by

New York Times Bestseller
Pepper Winters



Fable of Happiness (Book One)
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OTHER WORK BY PEPPER WINTERS

Pepper currently has over thirty books released in nine languages. She's hit best-seller lists (USA Today, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal) almost forty times. She dabbles in multiple genres, ranging from Dark Romance to Coming of Age. She lives on a small farm with six horses, one rabbit, and one very obliging husband.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OTHER WORK BY PEPPER WINTERS

Fable of Happiness Blurb

It's the start of something huge.

From New York Times Bestseller, Pepper Winters, comes a new Dark Romance full of decadent angst, monstrous heroes, and pages chock-full of lust.

A house hidden in the middle of nowhere.

A man who's lived alone for a decade.

A woman who trespasses on his solitude.

A love full of hate as well as hunger.

The thing about my life is...I was never in control of it.

I just I thought I was.

I thought I had everything figured out—a good career, fun hobbies, a bright future, but everything changed when I found an ivy-cloaked house, tucked in a forgotten valley, hiding a man who corrupted my world forever.

I thought I was successful, until he showed me fortune and happiness could be snatched away in an instant.

I believed I was blessed, but really, I was cursed.

Cursed to become a plaything for a monster.

Cursed to become a prisoner just because I trespassed.

Now, I know nothing.

I am nothing.

I'm just his.

Please note this is a dark romance and not suitable for people who have triggers. Content included can be hard to read and only recommended for people who like dark romance.

“Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.” Rainer Maria Rilke



PROLOGUE

THE DAY I WAS BORN, a curse was put upon me.

That curse grew with me from boyhood to man. I had no mark to prove it.
No doctor to confirm it.

But I knew.

A blackness had attached itself to me, and I was cursed.

It was irrefutable.

Because of this fact, I didn't look upon surprises as favorable. Surprises
in my world meant pain and punishment. I liked methods. Rules.
Comfortable habits and familiar routines.

So, what are you going to do with her?

My hands balled as I paced outside the cell where I'd thrown her.

I don't know.

That was a lie.

I knew what I should do.

I should kill her because she'd found me. She'd stumbled upon my
carefully hidden world. She'd had the audacity to enter my home. To step
foot upon my domain.

So...kill her.

I stopped.

I glared at the heavy wooden door, dropping my gaze to the rusty padlock that'd continued its role of imprisonment for far too long.

Eleven years.

Eleven years since I'd looked upon another person. Eleven years since I'd felt that raw hate bubble in my blood, demanding violence, chanting for their pain before they could summon mine.

Do it.

I pulled the key from my pocket.

I opened the door.

I stepped inside to face my enemy.



CHAPTER ONE

MY MOTHER USED TO SAY I was blessed.

Her tone might have been sarcastic, and her praises might have been fake, but that didn't change the fact that I agreed with her.

I was blessed.

I was born in the summer, I liked to learn, and I'd had a happy childhood. Well, I had until my dad passed away from a sudden stroke, leaving me and my little brother, Joshua, at the mercy of my fragile mother, who used scorn to patch up her own heavy grief.

But, because I was blessed, the minute Joshua turned eighteen and rented a place with some friends, I moved out of the house too, assuring my mother that I would always be there for her. That I would always answer the phone and forever be her daughter, even if she couldn't understand why life seemed, in her words, "to favor me and not her."

By favor me, she meant that by the time I was twenty-three, I'd quit my job as a travel agent and would never have to work for someone else again. I was free of the rat race. A self-made millionaire.

And it was all thanks to a passion that'd started in school and had morphed into a career that provided an ample income to buy my quaint

lavender-painted house, squirrel away my retirement fund, and enabled a lavish lifestyle, if I chose to.

Pity that I chose simple things.

I didn't drink or smoke. I didn't party or favor expensive dresses or makeup. Yes, I had the latest gadgets in video recording and laptop software, but those items, along with new carabiners, rope, and chalk, were all tax deductible because of my career.

My career that my mother couldn't understand. That friends from school rolled their eyes at, and other peers glowered at with envy.

I was one of the few women climbers who'd struck gold on YouTube.

A girl with strength in her fingers and flexibility in her body to scale complicated boulders, cliff faces, and technical mountains.

First, it was just the sponsorships. The free climbing shoes and exercise leggings as I won more local and regional contests.

Then it was the appearances. The brief reviews I was requested to give on climbing gyms around the USA led to some larger companies flying me overseas to sample their own routes and walls, quoting me in magazines who'd dubbed me as "The Girl Gravity Can't See."

As my notoriety increased, so too did the prize winnings. I had the opportunity to train with elites and enter contests reserved for champions.

I enjoyed all aspects of competition. I liked indoor climbing as well as outdoor challenges. However, my personal favorite was climbing on my own. No spotter. No belayer. No one to catch me if I fell.

One afternoon, I'd left the city behind on a quest to find a waterfall I'd seen mentioned on a couple of climbing forums. For four hours, I'd climbed its treacherous rocks. I almost fell. I made a few mistakes and triumphed on a few challenges. I truly felt as if I was the girl gravity couldn't see.

I'd loved the experience so much, I'd created a profile online and posted the recording from my camera that I'd set at the bottom of the waterfall. Just a simple recap showing the route I'd taken, the cuts I'd endured, and the time-lapse journey of me scaling moss-covered rocks all while water drenched me.

The light had been perfect on the cascade. The rainbows had been exquisite. The colors had been magical. I'd wanted to immortalize the experience by uploading it.

I'd tagged a few climbing acquaintances, labeled the video "Swimming in the Sky," and then gone to bed.

I woke to a viral sensation.

And the rest was history.

Now, at twenty-six, I'd hit over three million subscribers, had a nest egg that my bank manager looked at enviously, and got to do what I loved for a living.

I was blessed.

In everything but love.

With a sigh, I scanned the profile I'd just filled in for a dating site. *Active Souls* promised to match like-minded sporty individuals with other successful athletes.

I'd tried dating the old-fashioned way. I'd been on a few blind dates set up by friends. I'd agreed to a few drinks with men I'd met at the gym. I'd even had dinner with a man who'd done a double take at the gas station as I fed fuel to my sand-colored Jeep Wrangler.

He'd asked if it was my boyfriend's car, eyeing up my off-road tires, well-earned dents, and light bar. He'd been dubious when I said she was mine, followed by instant sexual interest.

I needed such a car.

My work, my videos, required me to explore backroads in search of boulders that no one had climbed yet, of waterfalls too tricky for others to attempt. I wasn't afraid of crawling over riverbeds or creeping up hillsides with my Wrangler for the perfect video that would hit a million views in just a few days.

The guy at the gas station—who'd been intrigued instead of intimidated—had asked for my number. He'd seemed sane enough, so I'd given it to him. We'd gone out. He'd said all the right things.

I hadn't been with anyone in years, so, feeling reckless, I invited him back to my home, and we slept together. The sex had been okay. I got more thrills from climbing a piece of sandstone, if I was honest, but it was nice to have company.

However, the next morning, he announced he and his wife had seen my channel, and he found me hot. Hot enough to cheat on his wife and turn me off men altogether.

Who would have thought that at twenty-six, the majority of single people came with such heavy baggage already? Most had a child, sometimes two. Some were still living at home with their parents. Some were embroiled in a messy divorce. Some openly sought affairs. And the majority? The majority

were overweight, didn't exercise, and their personal ambition was drinking on the weekend with their workmates.

Why are you doing this?

I rolled my eyes at my profile again.

Because I'm stupid, that's why.

Name: Gemma Ashcroft

Age: Twenty-six

Appearance: Blonde, hazel eyes, curvy but athletic

Ethnicity: Half American, half Norwegian.

Looking for: A man who loves the outdoors. Single. Loves to travel. Doesn't mind camping and exploring off the beaten track. Trustworthy. Kind. Passionate. Intelligent—

“Ugh.” I deleted it all. “Just give up, Gem. Get a dog that you can drag around the backcountry and accept that you're successful in business, but in romance...you suck.”

Nodding at my wisdom, I went to close out of the site, but a rush of rebellion shot down my fingers, and I typed:

Looking for: A man who's dominant and dangerous but not afraid of a woman who's probably far more successful than he is. A man who knows how to grant pleasure without thinking he's some gift to womankind. A man who knows how to cook and clean without needing a girlfriend for a maid. A man who doesn't have fifteen exes, two kids, a beer belly, and can't use a screwdriver. A man who...is a man. An old-fashioned man who is prickly but sweet. Who is gruff but kind. A man who will sweep me off my feet but allow me to fly free, all while he makes me come alive beneath his tongue.

“You are *such* an idiot.” I laughed under my breath as I deleted the entire thing, closed the window, and went to shut down my laptop. “No more daydreaming of fantastical men who don't exist.”

A flashing notification caught my eye, alerting me to a new post in *Climbers Anon*. I opened my screen again. I'd stalked that online group for a few years. The group's tagline promised virgin routes, secret boulders, and untried mountains.

In the years I'd followed them, they hadn't posted a single adventure that I hadn't already done or heard about.

Until now.

As I scanned the link and the hazy photo of a boulder cluster covered in weeds and debris, my heart rate picked up.

Kentucky Khaleesi

Found two days ago deep within Mammoth Cave National Park. Overgrown. Hidden in a ravine that seems impassable. I've marked the trail to get there with yellow ribbon. Didn't climb down as had no gear. 4WD required, followed by steep descent on foot. Whoever gets there first can name the route. Climbing grade? I'd say fucking hard.

My heart pumped faster as I glanced at my dirty, well-used backpack where I'd tossed it by the front door. I hadn't found an exciting climb in a few months. Regardless, I kept my bag packed with food and camping necessities, and carried around a permanent tent and bedroll in the back of my Jeep, along with all my ropes, gear, and filming equipment.

I could leave in a few minutes.

I could be the first.

I could claim it.

Enlarging the photo, I squinted at the size and shape. Fog had rolled into the valley where it was hiding, distorting the lines. Weeds made the outline of rock and plant hard to distinguish, and twilight shadows hid most of its secrets.

I couldn't tell if it would be a worthwhile journey from just the picture. However, I could see it was big. A looming giant rock compared to the trees below. It was untouched by human hands. It was calling to me to scale.

What else do you have planned?

I had no contests for the rest of the year. No luncheons with girlfriends. No dinners with potential lovers. I didn't even have a dog to walk. I was successful, healthy, and had ensured my future would always include financial freedom. But...I was alone, and I didn't like the emptiness of not having a challenge to tackle.

Look at what a few days with idle hands has done to me.

I'd stooped low enough to fill out a profile for an online dating site. I didn't care if all my ex-school friends had found their husbands and wives that way. I didn't buy into the advertisement that online dating was safer and far more effective than trolling parks, bars, and coffee shops looking for that perfect other half.

It was time I accepted that my love affair included granite, quartz, and feldspar instead of someone with a heartbeat.

And you know what? That's totally fine with me.

Stone couldn't trick you or tease you. It couldn't pretend to be interested because of your money or lie that they were single and sane.

Stone was clinical, cold, and didn't care if you conquered it. Because if you didn't, then it conquered you by throwing you into the dirt—broken bones and all.

I'm going.

Standing, I closed my laptop, stuffed it into its travel case, and packed the solar chargers for my phone, camera, and other tech stuff I'd take with me. Triple checking that my backpack still held enough supplies, I grabbed my personal locator beacon from the side table by the window and strode out the front door with swift steps.

After tossing my gear into the back of the Jeep, I pulled up my brother's number.

My life might consist of taking off on whims and chasing granite playgrounds, but it didn't mean I was stupid. If I ever got seriously injured and needed to be airlifted out, I had a location beacon. I had a GPS tracker on my car if it ever got stolen while I was up a cliff somewhere. And I religiously texted my brother where my next spontaneous adventure led me.

Me: Hey, Josh. I'm leaving. Going to Mammoth Cave National Park. I'll have my GPS and locator. Probably won't have reception on my phone. It's a seven-hour drive, so I'm guessing it'll be a few days by the time I find it, climb it, and get back to civilization. The boulder I'm hunting for is on Climbers Anon. Use my log-in to get more info if you need to. Don't start panicking unless I go missing for five days, okay? Five days then put Operation Find Stupid Sister into play. Hope you have a great week!

He replied almost instantly.

Joshua: First, it's midnight. Perhaps sleep first, then go driving cross-country? Second, only you would willingly go get lost in some national park and call it fun.

Me: You know I'm a night owl. If I leave now, I can be there for dawn and get some amazing light shots. There'll be park rangers there. They'll look after me if I need help.

Joshua: They'll most likely shoot you if you're covered in bracken and dirt, crawling monkey-style down a mountain. They'll claim they finally caught Bigfoot.

Me: Ha-ha.

Joshua: *Be safe! Give me access to your phone location so I can track you.*

Me: *I'll turn the mode on, but I doubt reception will be reliable enough to show where I am.*

Joshua: *For Christmas, I'm gonna get you that portable Wi-Fi docking station for hikers. Least then you can have your own satellite internet, and you won't be able to use 'off-grid' as an excuse not to call me.*

Me: *Go back to bed and stop nagging me.*

Joshua: *Stop climbing rocks and messaging me at bedtime.*

Me: *Love you.*

Joshua: *You too.*

With a smile on my face and excitement bubbling in my heart, I tossed my phone onto the passenger seat, inserted my key, and cranked the Wrangler's grouchy engine. My trusty Jeep yawned and growled, lurching out of my driveway, used to me waking it up in the middle of the night to go on some boulder hunt.

Switching gears, I glanced back at my house. My own slice of suburbia in the middle of Michigan.

I sighed with contentment.

God, I was so unbelievably lucky.

I wasn't clever with gardens, so the flower beds were wild, and the lawn needed a trim, but the façade was freshly painted with lavender cheer, and I'd had the roof redone in a dark charcoal.

The privacy offered by the three-bedroom place made up for all the lonely nights I might have endured. I loved it. I loved that it was mortgage-free and waiting for me to return. I loved that it wasn't just a house but my confidant who sheltered and protected me.

See you in a few days, house!

If only I'd known I'd lied that night.

It wouldn't be a few days before I saw it again.

It would be never.



CHAPTER TWO

I WAS A CREATURE OF habit.

The moment the sun rose, I was awake. Not drowsy or groggy or still half asleep. When my eyes opened, my instincts were alert, my mind sharp, my body primed for a fight. I didn't know if that was a product of my existence or something genetic, but I'd never get answers to those questions.

I'd never know why, after eleven years of living on my own, I'd chosen to stay. I'd never know if the world had imploded or if humans still walked the streets.

Questions like that didn't interest me. Partly because it didn't make any difference to my life but mostly because I didn't care.

As long as I was left alone, then I was content.

As long as I didn't do anything stupid and got hurt, I could live a good life hidden away from others.

Climbing out of bed, I quickly fluffed my pillow and tucked the blankets into neat corners under the mattress. The single bed was too small these days, and the frame had sunk in the middle, but it was the only place I felt safe enough to permit unconsciousness to find me.

It didn't matter that this place had twenty other bedrooms. Each one was a tomb for a devil. I'd closed the doors and did my best to forget about them. Apart from this dormitory—tucked in the back wing above the kitchen and

the ten-car garage with eight empty beds identical to mine—there was nowhere else I trusted. Nowhere else I'd fortified so strongly that every window was rigged with traps and the door groaned with locks.

Occasionally, in the past few years, I'd been tempted to claim the cavernous garage below as my own. The massive space promised a much comfier existence, and the fact that it only had one window and a bank of roller doors that could be jammed shut gave it a gold star in security.

It didn't smell of oil or engine grease because it'd never housed a single car. It was utterly pointless to this estate. Vehicle access to this place wasn't possible.

Helicopters weren't welcome, boats couldn't venture, no manmade transportation of any kind could enter. The only way in was via the cave, and the only way to find the entrance was to be shown.

Satisfied my bed was neat, I slipped my naked body into the clothes I'd laid out the night before. Unfortunately, I'd outgrown my old clothes over a decade ago. Now, I was forced to wear what was left behind. Every few years, I'd raid another wardrobe, chase away the moths, and claim a new outfit.

I didn't like expensive. I didn't like embellished. I liked comfortable and practical, and the expensive gray slacks and silky taupe shirt had long since lost any attempt at being rich.

Now, the slacks were more three-quarter length than full because the bottoms had been dragged in mud and caught on debris in the garden, leaving tattered material and jagged edges. A few holes lined the thighs, and a pocket was torn.

The shirt was no better.

The taupe now resembled dirt, thanks to the silk material not washing so well. Three of the top onyx buttons were missing along with one on the bottom, leaving my chest mostly on display. The cuffs had been torn off completely after I'd gotten pissed with the tightness around my wrists.

Not that I cared what I looked like. I'd long since smashed the mirrors in this place. I couldn't remember exactly why I'd attacked them but, good riddance.

After one last survey of my dorm, one last glance at the matching empty beds, I strode to the door and undid the numerous locks barricading me in. Like always, hate trickled into my heart as I stepped past the comforts of my bedroom and my bare feet padded down the rough wooden staircase.

That hate only billowed as I stalked through the servant's corridor and followed the stone wall to the kitchen. Dawn sunlight trickled over the marble tiled floor, etching the huge bank of honey-colored cupboards, wooden bench tops, and industrial-grade ovens in gold and red light.

My eyes adjusted from the darkness, grateful that another day had found me. That I'd survived another night. Two sparrows squabbled on the windowsill, hopping through the ivy vines and bouncing in the leaves.

Cutting across to the exterior door that led to the expansive chef gardens, I unlocked the handmade deadbolt and swung it wide.

Instantly, fresh air spilled inside.

Thank God.

I closed my eyes and inhaled.

Fragrant, delicious, untainted air.

Stepping outside, I crushed daisies beneath my bare feet, and the carpet of wild grass waved in the slight breeze as I left my stone prison and did what I did each morning.

Before I'd eaten a thing; before I'd drunk from the stream or done any chores, I ran.

I needed to remind myself that I was *free* to run. To bolt from this place, to leave if I pleased, to return only once I was exhausted and grateful for its shelter and warmth.

I didn't need to ask why I ran. I already knew the answer to that question. However, somehow, over the years of being alone, I'd erected a wall between my memories and my present.

I did know, somewhere deep inside me, who I was, what my name had been, and why I'd done what I did. The past could never be deleted. Always there, murky and morbid.

It waited for me in my sleep, and it slashed at me in my nightmares. And while it was dark, I belonged to those memories. I relived the past I couldn't escape. But the moment it was light, I was free. My skills at forgetting had successfully shoved aside the shadows.

I raised my face to the sun, crisscrossed with the branch ceiling high above, blocked by leaves and secrets. I hadn't seen the sky in its entirety in years. I hadn't dared to venture past the cave to the wilderness beyond. Why should I? Only death and misery waited.

As long as the sun rose and my bare feet could run the familiar wooded paths, then my recollections remained painlessly blank.

I was just me.

A man who lived alone.

A man who was a stranger to himself.



CHAPTER THREE

I DIDN'T GET THERE FOR dawn.

In fact, the seven-hour drive turned into ten hours, thanks to the winding national park roads, uncertain backtracks, and a fear that I might not find Kentucky's Khalessi, after all.

Noon came and went as I continued slipping off main tracks and following old forest trails that'd long since grown over. My poor Jeep earned more scratches and a few dings as I eased it between low hanging branches and skirted past large boulders that looked as if they'd been dropped from the sky and pockmarked the earth around it.

At the beginning, the national park had been populated. The camping zones held laughing kids, bright tents, and flustered adults trying to figure out how to cook over a firepit for authenticity.

A few groups of guided tours had left on scripted adventures, and a couple of rangers, who'd been patrolling the more active areas of the park, had waved at me from their vehicles, nodding in appreciation of such a beautiful sunny day.

Now, I was alone.

My phone registered no internet, my GPS tracker on my Wrangler kept flicking with "location error," and my bones were rattled from off-roading.

At some point, I'd had to release some air from my tires, making them softer and better at creeping over rocks and ravines, hoping to spot a sprig of yellow ribbon in the trees—the markers left behind by whoever had found this new, untouched boulder. Whoever it was certainly had an adventurous spirit or somehow had the best luck in the world.

This place was dense. Dense and wild and entirely inhospitable at finding anything, let alone a climbing route.

Stopping my Jeep in the middle of yet another narrow and chaotic path, I pulled up the last comment posted in *Climbers Anon*. I'd screenshot it a few hours ago before my internet blinked out, scanning for clues on the boulders location.

Turn off the main drag after you've passed the tree that looks like Harry Potter's scar. Go over the stream, up the hill, travel to the left when you find three rock formations covered in moss, then keep driving until you find the drop-off. You'll have to walk from there.

Well, as far as I could tell, I'd followed the instructions. I'd found a weird lightning bolt-shaped tree. I'd turned down the overgrown trail, I'd tracked over a small river, I'd crawled past three rocks that had transformed into green molehills instead of glittering granite, and now, here I was, sitting in the forest hopelessly lost.

Josh is going to kill me.

The shared app that gave him my location always sent a snooty text when it dropped out of range, tattling on me for disappearing.

Ah, well...I guess this is the end of the road.

Inhaling, I turned off the engine and narrowed my eyes, studying the green haze of the forest. Birds flittered in spiels of sunlight, butterflies fluttered past my window while enjoying their exceedingly short existence, and a peaceful, heavy silence fell, surrounding me, enveloping me, blocking out any hint that I'd just escaped from a city.

You couldn't find this sort of silence anywhere else. It didn't exist if buildings were present. It didn't deafen you in suburbia. This thick, impenetrable silence was created by the trees themselves. The rustle of their leaves was the white noise, the imposing height of their trunks the distortion of all other sounds.

This silence was both religious and rare, and goosebumps sprang down my arms as I opened my door and stepped out.

Bird song interrupted the silence. I found their twills and chirps better than any music on the radio.

I stepped forward, entranced.

Mud squelched over my hiking boots as I stood in the middle of nowhere and *breathed*.

Tart greenery.

Sodden bracken.

Fragrant flowers.

Heaven.

All that was missing was the sharp scent of stone and the powdery smell of climbing chalk.

Time to go deeper.

As I turned to open the back door to grab my gear, a flutter of yellow caught my eye.

Aha!

Dashing forward, I grabbed the satin. I'd expected bright yellow—something new and fresh. Instead, this marker was weathered. Sun-bleached and rain-splotched, it was more cream than yellow. Whoever had posted in the forum had made it sound like it had been a recent discovery, yet this ribbon spoke of history and waiting.

Huh.

I frowned, running the ribbon through my fingers, wincing as it tore from being so brittle. A chill scattered down my spine despite the hot sun. A sense of adventure and uncertainty tingled in my belly.

Looking up, I spotted another frayed ribbon hanging despondently deeper in the undergrowth. Just as old, just as impatient to be found.

Stupidly, the faded ribbons affected me. It made me sad to think of them being left to rot in the middle of nowhere, their only job to guide someone to a climb that had somehow come to mean more to me than just a YouTube video and speared me right in my heart.

I didn't know if it was from the podcast I'd listened to on Mammoth Cave National Park on the long drive over here. If the stories of vast interconnected cave systems, historic landmarks, ghost warnings, and fantastical folklore had infiltrated my blood instead of my business brain, but I *needed* to climb this boulder.

Not for likes or subscribers, not for ad revenue or fame.

But because I felt a kindred spirit to something hidden away, happy in its seclusion, harboring a loneliness despite its wild perfection.

Turning my back on the ribbon, an urgency crackled in my legs.

I need to go.

I have to see what's out there.

Rushing to slip deeper into this new world, I dragged my backpack from the Jeep and placed it on the little hill out of the muck. Leaning into the back seat, I pulled out my bedroll, sleeping bag, and tent, followed by long lengths of rope, a mess of carabiners, cams, and quickdraws. I never knew what sort of terrain I'd find. Sometimes, the boulder was straight forward after a good clean and assessment of its crags. Other times, a boulder turned out to be a cliff face, requiring spring-loaded cams and ropes to keep me safe.

The ropes and carabiners were heavy, but they were my lifeline, and I wouldn't leave necessary gear behind. My climbing shoes and chalk bag were tucked inside a spare set of clothes, which completed my basic staples.

Opening the large container in the tailgate, I grabbed enough granola bars, packet pastas, Fruit Roll-Ups, chocolate bars, and electrolytes to last two days. The rest of my rations I left. If I couldn't hike to the boulder and back in a couple of days, then I always had more supplies here.

I never went into the wilderness without at least a week's worth of food, plus reserves. I had eighty liters of water in containers, and I had a medical bag full of needles, antibiotics, and bandages that I'd taken a course on how to use. The knowledge of how to set a bone, stitch a wound, and self-treat to stay alive until I could find a doctor was a skill I was glad to have.

Taking my stash, I diligently strapped, stuffed, and tied everything to my backpack before hoisting the heavy weight onto my back.

Carabiners clanked together, rope cord flopped over my shoulder, and my water bottle hung from the front strap. It was cumbersome and top-heavy, but better to take precautions now than be sorry later.

My last task before I left my trusty steed was to pull up the hood and unhook the car battery. I'd learned that the hard way. Nothing worse than returning after a week of exploring only to find your battery had died.

Choosing the tree with the first ribbon tied to it, I dug a shallow hole beneath and placed my keys into it, covering it with a small rock that I scratched with my penknife for visibility.

I didn't like climbing with my keys. Taking them with me might mean I lost them. Leaving them at the base of a climb might mean they'd get stolen.

This way, I knew where they were. Safe and waiting for my return.

There.

Is that everything?

My receptionless phone was in one legging pocket. My PLB—personal locator beacon—was in another. The cumbersome size stretched my Lycra, but it'd been drilled into me to always, *always* have the PLB on your person and not in your backpack. You never knew when you might need it or what sort of injury could occur.

Tapping the bottom of my backpack, where my recording devices were packed and protected by clothing, I took a deep breath. I would carry substantial weight on my adventure, but at least I would be prepared.

I'm ready.

Running over my mental checklist again, I buckled the backpack around my waist and strode happily into the thicket.

* * * * *

You have to admit defeat. For tonight at least.

I sighed as I unbuckled my backpack and allowed it to slip from my aching shoulders. It crashed against the earth, sounding almost disappointed in me.

How did this happen?

I'd followed the ribbon. I'd kept going until all scraps of faded yellow were gone, pushing onward in the hopes of finding the path again. I'd doubled back. I'd stopped and looked at my compass. I'd swept the landscape for any sign of a valley holding a boulder that some stranger had posted in an anonymous forum.

I'd taken their word. I'd gone on a wild goose chase that ended with me alone, in the middle of nowhere, utterly vulnerable to anyone who thought they'd have a joke.

Perhaps they were laughing at me in the bushes, rolling their eyes at my gullibility to have followed a ribboned trail into an uninhabited national park.

You really aren't very smart, Gem.

I huffed, running grubby hands over my face and wiping away the sweat from my seven-hour hike. Scanning the darkening trees, I hoped whoever'd posted about the boulder hadn't planned to ambush whoever was stupid enough to fall for it.

Am I safe?

I'd gone so far off the trail, I'd put a few miles between me and the last ribbon, but still. Anything was possible in such a wild place.

Unfortunately—and I never admitted this lightly—I was lost.

I'd been lost before on other expeditions, but this time? I had no sense of direction on how to get back. I'd been so stupidly focused on those damn ribbons, allowing them to tug me forward and not paying much attention to my surroundings, that I'd gotten turned around, confused, and now had the enjoyable task of admitting to myself that tonight, I wouldn't be climbing a virgin rock, but setting up a lonely camp for one and hoping my brain rebooted so I could figure out how to get back to my Jeep in the morning.

Hopefully, you're alive in the morning.

Shut it.

I rolled my eyes, angry with myself. Frustrated at my predicament and short-tempered because I was tired. So, so tired.

Exhaustion buckled my legs, and I plummeted to the ground. My toes hurt from my hiking boots. I was thirsty, hungry, and my eyes stung from being awake for over twenty-four hours.

That's probably why you're lost, you know.

I shouldn't have set out on a fool's quest without a nap first. I should've taken my time. It wasn't like I had deadlines or pressure from someone to post videos at certain times.

All of this was my fault, and I had no one else to blame.

So, you better stop feeling sorry for yourself and get organized before it's blacker than death out here.

I half-heartedly tried to summon energy into my feeble body, willing my legs to stand and my arms to unpack my tent. However...just ten minutes.

A ten-minute rest, and then I'll set up camp.

Checking there were no branches or predators behind me, I flopped onto my back and groaned in relief.

Good God, that feels amazing.

The sensation of going from vertical with a heavy weight pulling on my shoulders to blessedly free and horizontal was almost enough for me not to care about setting up my tent at all.

Ten minutes only and then you're being smart.

I groaned again, arguing with common sense.

The earth had never felt so comfortable. The air cooled the heat from my exertion. My muscles relaxed until I was a puddle of hiking boots and dirty leggings.

After ten minutes passed—to be honest, it could have been seconds with how quickly it came and went—I did the responsible thing and sat up.

I couldn't stop the heavy groan or the stiffness as I clambered to my feet and stretched out the worst of my tied-up and overworked muscles. My body existed in an annoying realm of what my fellow climbers called "climbing fit." To usual humans who didn't put their lives on the line by ascending vast piles of rock, I had more tone and strength than any gym bunny was allowed. But to other climbers? The YouTube idols and the free climbing gods, I was a couch potato who ate far too much caramel fudge.

Right now, I felt exactly like an unfit pudding and stumbled about very inelegantly as I shook out my tent, secured the poles, tightened the guy ropes, shoved my sleeping bag into the one-person orange and teal sleeping pod, and kicked off my hiking boots before crawling inside.

Darkness fell in a heavy cloak of nothingness, almost as if it had been waiting for me to have a roof before clicking out the lights. No stars tonight. No moon. Just me and my solar torch, which turned into a lantern by untwisting the middle and hanging it from the hook I'd sewn into the ceiling.

I didn't bother changing.

I didn't bother setting up other creature comforts such as chargers, water bottles, or a tripod for my video diary.

I was spent.

I used what little energy I had left to eat two granola bars, clean my teeth, then burrowed into my sleeping bag and crashed.

* * * * *

I woke panting.

I jack-knifed up.

I hit my head on my lantern swinging from the tent's ceiling.

I froze and clamped both hands over my mouth to stop my heavy breathing.

What the hell was that?

I blinked.

Something...something dangerous.

My ears twitched for the bloodcurdling howl that'd woken me.
It'd reached into my dreams and yanked me out with bloody claws.

A bear?

A bobcat?

Coyote?

Slowly, I dropped my hands from my mouth and clenched my sleeping bag. Instinct made me reach for my windbreaker that I'd tossed in the corner, grabbing the knife that'd helped me more than once. A simple switchblade with a mother-of-pearl handle, it'd cut away vines that I'd stumbled into, carved firewood, and skinned fish for dinner.

It was as familiar in my fingers as stone was, but I'd never used it in self-defense. I'd taken a quick course when I'd started off-roading into deeper, more desolate places, but I'd never left myself so open to violence before.

Shit.

The noise came again.

I ducked involuntarily as if the howl could reach through the material of my tent and pluck me from my sleeping bag. It echoed in the ravine I'd camped above, ripped up the hillsides, banged morbid drums on the rock faces, and tangled with the trees that both absorbed the snarl and amplified it.

Not a bear. Not a bobcat or coyote.

Then...what is it?

I'd never heard such wretchedness. Never had a noise stop my heart and scratch itself over every inch of my skin, leaving me shaking and out of breath.

Leaving me desperate to know what it was.

It came again. A lament as well as a roar. A thundering shockwave of pure suffering.

An instinctual part welled deep inside me. My hand curled around my knife, not in self-defense this time, but in preparation to do what was necessary and put such a broken creature out of its misery.

The sound came again. Haunted and low, dismembered by the slight breeze and carried away before I could determine if it was animal, human, or otherworldly.

Crawling from my temporary bedroom, I climbed to my feet, swaying in the bracken, my socks catching on leaf debris, my hand raised with my knife.

Still no moon, no stars. Without my lantern, I couldn't see two steps in front of me.

If I went exploring, I might fall down the cliff not far from where I'd set up camp. I could break a leg and never get out of this place.

I could die here.

The howl came a final time, echoing with grief and the undeniable moan for help. It sounded like fury melted with sadness, throbbing with terror and torment.

It made me *ache*.

Made me desperate to help.

And then, it was gone.

And no matter how long I stood outside, a single girl exposed to the elements with every instinct straining to find such a creature, only silence and leaves existed.



CHAPTER FOUR

I'D BEEN DIGGING AGAIN.

Holding up my hands, I scowled at the dirt beneath my nails, the mud up my arms, and the soil spread through my single bed.

Fuck.

That hadn't happened in a while. It'd been years since I'd had the faculties to unlock the multiple barriers on the dormitory door and sneak my way outside in my sleep. To move with the moonlight. To slip between shadows, naked and silent, before falling to my knees in the earth.

Looking past my dirt-caked hands, I narrowed my eyes at the window.

It was ajar.

Vaulting from my bed, I bolted to it. Grabbing the wrought iron frame, I fisted the old-fashioned latch.

Why is this open?

Who?

How?

My eyes shot around the room, flying over empty beds, searching barren walls, and probing into dark corners.

I stilled and stopped breathing, waiting to hear an intruder cough or command. My skin bristled, and if I'd been graced with fur instead of pitiful flesh, I would've shuddered with a warning hackle.

Just like it'd been years since I'd been digging in the night, it'd also been a while since I was young enough to fantasize. To pretend I was another beast—any other beast—than what I was. I'd read every single book in this godforsaken place three times over. I'd devoured economics, cooking, horticulture, and mechanics. I'd indulged in thrillers, sagas, and even romance, but my favorite literature was fantasy.

It was the only thing that had the power to pull me from my existence and place me in the skin of another. The magic of a written word could transform me into a wolf or a giant or a sorcerer so awfully wicked that his hands were caked with a millennium of blood instead of earth.

There's no one here.

Previously, I wouldn't have believed myself.

These days, I'd learned to trust my instincts.

Slowly, I relaxed.

The room was empty. Just me, a few cockroaches, and the resident raccoons who'd set up home in the attic above.

But why is the window open?

Pushing it further, I glanced down to the roof of the ten-car garage. To the small overhang where the bottom level spread out wider than the second story above.

There, on the dusty metal, were footprints.

My footprints.

My shoulders crumpled in relief.

I hadn't gone out the door. I'd used the window. The trap I'd set to alert me if anyone tried to break in had been disarmed. The string attached to the ladle that would crash to the floor had been simply ripped off the handle and set aside.

It should probably worry me that I could do something like that when I had no memory of where else I'd been, but this was an old habit.

A habit I'd outgrown...or so I thought.

Where did I go?

Find out.

Nodding, even though I didn't truly want to know where I'd gone last night, I left the dormitory. I traveled naked with my back still prickling with warning, stalked down the narrow servant stairs, cut through the kitchen, and barged out the back door.

Sparrows took wing with insulted squawks. Vines shuddered, dropping a few leaves onto my shoulders as I ducked under the overgrown arch that led to the woods and away from the chef garden.

It was warmer than usual today. Muggy and heavy, living up to the stifling summer so far. The ground was dry after being damp from the thunderstorm only a few days ago, and a couple of fallen leaves rested beside dusty indents of my journey last night.

I was skilled at tracking. I'd hunted for years. I'd read game books and how to preserve caught meat.

It was strange to be hunting my own footfalls, but I did it because I had to know.

Had to see if I'd regressed.

My hands balled into fists as I followed the trail into the forest. It wasn't too far from the house. I'd needed it to be close enough back then, but now, it seemed as if darkness had claimed it as its own.

Nothing grew here. No grasses, no berries, no trees.

A blank scar in the dirt.

A blank scar with nail marks on the perimeter and handfuls of fresh earth piled on top.

I backpedaled.

Fuck.

Grabbing my hair, I yanked at the roots, wishing I could rip out the memories that continued to swarm inside me.

Why had I come here?

What was I trying to do last night?

The answer to that question almost made me vomit all over my recent claw marks.

A flurry of birds suddenly took flight behind me. Squawking indignantly, their wings creating a fluttering raucous of feathers. They bolted from the treetops ringing my ravine.

I spun in panic.

Had they spooked because of me? Because they sensed my rising terror?

They squawked again, circling over the top of the cliff where I'd never ventured. They hovered and dived, investigating something I couldn't see before taking off in a choreographed cloud.

Something's out there.

Self-preservation sliced through me.

Rage and hate sent violent possession for my valley down my legs.
No one else was welcome here.

Ever.

I broke into a run, back the way I came, slamming to a stop by the cliff to look up, up, up the craggy ravine that both imprisoned and protected me, through the crisscrossed branches that blocked out the sky, to the swaying treetops beyond.

I waited for another flock to spook.

My eyes darted in the new sunlight, searching for whatever had made them take off. I'd lived here long enough to read the forest, and birds didn't suddenly perform a mass exodus unless a predator was in their midst.

Was it the bear from last summer?

The coyote that I'd snared and then let go?

I strained to hear. I listened for far longer than usual because something felt off. Something wasn't quite right.

Nothing.

Silence. Just the bicker of birds, the rustle of leaves, the soft hum of insects.

No other hint that anything stalked me from above.

No enemy to hunt.

I was alone, like always.

I waited another few minutes before turning back toward the house. I tried to relax, to prepare for my morning run. However, foreboding iced my naked skin. It drew daggers down my spine and latched hooks into my flesh.

Something was out there.

Something was inside me.

Nowhere was safe.



CHAPTER FIVE

YOU MIGHT AS WELL admit it.

You're lost as hell and need to give up the idea of climbing and head back.

My shoulders slumped as I stared once again at my compass. I hadn't been able to go back to sleep after the strange noises in the night and had left at dawn, packing up my meager camp and continuing on in the hopes of stumbling upon the promised, untouched boulder.

I had visions of recording a fabulous video with the new sunshine striking just right, enjoying a nice lunch at the base, then having enough rations and daylight to hike back to my Jeep.

I was never usually this stubborn about finding a hunk of rock, but just like when I'd first parked and began this journey, something pulled me forward. Something made my steps quicker than usual and my familiar finesse at navigating trees and overgrown shrubbery messy and uncoordinated.

I made noise. I disrupted nature. Insects got out of my way, and birds squawked and swooped at my interruption. Mammals of all shapes and sizes disappeared into the shadows as if I'd trespassed upon their privacy.

Which I have, so fair enough.

This part of the national park was more than just untouched. It was feral. Every gnarly root and ancient branch looked untamed as if I'd fallen through a time portal and found the Middle Ages.

I doubted any tourists, campers, or rangers had been here in decades, if ever.

It was wild.

No paths, no pruning, no animals comfortable with human presence.

It didn't want me here.

The entire park seemed to bristle with secrecy, unwilling to allow me to travel deeper. But that only made this failed expedition more intriguing. Knowing that I was one of the few who'd walked this earth made me burst at the seams with gratefulness and curiosity, but it also made me wary that if I didn't play it safe, I could die and never be found.

My bones would become part of this ecosystem. My flesh become part of the forest.

I'd be swallowed whole and gone.

Unfortunately, even though I didn't want to, I had to concede.

I'd been following the ridgeline of the valley I'd slept above for hours. I'd backtracked and shimmied down a small distance to see if I could see anything that looked like the photo in the *Climbers Anon* group. I'd spotted a couple of clusters, a few rock formations that could be useable as a backdrop for YouTube content, but it wasn't the fabled Kentucky Khalessi.

But now it was past noon, and I always did endeavor not to be *entirely* stupid.

I was running low on water. I'd eaten the packet pasta and Fruit Roll-Ups for breakfast, and I'd worn far too many warm clothes with how hot the weather had turned out to be. Bugs buzzed around me, and the odd mosquito braved my clothing to bite my arms and legs.

I'd have to come back better prepared.

Looking one last time at the gorgeous view, I marveled at the way cliff sides seemed to crush close together before spreading out into a wider ravine. Trees on either side of the valley strained toward one another, their branches touching and entwining over centuries of growth.

I'd seen such phenomena before. A canopy of living branches formed in rainforests around the world. When I'd gone climbing in Vietnam, a few locations had been entirely closed in, the trees so dense and interlocked that sunlight speared in vain to the damp earth below. Another climb had led me

to caves in Malaysia where an entire cathedral had formed from banyan trees, all linking together as if saying no to the sky.

It had been a while since I'd come across something so intricate, and I hadn't been lucky enough to stumble upon something like this in the US. Typically, trees preferred their own towering individuality. Claiming their own space instead of binding into one massive air-carpet of leaves.

But not here.

Unfortunately, the braided canopy prevented me from seeing much below. I couldn't search the valley floor. Couldn't squint past the dense foliage to spy the boulder I was searching for. It would take a long climb down before I would be able to tell.

And even if it *was* down there, I doubted I'd have the energy to climb a boulder, video myself a few times in different angles, and then monkey my way back up this steep entrance.

Most of me wanted to do that very thing. To throw caution to the wind and see. But the small part of me that was still sane forbade it.

Go back to the Jeep.

Going home would be the wisest choice, but if you must try again, get more rations, rest, and return.

Fine.

Tucking my compass into my pocket, I unclipped my water bottle from my backpack strap and took a drink. I rationed myself, just in case it took longer than I feared to get back to the Jeep.

Forcing the lid back on after a few mouthfuls, I screwed it tight and went to clip it back onto the strap, only my fingers were slick with sweat.

The metal turned slippery.

It fell.

I tried to catch it.

The bright mosaic design on the bottle glittered in goodbye as it fell, fell, fell down the drop-off and tumbled over, bounced off, and clattered against the rocks before dropping out of sight into the valley below.

Damn!

Leave it. Don't be any more stupid than you've already been, Gem.

My left foot backed up from the edge, but my right foot slid forward, tugging me into danger.

I'll just have a quick peek.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I placed my backpack on the ground before edging carefully to the drop-off. Trees provided branches to hold onto, and I traversed my way down a few feet, searching for a lookout where the canopy of leaves wouldn't obstruct my view.

Fresh sweat broke out over my brow as I descended farther, glancing back to see the distance I'd already traveled.

Okay, far enough.

Forcing myself to stick to a sensible plan, I clambered down one final decline before latching onto another branch and peering through the portal of leaves.

Scanning the valley below, I already knew finding my water bottle would be impossible. It'd been adopted by the forest, never to be drunk from again. But honestly, hadn't that just been an excuse to look closer? To calm my suspicious nature that if I turned back now, I'd be walking away from something unique and magical? The boulder could be right below me, and I didn't want to leave until I was certain.

And besides, even if nothing was *remotely* climbable down there, the view was outstanding. The sun dappled on greenery of all shades. Emerald glossiness by the cliff sides, sage velvet from pretty flower-sprouting shrubs, and lime brightness from new growth bordering a meandering river cutting through the center of the valley.

Blue water glistened as if fed by a glacial runoff, bubbling over shallow areas before turning calm and glassy with depth. I followed the snaking beauty, watching it vanish into a cave formation ahead.

A cave!

Mammoth Cave National Park had been named for its limestone labyrinth of caves. The publicly accessible ones had been featured in every tour book and top recommendations of things to do in Kentucky. And thanks to the podcast I'd listened to on the way here, I knew over four hundred miles of cave passageways had been explored with the potential of another six hundred miles still to be found.

Had I found a cave that hadn't been discovered yet?

Was this one of the disconnected caverns—a cave that wasn't part of the known network and full of archaeological surprises?

The itch of adventure returned.

Screw finding the boulder.

If the cave had tunnels and chambers, that would make an insane YouTube video in its own right. Grasping the branch tighter, I twisted to look back the way I'd climbed.

I'd have to go back up to grab my backpack, and I should definitely return for more rations before I—

Wait, what's that?

I froze, narrowing my eyes at the flash of sunlight on something below. Something that was so camouflaged it blended into the valley landscape.

Surely, that isn't a—

I looked harder, tracing the hard-to-see outline of a roof and chimney. A house. No, not a house. A mansion.

A mansion covered in vines, leaves, and the undeniable trick of nature to blur its existence. Wildflowers grew out of the roof, breaking up the large expanse of camo-painted metal. Exposed rock and chiseled stone hinted at how the building was made while greenery did its best to consume it.

The gardens around it were just as wild, giant trees casting shade over long grass waving like water in the gentle breeze. Even looking directly at it, I struggled to comprehend it was manmade and not some wonderful natural enigma.

I'd never seen anything so covered in plants yet so obviously created by hands instead of soil. It was utterly foreign and creatively hidden.

Is it a ruin?

Some sort of fort from the Civil War?

A hideout for some bureaucrat?

I climbed without thinking.

I descended instead of ascended. I left my backpack and recording gear; I turned my back on sensible decisions. I focused only on reaching the valley floor.

I have to know.

It didn't take long.

The methodicalness of climbing took over my mind and motor skills. Grab a branch, drop down, slide down an embankment, pause. Track left for a better path, then crisscross to the right before trusting my body and a tree growing at a steep angle to catch me as I jumped a small distance.

By the time I leaped the final way from the cliff to the valley floor, sweat trickled down my temples, and beneath my windbreaker, workout hoodie, and exercise t-shirt, my skin was wet.

The babble of the river made my mouth water to drink and swim, but the house was even larger from down here.

A two-story sprawling monster with arched windows, carved keystones, heavy wooden doors with iron hinges, and a footprint larger than any suburban home available today.

It looked abandoned. Sad almost.

I stepped forward, drawn to it.

What are you doing, Gem?

You're trespassing.

I stopped and looked around, my ears twitching for any sign that someone lived here. That they might have a gun and shoot me for being on their property. But no sign of habitation existed. No footprints, no debris, no smells of cooking or fires, no laughter or TV.

The air shimmered around it as if trying to protect it, to turn it into a mirage and fool me into thinking there was nothing there at all.

I have to see.

Balling my hands, I strode out of the shadowy forest around the cliff's edge and waded through the long swaying grasses. They rustled around my legs, leaving my black leggings covered in fine golden pollen.

My heart galloped as I reached a heavy wooden door. It hung open slightly as if someone, so many years ago, had left in a hurry and forgotten to lock up. I looked at the stone entryway, searching for signs of animals.

Had this huge building become a shelter for forest creatures? Did bears hibernate inside?

Sucking in a breath, I knocked.

I waited.

Nothing.

I sucked in another breath and pushed the door, expecting to find it stiff and creaky in its old age. Instead, it swung on silent hinges, sweeping over marble tiles and revealing an industrial-size kitchen.

I froze on the threshold.

Neat wooden cabinets, clean wooden countertops, and a skylight directly above the range. The random clumps of dirt and wildflowers growing above blocked the sun in places. Higher still, the crisscross of branches that had once looked like a carpet when I'd looked down from the cliff had now transformed into a ceiling, providing a patchwork view of the sky.

Pots hung from a rack over the sink. Knives waited to be used in a butcher block. Everything was clean and tidy.

Clean!

No dust, no animal debris, no sign of disrepair.

This looked lived in.

This looks recently lived in.

How did the place look so abandoned and miserable from the outside, yet inside it was obviously cared for and appreciated?

Goosebumps broke out as my eyes flew faster around the space. A large fridge clicked over, humming with age in the corner, hinting that not only was this place an existing home but it also had electricity in the middle of nowhere.

How?

What was this place?

Desperate to see more, my legs ached to creep deeper into the house.

Stop.

Propriety made me pause.

You can't just go wandering into someone's home.

What on earth are you thinking?

I should go back outside. I should leave. At the very least, I should wait until whoever lived here found me and offered an invite instead of me taking advantage.

Clearing my throat, I called, "Hello? Anyone there?"

I waited for a few ragged heartbeats.

Nothing.

"Hello? I don't mean to intrude."

Well then, stop trespassing.

Go outside.

I'd never been good at self-discipline.

I'll just see if they're in the next room.

Maybe whoever lived here was old and deaf. They might need help being so far from society and people.

"Hello? I mean no harm."

Creeping forward, I left the kitchen and passed a narrow wooden staircase heading upstairs. A soft breeze whistled down, faintly musty but refreshing. The air was appreciated as the rest of the house felt stagnant and hot, soaking up the heat from the summer outside and trapping it within its stone belly.

A noise came from up ahead, wrenching my stare from the staircase, summoning me forward. “Anyone there?”

Moving faster, I followed the corridor until it spilled out into a cavernous foyer. Its door had been pushed aside, leaving the access open...but it wasn't a typical door. Heavy and carved, it mimicked a bookcase—designed to hide the corridor, hinting that it led to staff quarters.

And this? This room that I'd just stepped into was most *definitely* not for staff. This was for royalty. This was for people with money and titles and fame.

“Oh, wow...” I breathed, drinking in its size and majesty.

If the outside looked like a crumpling, ivy-smothered relic, the inside was a palace. The greatest lie imaginable on the exterior, hiding the true wealth within.

Ceilings soared upward, a carved marble staircase with wide shallow steps led to a balcony that branched off onto a mezzanine, granting a viewing platform to the foyer below. A chandelier glimmered with a million crystals, sending delicate rainbows over my clothing. A fine layer of dust rested on each crystal, a cobweb dangling off the bottom.

But that was the only imperfection I could see.

Embossed with silvery swirls and golden flecks, the thick wallpaper covering the walls looked as if it had been inlaid with precious metals. Gray-veined marble tiles kept the air cool by my feet, and massive gilded artwork of the valley and its river brought the perfection of outside in.

Carved wooden side tables waited for vases or other knickknacks of the rich and famous, while a chaise lounge glowed bronze in the sun spilling from another skylight directly above.

I couldn't help myself.

I drifted forward.

A library welcomed me, rich with the scent of paper and leather. Shelves soared upward, touching the two-story ceiling, and metal railings on narrow balconies gave access to the limited editions above. Cream leather wingbacks waited beside a cavernous fireplace, and rugs so thick and richly dyed they made me wince with guilt to step on.

The library guided me into a living room.

Another massive area with carved couches, loveseats, huge bay windows, gleaming coffee tables with chessboards just waiting for masters, and a world

globe made out of polished shell holding crystal decanters of amber and clear liquor.

I couldn't take it all in.

The splendor. The intricacy.

How could such a place look so ramshackle on the outside and be so sublime within? It looked almost deliberate. A ploy to make this place vanish. To only be accessed by those with a strict invitation.

And you don't have an invitation.

"Oh, my God..." The living room opened up into a space I would happily live in for the rest of my life.

A conservatory with floor-to-ceiling windows, a glass roof, and a glass flooring.

A pond existed beneath the glass tiles. Green with algae and overgrown with lily pads, it would've looked incredible with fresh water and goldfish flittering beneath my feet. Potted ferns and stunted palm trees lined the glass walls, adding richness to the air, a denseness of oxygen, and another wave of muggy heat.

The conservatory existed as a link to another part of the house. A ten-chaired extravaganza sat in the dining room with plates still set out for a party. The napkins were held down by crystal bumblebees, and the vases along the center of the table held long-ago withered flowers. A wall of framed mirrors that had once bounced the dining table back, making it seem as if it went on for miles, was now shattered with shards still clinging in despair to the frames.

Whoever had smashed the mirrors had swept up and thrown out the rest of the damage, leaving the room perfectly groomed but with obvious sins and secrets.

Running my finger over a placemat made of woven leather and pearlescent ribbon, I searched for dust. For any sign that this place had sat empty for decades.

Spotless.

If this place was so well maintained, it must have a bevy of cleaners. Perhaps I'd arrived before guests had been delivered and the staff had headed out for supplies?

A grocery run?

Out in the middle of nowhere?

Where did they shop?

How did the building supplies needed to make such an opulent castle end up in the middle of a national park?

Spinning around, I frowned. "What *is* this place?"

No one answered me. A blackbird suddenly fluttered through a doorway, its wings whispering as it soared out the open window beyond. Was that what I heard before? Or was someone watching me tiptoe through their carefully preserved home?

"I don't mean to intrude. If anyone's there, I'd love to meet you." I waited for a few seconds but only silence replied.

Leaving the dining room, I entered a game room complete with large chests with playing cards and casino chips resting on velvet flocked tops. The ceiling was painted black and lowered. Furs of dead beasts littered the floors and the back of couches. Ashtrays with fresh cigars waited to be lit. A wall of weaponry glinted with swords, ancient guns, and shields.

Confused and growing slightly unnerved at this palace wrapped in poverty, I braced myself and stepped back into the foyer. My eyes shot skyward, seeking out the bedrooms above.

Where was the owner?

Who lives here?

My hand latched onto the polished banister, my weight swaying forward.

Don't you dare.

Leave, Gem.

Go home.

Imagine what Joshua would say if he knew what you're doing.

"Hello? Is anyone up there? My name's Gem, and I would really love to chat."

Great, you've truly gone nuts.

No voice replied. No hint that I wasn't alone and talking to myself.

The house was empty. However, there was another level to explore before I could be certain.

No. Don't be stupid. Think before you—

Too late.

I put one foot on the staircase and climbed.



CHAPTER SIX

I'D RUN FOR MILES.

To the cave and back, through the western forest, and around the entire valley. Each time I tired and thought about resting, the unsettling sensation of sleepwalking and the unnerving prickle that something wasn't quite right pushed me onward.

My lungs panted. My legs pumped. I pushed myself to the brink of exhaustion.

My bare feet were used to such abuse. My soles had long since turned to leather. Twigs didn't hurt; pebbles didn't matter. I flew over the ground and welcomed rivulets of sweat to run down my naked back.

Air rushed over my skin while the sunshine warmed and tanned. Being outside never failed to chase away my demons. It helped that I ran fast. I bolted. I wasn't running for exercise but for sanity.

At least my mind was calmer than it had been this morning. Summer was my favorite time of the year. The season where food grew easy, the forest was alive with activity, and I could run without needing to bundle up in clothing.

Today, I just wore a pair of tight gray boxer briefs. I'd returned to the house after the birds spooked to dress. However, I wasn't in the mood for clothing. I wasn't in the mood to be *human*. Briefs had been the only item I

selected, purely for support purposes. I wouldn't even wear those if it didn't hurt. I'd tried running naked a few times. I'd cupped myself and done my best to prevent gravity from tugging on my balls, but I'd had to concede when I started getting hard.

I fucking *hated* getting hard.

It filled me with self-disgust.

It made me ache for something I couldn't have and hunger for things that were pure evil.

Touching myself to wash was one thing. Touching myself to rid that tangled heat in my blood was entirely another.

It was vile.

My teeth clenched together. I hadn't meant to let my thoughts stray. They didn't often go to forbidden territory, but today seemed to be intent on destroying me. First the sleepwalking and now the heavy ache inside me. If running wouldn't stop such things, perhaps a swim would.

Veering off course, I ran away from the sweeping hillsides that led to the top of the valley and followed a narrow animal track to the river.

Bowling out from the trees, I didn't stop.

The blue beckoned me.

The cleansing promise of the water summoned me faster.

I leaped off the edge and dived into the deep swimming hole that housed fish, eels, and the occasional crayfish that lived in the cave system.

I plummeted down, sinking to the bottom as fresh water consumed me. Wetness washed away my sweat, cooled the nasty aches in my belly, and reminded me, like all the times before, that it was okay to have needs. I was no different from the bears and squirrels who fucked in the forest. It was nature. It was *natural*.

Still doesn't mean I'm interested.

My hands went to my hips and shoved off the boxer briefs. Ripping them down my legs, I bunched them up and swam nude. Swimming naked was pleasurable. Running naked was not.

At least with nothing cupping me, I could forget the tightness of cotton. I could calm down and allow the heat in my blood to vanish.

The temptation to let the boxers float away came strong, but I ignored it.

I'd done that one too many times, and the available options in the house had dwindled to just a few pairs. Once they wore out, I'd have nothing.

Therefore, I'd keep this pair even though I preferred to wear nothing for as long as the season permitted.

I didn't know how long I remained in the river, floating on the surface before ducking and gliding along the bottom. Hunger for food finally overshadowed my hunger for sex, and I climbed reluctantly from the watery embrace.

Droplets cascaded down my torso and legs as I strode back toward the ivy-shrouded house. My cock bounced against my thighs, once again turning hard despite my self-disgust.

I'd thought, as more time passed, that those urges would fade. In the beginning, I'd been blessedly free from wanting any form of sexual release. Unfortunately, it'd become rather insistent the past couple of years.

The cramping in my balls. The hardness between my legs. My body's demands for pleasure always went unanswered, but it cost me. It made my temper spike and frustration bubble.

Stop it.

Ignore it, and it will pass.

Fisting the boxers, I focused on getting home. Once I'd eaten and done my daily chores, I could lose myself in a book. Perhaps, I'd find one I hadn't already read. Or I could finally lower the chandelier in the entrance hall and clean the crystals. I hadn't done that for years and had been putting it off for too long.

It was a bitch of a job, but it was the only part of the house that hinted at the filth existing within the walls, and it bothered me.

My mind continued to bounce from work to what I should cook. I'd have to start conserving crops soon. The endless task of freezing, drying, and preparing a larder for winter.

I'd gotten pretty good at prepping. Supposed it was thanks to the third winter when I'd finally exhausted the large amount of produce that'd been stored here and almost starved.

I hadn't planned ahead.

I'd gone hungry.

For months, I survived on scrawny game and river water. By the time spring came and the snow left, I'd read every book in the library on cultivation and put the many packets of seeds in the storeroom to use.

If it's this hot this summer, it means an equally cold winter is on its way.

Urgency made me walk faster, ticking off a mental checklist of things to do. The veggie patch needed weeding, the celery needed harvesting, and the cucumbers re-stringing. I also had the shit job of fertilizing, which included raiding the septic tank, scouring the woods for animal scat, and enduring the stench in the sun.

But at least those chores were outside.

I preferred those over the indoor ones.

When winter hit and boredom found me, I methodically cleaned Fables from top to bottom. Every inch of that monstrous mansion was buffed, waxed, and dusted, hoping that this year, I might achieve the impossible and clean away the dregs of disaster, despair, and desolation that existed within its walls.

My hands curled into fists.

Today really wasn't my day.

Not only had I sleepwalked and suffered from lust that crippled my balls and thickened my cock but I'd also slipped into old habits.

This house wasn't Fables anymore.

This house was *mine*.

And if I had my way, it would never remember why it had such a title or why I'd spent one spring chiseling out the engraved name from all the keystones above the wooden doors.

This place was nameless now.

Just like me.

Exhaling hard, I shoved my thoughts away. Thoughts were bad. Actions were good. I had a shit ton to do and didn't need my mind delaying me any longer.

My legs worked on autopilot, taking me home. Birds sang in happy tunes, chipmunks argued in the undergrowth, and my valley gave no hint that the predator from this morning remained.

Good.

I didn't fancy taking on another bear. My encounter with one that first autumn, when I still had so much to learn, had almost meant my death. I'd almost lost. *Almost.*

My fingers trailed over the scars he'd left behind on my torso. He'd wanted to claim the house as his own. I'd said no. We'd...argued. He'd left, and I hadn't seen him since.

I often wondered if he was still alive or if the seasons had claimed him like they'd tried to claim me.

The shadow of the house welcomed me back as I stepped over the threshold into the kitchen. With a practiced toss, I threw the soaked boxers into the sink and kept striding toward the stairs that led to the dorm—

Wait.

I spun around.

The door.

It's wide open!

I never leave it open.

Ever!

You didn't latch it this morning.

You were too eager to bolt.

Maybe the wind blew it open?

I scowled outside at the calm trees and soft breeze.

It hadn't been windy all day.

There was no way the heavy door would've opened on its own.

Intruder.

What kind of animal? What weapon would I need?

My eyes dropped to the floor, searching for tracks.

Claw marks.

Pad indents.

Slither hints.

I ducked to my haunches, running my fingers over the tile.

I stopped breathing.

I couldn't move.

Not a paw print but the barely-there tread of a shoe.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I shot up and backed away so fast, I bumped into the kitchen island.

A shoe?

What the *fuck* was a shoe imprint doing on my tiles?

My heart rate exploded.

I couldn't catch a proper breath.

Undiluted fear and the hottest, blackest rage snarled in my stomach.

Human.

There was a motherfucking *person* in my house.

My house.

Not theirs.

Mine.

I'd kill them.

I'll rip them limb from limb.

Pushing away from the island, I bared my teeth at the dusty footprints and hunted.



CHAPTER SEVEN

WELL, I'D CONFIRMED IT.

I'm alone.

The bedrooms had been decorated with scrumptious furniture, rich bedding, intricate sconces, and delicate works of art, yet I hadn't found the slightest hint in any of the twenty suites that someone slept there.

Each bathroom was untouched with fresh towels hanging off chrome rails, soap still wrapped in tissue paper, and taps so perfectly polished I could see my reflection in them. And just like the dining room and its shattered mirrors, each bathroom housed empty frames where reflective glass used to live. No debris existed, so meticulous attention to cleanliness was obvious, but the oddness of missing mirrors sent chills down my back.

Who had done such a thing?

Why?

Did they still live here?

No water marks in the showers, no laundry on the floor, no books on the side tables, no usual clutter of habitation. If someone *did* live here, they didn't sleep in the house.

So...where?

Who keeps this place so clean?

My head swam a little, either from the heat, confusion, or dehydration. I'd somehow stumbled into a mystery that I doubted many people knew about, and my questions weighed me down. Curiosity scratched me. I'd hoped I'd find someone to explain the randomness of this home and the apparent attempt at sheltering it away from the population.

It hadn't wanted to be found.

It'd been hidden away for a reason.

And that reason was driving me crazy.

Sighing heavily, I left the last bedroom—this one decorated in navy and cream with a four-poster bed and a mountain of pillows artfully arranged—and stepped back onto the landing.

The skylight above, complete with its clumps of wildflowers, showed the sun had slipped into later afternoon. If I was going to make it back to my Jeep tonight, I needed to leave now. I'd already left it far too late.

Gathering my hair off my neck, searching for some coolness after sweating in this hot house, I moved quietly toward the staircase. My boots made soft thumps on the gray carpet as I touched the banister and prepared to climb down.

Only...

A noise.

A growl.

The heavy pound of running feet.

Someone's here!

My heart shot into my throat as a man suddenly exploded through the door disguised as a bookcase and skidded into the foyer. His legs splayed wide, his hands fisted by his sides, his eyes darting everywhere at once. His chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, sending sunshine scattering over his body and highlighting a thousand silvery scars.

I sucked in a breath.

He froze as his head whipped up and his dark eyes latched onto me.

Time stopped.

I swear it did.

Every clock in the world paused as he stared at me on his staircase, and I stared at him below me. I drank in every inch of his naked skin. His cock hanging between wide legs. His defined muscles etching with fury and power. He looked as if he'd appeared from the river moments ago with dripping dark hair touching defined shoulders and grass sticking to bare feet.

My stomach quickened. My heart raced. Every inch of me tingled with awareness.

I didn't know who he was or where he'd come from, but he was the wildest, most furious looking man I'd ever seen.

Swallowing hard, I tried to speak. I licked my lips and pushed away my nerves, my voice quivery and full of guilt. "I didn't mean to trespass. I—"

He snarled.

A rabid thundering sound that echoed in the marble-encrusted foyer.

And then, he was running.

Leaping up the stairs four at a time. His thighs rippling with power. His cock swinging. His arms coming up as weapons.

A lifetime of safety and living in a tame society left me woefully ill-equipped for a monster rushing up the stairs.

I didn't understand.

My brain refused to contemplate that this stranger meant me harm.

But my body wasn't so conditioned.

It still operated on instinct, and it knew.

It knew it was being hunted and needed to run.

Run!

I spun and sprinted down the corridor, racing for a bedroom.

"Stop, please!" I screamed as he leaped the final distance to the landing and gave chase. The strength of his strides shuddered the carpet beneath my boots. "I only wanted—"

He snarled again.

No words.

No warning.

Just a beast about to tear me to pieces for trespassing.

I'd die here in this mysterious mansion in the middle of nowhere.

"No!" I careened into a bedroom, swinging on the door handle as I struggled to shut it. I slammed the door as fast as I could.

I scrambled with the lock.

No lock!

The door exploded inward, bashing me off my feet and sending me sprawling to the floor. He stalked over the threshold. His dark eyes manic and long hair tumbling as if it was a shaggy pelt and he wasn't human.

I crawled backward, my boots skidding on the carpet, my palms burning.

"No, wait. Please. I—"

He stood over me, his nostrils flaring. He glowered at me with such loathing, his entire face bathed in evil. I scurried backward, but he dropped to his knees, imprisoning me between his spread legs.

His hands wrapped around my throat. A heady scent of rivers and woods filled my nose.

I instantly clawed at his wrists, digging my nails into his violent hold. “No, wait, I—”

“How dare you,” he hissed, his fingers looping tighter around my neck, his touch shaking with anger. “How *dare* you!”

“Stop!” I gulped and gasped, writhing beneath him, slashing at every part of him that I could reach. My fingernails scratched deeply but he didn’t seem to notice or care—impervious to whatever pain I granted.

“Please...” I struggled harder. “Let me—”

His fingers noosed tighter, his eyes flashing with hate.

His entire presence overwhelmed me, taking master of my senses, crushing me deeper into the carpet. His skin was scalding hot. His muscles rock hard. His cock pressed against my belly as he continued to squeeze. And squeeze.

I choked.

I couldn’t breathe.

My eyes felt as if they bulged with pressure, and my arms grew too heavy to fight. I kicked and kicked. My legs danced uselessly beneath him, unable to connect, unable to save me.

“Stop!” I fought until I was too feeble to try.

Get your knife!

I fumbled for my pocket.

I fought against the heaviness, the sluggishness.

My fingers didn’t work properly.

My kicking grew jerky as air retreated from my blood.

I tried again to get my knife.

I couldn’t.

Panic drowned me.

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t beg.

I looked into the face of my murderer and studied the scars on his cheekbones, the lips glistening with hate, the eyes molten with mayhem, and took my last breath as he bowed over me, the tips of his long hair tickling my cheeks, his nose coming so close to mine.

“Die.” He squeezed a final time.
And I did.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SECOND SHE PASSED out, I shot off her and shook out my hands. I couldn't stop the fire of touching her, of feeling her pulse flicker, of squeezing the life out of her body.

I paced, looking down at the unconscious stranger. A girl who'd appeared out of nowhere and somehow entered my house.

Where the fuck did she come from?

Unable to remove the burn in my fingers, I ducked and checked her condition.

If she was dead, then good riddance.

If she wasn't, then I had a choice to make.

Slowing my breathing, I waited for a quick kick of her heart.

There.

Faint but steady.

Fuck.

I had a choice then.

But how was I supposed to decide when she wasn't welcome here? When her very existence threatened mine?

I returned to pacing, dragging my hands through my hair and shoving aside dampness from the river. I couldn't take my eyes off her. It'd been so long since I'd seen anyone other than my own river reflection that she looked

foreign. Wrong. A combined creation of everyone and everything evil that had been done to me.

I stopped and stood over her.

With blond hair spread and tangled on the carpet, arms bent at her sides, and legs wide from kicking, she looked vulnerable and nonthreatening. She was a girl. She couldn't hurt me.

Then again, my life experience said she could. All it would take was a moment of distraction on my part, a slight give in my wariness, and she could kill me as surely as I could kill her.

I nudged her cheek with my foot.

Her head lolled to the side, but her eyes didn't open. She didn't come back to life. She remained utterly at my mercy to either finish the job or devise another plan that didn't involve more blood on my hands.

Think.

I grabbed my hair again, tugging it, forcing my brain to unriddle this problem.

First, I needed to make sure she was alone. Where one human was, more were sure to follow. Until I knew why she'd come after me and who would come after her, she was worth more to me alive than dead.

I sighed, dropping my arms with a scowl.

The sun had decided to hide above the branches cocooning my valley, and shadows crossed over her face. Her nose was small. Her cheeks round. Her eyebrows the same color as her hair.

She kind of looks like—

Don't.

I gritted my teeth, shoving the memories away. They weren't welcome while daylight still existed. Besides, I had work to do. It no longer involved the chores I'd set for myself but ensuring this girl remained shackled and unable to run.

For the first time, I let myself study the room where she'd sought solace. A gold and teal monstrosity with lace on the coverlets and a wardrobe full of expensive gowns. I'd braved each of these rooms to ensure they remained clean, but at no point would I ever sleep in them.

No fucking way.

Chills darted down my back.

I'd been in here too long.

So you'll leave her on the carpet then?

I sniffed, glaring at her again.

Why the hell did she have to find me? Why did she have to interrupt my life after I'd worked so hard to make it mine?

I couldn't leave her here. The windows didn't lock, and the ivy outside meant it would be a simple task for her to shimmy down and vanish into the valley.

Had she come through the cave? That was the only entrance I knew of. Were others waiting for her to return?

My mind raced with questions. Sweat broke out over my skin as fresh anger coursed through my body.

Bending over her, I danced on the edge of just killing her. Of getting it over with so I could pretend this never happened. But as I stared at her blank face, I grew traitorously hard.

For the first time in eleven years, there was a female in this house.

A female who was at my command. A woman I could do anything I liked to.

I could use her.

Hadn't my needs demanded this very thing? I refused to touch myself, and the desire in my blood had become excruciating. Nature always provided an outlet. Male birds found female birds. Horny coyotes howled until they found a mate to bite and mount.

Maybe that was all this was. Nature giving me what I needed because I wouldn't take it for myself.

Or maybe she's a spy. She's one of them. She's been sent to destroy you.

My hands balled.

No way.

No way would I let her take from me again. Not now. Not after every-fucking-thing I'd done.

I wouldn't kill her. Not yet. Not until I had answers on why and how she'd found me. But if I ended up keeping her, she'd almost certainly beg for death. Even now, my belly clenched for something I hadn't had access to in a very long time. If I kept her, I wouldn't have the self-control not to take everything I could from her body.

And that knowledge made me rage. Made me hard. Made me hate.

With a growl of scorching loathing, I ducked and slid my arms under her shoulders and knees. Hoisting her from the floor, she didn't make a sound. Didn't wake up. Didn't acknowledge me in any way.

A knife fell from her jacket pocket, striking the bones of my foot.

Fuck.

A compass tumbled after it, rolling under the bed.

I flinched and backed up with her balanced in my arms. My speed jostled her. I froze, searching her face to see if her eyes would open.

She didn't wake.

Perhaps she wouldn't. Maybe I'd done irreparable damage, and I wouldn't get my answers, after all.

Fear filled me as I stalked from the bedroom with the stranger in my arms, leaving her knife that had already hurt me on the carpet.

It wasn't fear for what I'd done to her but fear of what would happen to me.

What if others came?

I had weapons and was skilled at defending my home, but if they came in a mob? If they arrived for war, my carefully crafted existence would be over.

I glowered at her as I descended the staircase, her weight hardly noticeable in my arms.

How dare you.

How fucking dare you ruin my life.

I hated her.

I downright despised her.

My cock twitched as I reached the foyer, the heavy length hitting my thighs as I headed toward the back of the house and the hidden door beneath the staff staircase. My balls throbbed as a whiff of her scent invaded my nose. She smelled like leaves and earth. A musty combination that laced the air in the valley, thanks to living in a jungle of ivy and tree branches.

My skin burned where she rested against my chest.

My body tightened, eager to take everything from her.

I wanted her.

I didn't like her. I didn't know her. I still planned on killing her, but *fuck*, the longer I held her, the worse those urges became. The hotter and fiercer my need grew.

I trembled and gritted my teeth, cringing at her closeness.

Get away from her.

Rushing to open the cellar door, I almost dropped her as I pulled it wide. She moaned a little as I tightened my hold.

Christ, who would've thought a quiet moan would almost buckle my knees?

My mouth watered. My mind turned black. My cock thickened to excruciating levels.

Tightening my hold again, wishing I could squeeze the life out of her and the disgusting lust out of me, I climbed down another set of stairs. Unlike above ground, these steps were entirely entombed in the dark.

My blood continued to hum with desire as I climbed down, lower and lower. Sixteen steps to the bottom. Fourteen steps to the cell. Ten steps in either direction marked the size of the square dungeon.

A dungeon that lurked beneath a house full of finery, slowly festering with filth and pain.

The air turned stale, the temperature shifting from muggy warmth to dank coldness. My chest burned where I touched her, but my back welcomed the chilly dampness. It helped soothe the chaos inside me. The bloodlust and the violence.

I felt as if I had a fever. I was sick, and I was shaking. I wish she'd never fucking come here.

Striding deeper into the chilly dungeon, I didn't care about the dark. This place was more familiar to me than any place in the valley.

I didn't pause to turn on the lights. I'd memorized every divot and imperfection. I rushed to drop her so I could run.

Reaching the wall, I bent and lowered her to the ground. Barely visible, she slumped to the side as I let her go, her shoulder bashing against the floor as she slid into a fetal position. Her head cracked on the concrete.

The darkness was almost absolute. Small slivers of light crept in from the stone where the mortar had crumbled to dust, thanks to ivy roots wriggling their way through the foundation.

But I saw enough to study her. To drink in the youngness of her. The innocence of her sleep. The collar of bruises I'd caused around her white, breakable neck.

I waited.

Eyes didn't open.

Lips didn't move.

Hair slipped over her face, obscuring what I'd done.

Straightening up, I fought with myself again.

Just do it.

Get it over with.

The urge was almost unbearable—almost as unbearable as the uncommon feeling of lust.

I wanted both. To touch and to kill. To take and to ruin.

But I fought for patience.

Scanning the tiny cell, I checked the bucket was there, nice and clean from previous inhabitants. The fresh water tap still dripped through the wall, providing hydration. And a scratchy blanket—that was probably woven with thorns and rat hair with how uncomfortable it was—rested neatly folded in the corner.

If she woke, she'd stay alive for however long it would take to get my answers.

And then, I'll kill her.

I wouldn't be reckless this time.

I would restrain myself in the lust department.

I would get my answers, and then she'd be gone.

She's secure and can't leave.

I can wait.

Needing air, I spun and crossed the ten steps back to the door.

My cock bounced on my thighs in frustration. My heart kicked with age-old hate. And I swung the heavy wood closed.

I locked the padlock and palmed the key.

I sprinted back up the stairs to the sun.

* * * * *

I stayed away for nine hours.

Nine eternal hours where I stood by my window in the dormitory and drove myself to madness, weighing my options. Had she woken? Had she tried to escape? Would others appear from the forest any moment now, looking for her? *Why* was she here?

What does this all mean?

Was this secret place no longer a secret? And if that was the case, what the fuck did it mean for me and the history still haunting these four walls?

My thoughts collided and spun. My body was on high alert. My nerves flayed to their breaking point. My eyes ached from staring outside so intently, watching every leaf and glowering at every rodent.

I flinched at the smallest movement. The tiniest breeze in the foliage had me tensing and reaching for my butcher's knife. My heart rate never calmed, and shaky anxiety cloaked over the raw hunger in my blood, leaving me short-tempered, violent, and starving.

I hadn't eaten all day.

I should've fucking eaten.

Go then. Cook. Stay strong.

I shook my head, fisting my knife tighter as dusk descended. It became harder to study the valley. No way would I let down my guard. No way would I sleep or eat or even sneeze until I knew where that woman had come from, how she'd found me, and why.

My cock twitched, reminding me of yet another need that I couldn't forget about.

Knowing she was down there.

Soft and fragile. Imprisoned and mine.

It was enough to drive all sanity out of my mind and throw myself to baser instincts.

She'd trespassed on my turf. *She* was the one who'd entered uninvited. She was the one who found me, not the other way around. Didn't that give me a right to take what she'd already taken from me?

She'd taken my privacy, my secrecy, my very way of life.

The least she could do was spread her legs for me.

My belly clenched as my mind filled with writhing limbs and thrusting hips.

Christ.

I clutched the windowsill, digging my nails into the wood so I didn't reach for my cock and seek out the tingling pleasure it promised. I'd never, *not once*, given in to the urge. I endured wet dreams as I came in my sleep. I sometimes howled like the coyotes when I woke and thrashed in bed, needing a release. But not once had I put myself out of my misery.

Answers to why I didn't lurked in the back of my mind. If I dared open those heavily fortified doors and pull out my sordid past, I would remember precisely why pleasure and fornication was the vilest sin on earth.

However, I had enough problems to deal with tonight without torturing myself with the past.

Night fell, blackness swiftly eating up the last remaining light. Creatures turned vocal with the darkness, making my skin prickle as I strained to hear

foreign sounds that weren't welcome.

Were they out there? Watching me watching them? Were they waiting for reinforcements before entering my property?

Unlike the woman below, they might be smart. She'd had no thought to her safety. No respect for someone else's home. She'd strolled in as if this ivy-smothered building was hers.

My teeth ground together.

Nothing here belongs to her.

It's all mine.

Looking one last time out the window, I allowed my back to relax, my knife to lower, and my rage to fade.

I supposed, after nine hours of her disappearance, if anyone *was* out there waiting for her to return, they would've given up being patient by now and raided my home. They would've appeared with their demands and either gotten killed in the process or succeeded in killing me.

The resident pack of coyotes slinked through the darkness, and a few weasels helped themselves to a drink out of the bowl that I'd placed by the back door for that purpose. Nothing was on alert. No creature acted as if anything was different.

I had to trust that they had better noses than me for sniffing out traitors.

I was alone.

Which meant the time had come.

I had to go back down there.

Fuck.

Dressing slowly now that a chill existed in the air, I hoisted on my ruined slacks and shrugged into the taupe shirt with destroyed cuffs. Pulling my hair back, I secured it at my nape with a rubber band from the study.

Shoving the key into my pocket, I clenched my jaw as I stomped down the stairs, bypassed the kitchen, and opened the cellar door. My stomach growled with discomfort, reminding me once again that I hadn't given it any food.

Later.

Once she's dealt with.

Once I have my answers.

My bare feet slapped on the damp concrete stairs, loud in the night.

Even though I'd memorized the cells below the house, I flicked on the lights, wanting illumination to see her, to watch her lies—to do my best to

see her truth.

Because one thing was for certain—she would lie.

I'd strangled her, imprisoned her, and now I'd come to interrogate her. She'd hate me almost as much as I hated her. She wouldn't be cooperative, and I was prepared to do what was necessary to get information.

The moment she'd stepped into my valley, her fate had been sealed. She wouldn't be leaving here while breathing. And for that, I should've felt guilty. Instead, all I felt was absolute authority and obligation to be as merciless as required.

Moving toward the heavy door blocking her cell, I sucked in a breath. I swallowed to lubricate my throat, preparing for words that I hadn't spoken in sentence strings for over a decade.

Thanks to my lonely existence, I'd embraced more animalistic tendencies. I didn't talk. I didn't fuss over my appearance. I'd forgotten what it was like to hold a conversation and be a man instead of a beast.

That was all I was now.

A beast.

A forest dweller who wasn't fit for society.

And it was all *their* fault.

The day I was born, a curse was put upon me.

That curse grew up with me from boyhood to man. I had no mark to prove it. No doctor to confirm it.

But I knew.

A blackness had attached itself to me, and I was cursed.

So...what are you going to do with her?

My hands balled as I paced outside the cell where I'd thrown her.

I don't know.

That was a lie.

I knew what I should do.

I'd told myself countless times.

So...do what you know is required.

I stopped.

I glared at the heavy wooden door, dropping my gaze to the rusty padlock that'd continued its role of imprisonment for far too long.

Get it over with.

I pulled the key from my pocket.

I opened the door.

I stepped inside to face my enemy.



CHAPTER NINE

MY EYES COULDN'T GET used to the harsh brightness of the screaming light bulb above me. White haze danced over my sight, obscuring the barren cell that I'd woken in.

I didn't know how long I'd been locked in the dark, but it'd been long enough to have to use the bucket I'd found in the corner and drink out of the tap like some trapped animal.

Unlike earlier today, when I'd complained of being overly dressed and too hot, now I was grateful for my windbreaker and layers.

It was cold.

Very cold.

Damp and deep, seeping into my bones and making me shiver.

I'd like to say I attempted to escape—that I pounded my fists on the door and clawed at the walls for a weak spot—but my head ached so badly that I'd dry-heaved when I'd first exploded back into consciousness.

My throat burned. My neck was swollen and sore to the touch. Bruises throbbed over my shoulders and back from thrashing beneath his hands.

And my knife was missing.

Flashes of being strangled kept torturing me.

Pieces of him chasing me, killing me, and then leaving me to rot in this place.

God, the images wouldn't *stop*.

The only comfort I had was my personal locator beacon. My cell phone was utterly useless, the screen lighting up the stagnant dark when I'd checked my leggings pockets and found both devices still there.

I had to admit, I'd been shocked that he hadn't taken them off me. Why had he taken my blade and compass but not my PLB or phone?

Had he believed he'd killed me and just stored my body down here to decay? Or was his intention to keep me alive and his captive? In which case, why permit me to keep the very things that might enable me to escape?

Who *was* he?

Why had he been naked?

Why had he chosen to hurt me before I'd even explained why I was in his house?

With fear coursing through me, I'd used my time as his prisoner wisely. After taking care of my needs and drinking what I could around my bruised throat, I settled back against the wall and confirmed my phone was of no use in my current no-reception predicament.

Doing my best to stay strong and smart, I turned it off to conserve the battery.

That hurt.

It slashed at my heart to watch the glow of communication die in my hand, cutting me off from my brother, my fellow climbers, my life.

You'll survive this. You'll see.

Wrapping those brave words around me, I pulled out my PLB. The black piece of technology was cumbersome and weighty. So many times I'd been tempted to put it in my backpack instead of stretching my legging pocket with its bulk.

But now, sitting in a cold puddle in a wretchedly dark cell, I cried tears of gratefulness.

This tiny black device would save my life. It was a gift.

Salty droplets tracked down my cheeks as I pulled out the antenna, flicked open the case, and pressed the button.

I'd hoped for a light to flash. Some announcement that my signal for help had been received, but it remained exactly as it had been. Cold and immune to my terror.

Vaguely, I recalled the shopkeeper giving me a lesson on it when I'd bought it years ago. He said it was a one-way street. The signal would be sent out, but no acknowledgment of it being received would be sent back.

The anxiety that granted wasn't fair.

Had it worked?

Will they come for me?

All I knew was I had to keep it serviced, check the batteries regularly, and be prepared to wait a few days for rescue. Satellites needed to make two passes minimum to confirm my location, and that was only if it had direct access to the starry sky.

Who knew if GPS could track me down here, in a stone basement in the middle of nowhere? The not knowing and lack of confirmation were the worst torments imaginable as hours ticked onward and the chill in my bones solidified to ice crystals.

I felt like I'd shatter from stress and shivering.

I rocked against the wall. I crawled around the perimeter until I found a blanket that itched and prickled. I bundled myself up and did my best not to slip deeper into fear.

Tears prickled my hazy stare as the bright lightbulb flickered above me, bringing my jumpy attention back to the present. The bulb seemed to glow brighter, glinting off the antenna of the PLB, mocking me.

Will someone come?

Or am I on my own?

Pressure built in my already sore throat. My pulse shot skyward, sending blood to pound in my fingertips and toes.

Why had the lights come on?

Was he coming?

What is he going to do?

My mother was wrong.

I wasn't blessed.

Not anymore.

I'd made a stupid, *stupid* choice. A choice that'd totally derailed my safety and success and left me alone, in pain, and—

The door clanged as if something heavy bashed against it, followed by the screech of metal pulling through metal.

Stand up.

Stand up!

Scurrying to my feet, swaying as light-headedness caught me, I blinked in panic.

The door opened.

I braced myself against the wall, tilting my chin and balling my hands. My knees quaked, and nausea bubbled in my belly. I was weak and lost and dreadfully afraid.

I'd always thought I'd be brave when faced with danger. I'd never shied away from risk and received praise from my self-defense teacher. I even remembered bragging to my good friend Katie, from my local bouldering gym, that I would beat up any man before he could touch me. If I could master stone, I could master men.

How wrong I'd been.

How stupidly, *awfully* wrong.

This wasn't just a man. He wasn't some overweight jerk on the street. He wasn't some nerd from an online dating site. He was...feral.

Don't be weak, Gem.

Get ready to fight.

I held my breath as he stalked into the small cell, his bare feet whispering over dank concrete. Unlike when I'd first seen him, he wasn't naked. The shirt he wore looked as if he'd crawled through caves and gotten into a fight with thorns, and his slacks weren't much better. The cuffs were torn around his ankles, ragged and discolored with dirt. His long hair had been scraped back to his nape, and his skin once again glittered with scars.

Thick ones, fine ones, crisscross ones, and ones that looked like round pennies along his jaw. Each wound had lost the redness of healing and turned silvery with age. His pain wasn't recent. Whatever he'd lived through was in the past, but it'd scarred his soul as well as his body.

Needing oxygen, I sucked in a shaky breath as he closed the door behind him. He didn't have a common scent. Once again, a faint whisper of rivers and woods entered my nose. He seemed to have adopted the earthiness, the ivy sharpness, and the fragrant subtleness of the valley's neglected wildflowers.

He made a show of inserting a key into his pocket before crossing the small space and stopping a few feet from me.

He didn't speak.

I didn't speak.

I hated that my fight had fled before I'd even tried. That curse words and shouted slurs for my freedom remained stubbornly out of reach. If he hadn't talked to me when he'd strangled me, I would've been adamant he wouldn't understand me.

It wasn't that he looked uneducated or not smart enough to converse, more like he was above such practices. The way he watched me spoke of an undomesticated creature who didn't use words often. His wildness and aura of viciousness hinted that he hadn't been around another human in a very, very long time. Perhaps so long, he'd forgotten he was human himself.

It's just shock, Gem.

Stop making him scarier than he is.

He's just a man.

He's a hermit with bad clothes and overgrown hair.

A nudist most likely who lives in a cult.

Oh, God.

That thought brought a trailer load of other worries. Maybe I had it all wrong, and this place wasn't just his, after all. Maybe it was some secret coven that was hidden for a reason. What if I'd stumbled onto something I was never meant to see?

My chest rose and fell as my breathing accelerated.

Even if I do fight and get free, who else is out there?

He noticed.

His dark eyes fell to my chest, narrowing as my breasts moved beneath my windbreaker. A scalding intensity drenched his stare, making my body flinch to get away.

I pressed harder against the wall, wishing I could dissolve right through it.

Licking his bottom lip, he dropped his stare, scanning me from head to toe. Slowly, carefully, so thoroughly it felt like a violation and seduction all at once, he drank me in.

The front of his slacks tightened as he hardened. He made no move to hide his reaction. Nor did he move to unbutton and use me.

He merely kept staring, his eyes scratching over my skin.

I kept my head up and lips pressed together. I didn't let him see that his stare affected me. That the sheer potency of being alone in a tiny cell with him made me sick to my stomach.

I didn't know him. What I did know of him was violent and cruel. He'd told me to die. He'd wrapped his awful fingers around my throat and squeezed the very life out of my lungs.

I *hated* him.

So why did my stomach clench on its own accord? Why did the air shimmer with heat the longer he studied me? Why, *why*, did I feel hot and cold and itchy and confused the longer we stood in silence?

He had a power.

An awful talent at making my heart rabbit and wordlessly putting me in my place. Our power dynamics were obvious. Hunter versus hunted.

His gaze crept back up my body to linger on my bruised neck. His eyebrows drew together, and his jaw clenched as the ripple of anger flowed from his face down to his hands as they curled into fists by his sides.

He looked utterly untamed and unpredictable.

He made dread seep into my veins. How was I supposed to survive this? How could I get a rational response when he wasn't a rational human being?

Running a hand over his tied-up hair, he sniffed as if debating his own runaway thoughts. At least, with his hair back, he didn't look so completely savage, not that it softened any of his harsh edges.

His cheekbones were sharp. His nose severe. His eyes demonic. The scruff around his jaw hinted he didn't believe in shaving, leaving personal grooming to a more tameless style.

The silence between us continued to thicken until the entire cell throbbed with awareness.

I'd never been so on edge, so poised for pain or pleading.

I wanted to go home.

To *run*.

That overwhelming need to get away from him ensured a levelheaded coldness settled inside me.

The way he watched me.

The way his tongue moved over his bottom lip and his gaze lingered on my feminine attributes.

I might not have been blessed in romance, but I knew what that look meant.

He wanted me.

He didn't *want* to want me, but he did. And it compounded his temper. It tightened his fists. It doused fuel on his rage.

I wasn't above using any trick I had to get free, and that included letting him believe I was open to the black desire glowing in his gaze...*however, it will cost me everything.* It went against everything I was as an independent, successful woman.

You're successful because you don't shy away from difficulty.

Fine.

Bracing my shoulders, I shoved away my weakness and prepared to fight. "What do...you want?" I winced and swallowed past the swelling in my throat. His fingers had been ruthless. He could've killed me in that bedroom, yet he'd stopped and shoved me in here instead.

Why?

His eyebrows rose, flinching at my voice. The fine lines around his eyes deepened, the harsh brackets around his mouth looked like they'd draw blood from his cheeks, even through his scruff. With such naked hate on his face, it revealed he was younger than I first thought. The weathering of his skin hinted at someone in their late thirties, but the stark distress in his eyes made me guess he was more like late twenties.

A very sheltered late twenties.

Someone who'd never learned how to hide his true feelings and wore naked emotion with no knowledge that it could be used against him.

I cocked my head, studying him in a different light. *That* was what made him different from other men. He hadn't mastered the art of deception. He didn't try to mask the obvious lust in his stare. He didn't cough away the sudden growl of disgust in his chest.

He was *readable*.

And in that, I had a weapon.

"You want me."

He stumbled backward, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Shut up."

I bowed my head, not out of respect but because with knowledge came a plan and that plan meant I had to get him to see me as a person. Not a prisoner. Not someone to use as he saw fit. I was like him. And maybe, if I made him see that, he'd let me go.

"I'm sorry I trespassed." I looked up between my eyelashes. "I never intended to go where I didn't belong—"

"Quiet." His hand slashed through the air. Another dose of scorching fire set his dark eyes flashing, and the air of the cell turned positively thick with need. I couldn't breathe without tasting it.

Heat rolled off him, kindling little flames over my skin. It wasn't my body reacting to his; it was the intensity of his own making everything so much *more*. More intense, more desperate, more strange than I'd ever experienced.

Who is this man?

Breathing hard, he crossed his arms, making the seams of his shirt strain. He didn't cross his arms like a CEO would, using the stance as dominance. He didn't use it as aggression or as a cage to contain the obvious rage inside him. Instead, he used it as protection, almost as if he hugged himself—as if clinging to the shreds of his self-control, searching for answers, *same as me*, trying to figure this out, *same as me*.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"Stop," he growled. His nostrils flared as he inhaled, the last remaining buttons down his shirt threatening to pop. The silky material splayed over his chest, giving glimpses of a muscular body with a dark snail trail leading into his trousers and a splattering of hair over his pecs. Apart from those areas, he was smooth—unless I counted the scars.

Then, he wasn't smooth at all. He was damaged.

"I—"

"Don't say another fucking word," he hissed.

I nodded and fell silent. For all my scheming and willingness to fight, I would pick my battles wisely.

The cell throbbed with energy. My nipples tingled as he paced in front of me, his erection stabbing upward in his slacks. He paced through puddles and over cold concrete with bare feet.

More time stretched as he threw me dirty looks, and an animalistic grumble echoed in his chest.

His footfalls thudded in time with my heartbeat, counting down to my end.

Tearing his gaze from me, he shook his head as if fighting every dark instinct inside him. His back braced. His thighs bunched. He walked faster with fury.

Every time his eyes landed on my body, it seared. Every time, he sniffed or bared his teeth, my body stiffened with a primal reaction.

He was a trapped beast, and I didn't like the sensation of being trapped in here with him. I didn't like the unpredictability. The real fear that he might snap, and I'd either die or wished I had.

Was he contemplating whether to finish the job?

Did he hate that I hadn't died in that bedroom?

The way he watched me...it made me think he'd been denied company for decades. He looked woefully unprepared to deal with me, violently reckless to get rid of me, and the undeniable confusion of what he truly wanted.

His dark eyes bounced between palpable lust, explicit hate, downright disgust, and absolute turmoil.

When I couldn't stand the silence or his pacing anymore, I swallowed and flinched past the hurt. "Who...*are* you?"

Massaging my throat, I watched him carefully. I expected him to order me to be quiet again. Instead, he stopped. He locked his knees and turned to face me like a soldier conscripted to battle.

Wiping a hand over his scruffy jaw, he once again crossed his arms. With impatient anger, he chewed on words before snapping, "I ask the questions."

His accent was strange. Almost rusty, it slipped over vowels and lingered on consonants in an unusual manner. He sounded American, but with an edge of gentile sophistication. A level of education that didn't mesh with the current location of his home or the state of his dishevelment.

We continued to stare, neither of us embarrassed to be so blatantly watching. When our eyes weren't locked in a battle, they were roaming, imprinting.

He was tall but not too tall. His arms once again causing stress to the seams of his taupe shirt while his thighs bulged in the soft material of his slacks. The clothes didn't fit him or suit him, almost as if they were never his to begin with.

His erection hadn't faded, and his hips moved just a little, the faintest physical hint of what his eyes were screaming.

Lust.

Squeezing his eyes shut for a second, he reopened them with black determination. The hunger was still there, but this time, it was desire for answers rather than sex. Whatever existed between us was no longer a debate on whether or not he'd pounce on me, but how bad the interrogation would become.

"Where did you come from?" he snapped.

I linked my fingers together, glancing at the PLB by my feet.

Come on, find me. Hurry.

I swallowed. "Michigan."

“No.” His forehead furrowed into thick annoyance. “I mean *how* did you come here? How the fuck did you find me?”

“I climbed.”

He scowled again, harsh and spiteful. “*Climbed?* What the hell does that mean?”

Swallowing again, I wished I had water for my throat. “It means I was searching for a boulder someone claimed was nearby. I got lost. I saw your house from the cliff. And I...” I swallowed again and again, pushing through the bruising. “I climbed down to investigate.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

I shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

“So you’re not here to take me back? You didn’t come in via the cave?”

I shook my head. “Take you where? What cave? Oh, you mean the one at the end of the valley? No, I didn’t come—”

“Who else is out there?”

“I—” I closed my mouth. This was the part where I could lie and say I had a group of friends all desperately searching for me. I could convince him that if he didn’t let me go, then others would come looking. Police would come. The army would come. He’d be shot if he put one more bruise on me.

And all of that might be true...if my PLB worked.

Even now, my faint little signal could be on some helicopter dashboard, flashing brightly as they flew to find me.

But...if rescue took a few days. If I had to survive here, on my own, totally at his mercy, the threat that we’d have company might make him lose his temper. He might call my bluff and—

“Well?” He bit the word in two. “Who else knows you’re here?”

I couldn’t stop my gaze latching once again onto my PLB. To the outstretched antenna. To the very clear evidence that other people would know and soon.

His eyes tracked mine, landing on the device.

I winced, waiting for him to smash it and then smash me. However, he just cocked his head and nudged it with a toe. “What’s that?”

He...he doesn’t know?

How sheltered was he?

What sort of world had I stumbled into?

I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to tell him. Why would I give up my only hope? But could I lie? Would he believe me?

“It’s a useless cell phone.” I held my breath. “The battery is dead.”

His eyes narrowed, and for a second, I thought for sure he was playing with me. Pretending not to know but knowing full well that I’d activated a locator beacon. But he nodded and scoffed under his breath. “I remember those.” Kicking it across the floor, he added, “Even if it had a charge, it wouldn’t do you any good out here. There’s never been phone reception. Not even in the beginning.”

My mind exploded with questions. What beginning? How long ago was the beginning? If he’d seen a cell phone, that meant he’d had access to technology at some point, even if he lived an almost archaic existence now. And if he had seen things like phones, then why was he living mostly naked in a house consumed by ivy?

Exhaustion suddenly crushed my shoulders.

I was hungry and cold and I wanted to go home. Who cared who this guy was? He was keeping me prisoner, and I was done.

Drawing myself up, I let ice slip into my voice. “Let me go. I want to leave.”

With speed that seemed otherworldly, he grabbed my chin and pressed my head against the stone wall behind me. My bruised neck cried in agony as his fingers dug into my cheeks, locking me in place. His nose almost kissed mine. The tension between us returned a thousandfold as his anger consumed me.

“You’re not *allowed* to leave.” He kept squeezing me, his eyes almost feverish. “Ever. Do you hear me?”

I’d felt panic before. I’d fallen and broken bones. I’d scaled mountaintops and stood on the edge of the world. I’d suffered grief when my dad died. I’d endured hardships as well as successes. Yet nothing, *nothing* had prepared me for the undiluted wave of foreboding.

“I can’t stay here.” I grabbed at his wrist, doing my best to get free. “I won’t.”

“You don’t have a choice.” His stare dropped to my mouth. His other hand came up, running his forefinger over my bottom lip. It didn’t matter to him that I struggled. He didn’t notice or care. He inserted the tip of his finger into my mouth.

He groaned.

I bit him.

Hard.

“Fuck.” Ripping his hand back, he snarled, “Are you trying to die?”

“I’m trying to live!” I bared my teeth and rubbed the indents he’d left behind on my cheeks. “Don’t *touch* me.”

“I can do more than touch you.” He sucked on the finger that I’d bitten, a trace of blood staining his teeth as he hissed, “You walked into my home uninvited. I didn’t seek you out. I didn’t bring you here against your will. This is *your* fault. Not mine. Your fault that you’ll die in this valley, same as me.” Planting both hands on the stone behind my head, he crushed his body over mine.

His hips collided into me, wedging his erection against my lower belly. He ground against me, ensuring I felt every thick inch. “*That* is all your fault. I’m trying really fucking hard not to hurt you. I’m doing everything I can to ignore the fact that I have full right to make you do anything I want.”

“You don’t have that right. No one has that right—”

“You gave me that right the moment you stepped into my home.” His voice dropped to a lashing whisper. “I keep reliving the moment I saw your tracks over my threshold. The disbelief that someone had dared to enter without permission. How you were there, bold as fucking be, standing on *my* stairs, entering *my* rooms, touching *my* things.”

His cock throbbed against my stomach. His entire body shuddered as his forehead lodged on mine, keeping my head locked against the wall. “I didn’t summon you. I didn’t want you. But now that you’re here, Christ, it’s hard not to take what you’ve so stupidly given.”

I squirmed and tried to push him off me. It was like pushing granite. “I haven’t *given* you anything.”

“Are you deaf? I just told you. You gave me everything the second you entered my valley.”

“I did nothing of the sort. Perhaps, you’re the one who’s deaf. I said *let me go*. I’ll leave. I’ll get out of your home. You won’t have to—”

“*Listen* to me.” His voice turned black with rage. “I’m not letting you go. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. It’s easy. Just open the door, and I’ll climb away. You’ll never see me again.”

“And why would I do that?” His hips once again rocked into me. My breath caught as he framed my face with his elbows, his nails scratching on the wall by my ears. “You’re mine now. Why would I let you go before

knowing how you feel? Why would I let you run back to whoever else is out there? Why would I give you the chance to ruin me?"

Tears glassed my vision. Sweat broke out beneath my windbreaker.

He was too close, too strong, too angry.

His cock never stopped wedging against my belly—an aggressive threat as well as an unwanted link between us.

"Stop. *Touching. Me.*"

Dropping his nose, he sniffed my throat. "It's taking every inch of self-control not to do more than just touch you." He shuddered and inhaled me again. "Fuck, it's taking everything that I am."

My hands scrambled for purchase on his chest, clawing at his scarred skin. I couldn't push him off me. I *hated* that I couldn't move him. I'd always been strong—far stronger than many girls—yet shoving him did nothing. *Nothing!*

Furious frustration rippled down my spine. "Stop!"

His answer was a gentle lick of his tongue from my collarbone to my jaw. I shivered and fought. "I. Said. *Stop!*"

"I should've killed you." He pulled back. His eyes snared mine, too close to fully focus. "It would've been better for both of us."

"Please—" I turned my head to the side. I didn't want this. Despite the weapon I'd acknowledged and the belief that I could play tricks to earn my freedom, I knew now I wasn't equipped.

I wasn't brave enough to use sex as a way free. Sex was a landmine. Sex with him would eradicate all my rights, my freedoms, and my sanities.

If he took from me, he'd take *everything*.

He'd steal every scrap of who I was and leave me nothing in return.

His hips thrust against my belly.

He groaned through parted lips. His entire face went slack as if the sensation completely undid him.

Having him take pleasure from me without my consent—having him *use* me when I'd said no made my skin crawl and my heart race and my bruised throat throb with injustice. "*Stop.*"

He grunted as his hips thrust deeper, driving my spine into the stone wall. "Fuck, I can't." It was as if something snapped inside him. "I can't." He drove against me again. "I won't."

He sounded wretched and afraid.

A direct contradiction to his overpowerment and abuse.

“God, you feel—” Throwing his head back, he thrust again, rolling his hips, forcing every hard inch of himself against me. “Oh, *Christ*.” He spasmed and let go, driving again and again, short and vicious, imprinting his heat, his need.

“*Fuuuuck*.”

He rutted a final time into me, his body bowing tight, his breath catching. His groan sounded eerily similar to the suffering creature from last night. The same animal that’d woken me up and made me wish to seek it out and put it out of its misery.

A sound that was bruised and broken.

He jerked as an orgasm shook him. He rode out the waves of pleasure.

I didn’t look at him.

Couldn’t stomach watching him come apart.

I’d met him when he was naked. And now, he climaxed while fully clothed. An enigma. A riddle. A stranger I was too afraid to figure out.

When he grunted a final time, his body switched from aggressive to almost apologetic. Stumbling away from me, he dragged both hands over his face.

I slid down the wall, hugging my shaking knees to my chest. A damp spot now existed on my belly, leaving behind his mark.

I hated him.

Hated him.

The front of his slacks was stained, and his body continued to jerk with pleasure as he dropped his hands and stared at me.

What an absolute *bastard*.

What a messed-up, dangerous man.

He didn’t speak as he glanced down at his groin and noticed the stain of what he’d just done. His jaw clenched until every tendon in his neck stood out. His face turned thunderous. For a second, he raised a fist and looked like he’d strike me to death.

But then, a wash of absolute shame coated his face. A shadow of conflict and shyness. With a snarl, he stormed to the door.

Fumbling for the key, he wrenched it open and almost fell through it.

He slammed it shut a second later, followed by the scratch of metal and the clunk of a lock.

Sighing hard and giving in to the hot wash of tears, I rested my chin on my knees and cried.



CHAPTER TEN

OUT OF ALL THE things I'd done.

Out of all the years I'd been alive, and all the things I'd seen, experienced, and endured, the worst was closing my eyes. Worse than masturbating on that girl. Worse than all the black images of fucking her against her wishes.

I'd lost control.

I knew that.

But in the darkness, all alone, I couldn't focus on that. Couldn't come to terms with how easily I'd broken.

If I closed my eyes, the nightmares came.

If I went to sleep, the memories were waiting.

If I let myself relive what I'd done, the thirst for her became fucking *unbearable*.

Night for me was the worst kind of torture. Sleep would always be my nemesis.

Therefore, instead of seeking rest and willingly giving myself over to the blackest pits of my mind, I stayed awake.

I lay in my single, sunken bed with just a worn sheet over my nakedness and stared at the lacy cobwebs in the rafters.

My hands never unfurled.

My body never relaxed.

I lay in a state of explosive readiness. Ready to slaughter anyone who came after the girl imprisoned in my cellar. Ready to leap from this room and spill blood in the corridors.

She couldn't leave.

I knew that.

She was locked below. Completely captive. Her very existence relied on my generosity.

I could keep her for however long I wanted, or I could kill her and end the misery she'd created, or I could fuck her until I cured my sudden insanity.

Regardless if help did come for her, she was *mine*. Like I'd told her in the cell, this was *her* fault. She'd trespassed. So didn't that give me the right to do whatever I wanted?

Seriously, what are you thinking?

I groaned and glowered at the shadows.

Keeping her was an inconvenience. Keeping her meant double the work, double the preparation, and a whole shit ton of personal pain.

But I couldn't let her go, either.

No one could know about this place.

No one.

I sat up in bed, checking for the millionth time that the locks on my door were still in place and the warning alarm was still rigged against my window. Just because no one had come to find her in over fourteen hours didn't mean they wouldn't come. That they weren't waiting for my guard to drop.

But that was the thing. I'd learned the hard way that to survive, you couldn't stop looking over your shoulder. I'd been doing it for eleven years. I'd become a master at it.

No one would touch her without my permission.

Running my fingers over one of the three knives resting in grabbing distance, I glanced at the other two. One beneath my pillow, one on the floor, and one on my current book.

If more people came, I was ready.

And if they don't?

If it's just you and her?

Alone?

For days? Months? Years?

I gritted my teeth.

Then we're both royally fucked.

Tonight had shown just how weak I was. Just how screwed up I'd become by denying natural urges. I'd broken within moments of being in that cell with her. I'd gone down there to demand answers, yet instead of a calm interrogation, I'd lost all sense of who I was.

I shattered every shred of discipline.

I'd become like *them*.

I drove my head into the pillow and bunched the sheet over my thighs.

Just because nightmares couldn't find me didn't mean the memories of what I'd done to her didn't. They ignored my command to stay the hell away. They bombarded me with sensation.

Memories of how delicious she'd felt as I'd driven my cock against her came fast.

Her vulnerability made my balls ache to claim her.

And I knew, right down to my rotten soul, that the next time I saw her, I'd want more. I'd *take* more. I'd use her, with or without her consent, and that left me hard, hurting, and horribly eager to storm down the stairs and command her to her knees.

* * * * *

Standing in the kitchen, I fought against necessity and nastiness.

I was hungry, starving actually, after not consuming a thing yesterday. And if I was hungry, that meant my prisoner would be equally malnourished.

Which led to the dilemma I now faced.

If I fed her, that meant I intended to keep her alive.

If I didn't, that meant I was destining her to die.

Both scenarios came with ramifications that I wasn't prepared to deal with on an empty stomach after a sleepless night.

Stalking into the walk-in pantry, I grabbed the rest of the loaf of sourdough rye bread I'd made two days ago. Disformed and stale, it wasn't exactly enjoyable. It was moderately edible, and for the past few years, that was good enough for me.

In the beginning, I'd eaten like a king.

The cellar once had another purpose instead of housing trespassing girls. It'd been teeming with food. Canned vegetables, huge sacks of rice and

potatoes, barrels of sugar and salt, shelves upon shelves of chocolates, wines, and liquors.

There'd been enough rations to last almost four years. I'd stretched certain things, done without on others, and began the necessary shift from eating prepared grains and gathered ingredients into growing my own.

Thank fuck the owner of this place had entered the wilderness prepared. Once a year, they'd have supplies brought in. Huge crates of linen, soaps, juices, savory, and sweet. On top of all the frozen, smoked, dried, and packeted food, they'd imported seeds of every fruit and vegetable. Stocked the library with every book on horticulture, employed gardeners and chefs, and straddled the convenience of modern living with the old ways of cultivating the land.

Those deliveries had stopped long ago, and I'd learned how to stay alive through trial and error. My body had been used as a tester on more than one occasion, confirming what was palatable and what was not. And now, I'd become fairly proficient at providing for one man through four seasons.

I had a system in place.

Chores that needed to be completed each month. Checklists that couldn't be ignored. And all that had now been thrown into chaos with an additional mouth to feed.

Wrenching open the ancient fridge that ran off hydropower thanks to the swift currents found in the cave system, I yanked out fresh strawberries, a bowl of crunchy snow peas, and a few sticks of last week's celery.

Placing equal measure of food onto the fancy plates where the gold leaf had long since washed off, I tore up the rest of the bread and carried the two meals down the stairs and to the cellar.

The instant my bare feet landed on the damp concrete of the lower level, a chill shot up my spine.

The heat of the summer didn't reach down here.

I was suddenly glad I'd slipped into my shirt and slacks, deciding clothing would be a better alternative than going to visit her naked. However, I hated these clothes even more than usual after last night. They were a reminder of what I'd done. The fact that I'd had to scrub away the stain of pleasure. That the slacks were still damp from coming against her—it all shouted a message that I wasn't in control. Of fucking anything.

A pounding began in my head.

Just get rid of her.

Why are you feeding her?

Why are you delaying the inevitable?

Placing both plates on the ground, I pulled out the key and unlocked the padlock.

I had no answers to those questions, so I ignored them.

The faintest of scurrying inside made my ears prick. What had she been doing all night? Had she set a trap for me?

Rolling my eyes at my stupidity, I curled my hand around the handle. I should've checked her for additional weapons when I'd thrown her in here. I should've smashed that cell phone, regardless if it was completely useless. I should've stripped her down and investigated every inch of her to make sure she had nothing that could hurt me.

Yet another reason you should stop this nonsense and kill her.

You're overlooking things.

You're messing up.

Bending, I gathered up the plates before wedging my foot against the door. "Don't do anything stupid. I'm coming in."

Kicking the door, I braced for pain or her attempt at escape.

Instead of her racing toward me with a knife or shoving past me to the stairs, she merely blinked from where she sat cross-legged against the wall. The cell phone with its pointless antenna rested beside her. I would've expected technology to have improved in the decade and a bit since I'd been gone from society, but judging by that piece of shit, it seemed as if the world had gone backward.

Stepping into her prison, I kicked the door shut behind me.

What the fuck was I supposed to do now?

Offer her food? Pretend this was normal?

Smile?

Clearing my throat, I braced my shoulders and moved toward her.

She flinched and looped her hands together. Her eyelashes glittered in the harsh electrical light. Her eyes never strayed from my face while her body pretended to be non-threatening, sitting on the floor. However, every muscle twitched with tension.

I knew that pose.

I'd mastered that pose.

And I knew that look, too.

I'd worn it. I'd seen it. I didn't need her to tell me that she hated me, feared me, and wanted me to die in equal measure.

"Here." Placing the plate on the ground, I shoved it toward her. It slid across the concrete with a clunk, the bread tumbling into a shallow puddle. I scowled and reached to pluck it out before it could get too soggy. One of the many rules I'd learned here was you never wasted food. Ever.

She watched me carefully as I placed the bread back on her plate. A little bit of water never hurt anyone.

Holding her stare, I sat cross-legged before her, ignoring the cold concrete against my ass.

She bit her bottom lip, her eyes turning glassy as she stared at the bread. She trembled and sniffed as if food had the power to make her cry. Dismay coated her face as she glanced from the bread to the red juiciness of the strawberries that I'd tended, grown, and harvested.

Her hunger was obvious.

Her joy at seeing a basic feast sparked a cord of comradeship inside me.

She wanted something *I'd* created.

Her desire for the breakfast I'd offered made possession flash through my heart. It silenced my hate just for a second, and with a quick snatch, I swapped her bread for mine.

I did it automatically.

Some long-dead chivalry raising its head despite my current lack of social skills.

Her head snapped up, long blond hair slipping over her shoulder.

And that was all it fucking took.

A single strand of hair.

A simple quirk of attention. Her eyes on me. Her awareness on me. Her heat so close. Her body so near.

Shit.

My cock swelled and pressed against my slacks, switching my starvation once again to her. A quaking desperation cracked my bones. I needed to shove the food away, strip her down, and wrestle her to the floor.

I'd stared at her last night, searching for tricks and lies. I'd been too focused on survival to see her for what she truly was.

But I saw now.

I saw *her*.

A woman.

A woman who stunned me fucking breathless with beauty I'd refused to see. Either my eyes were unused to seeing anything but my river-cast reflection or I'd forgotten what females looked like because I swore on the final shreds of my self-control that she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.

Leaf-scattered hair, big green and brown swirling eyes, pink lips, dirt-smudged cheeks, and a body that wasn't feeble or fragile but had muscle tone, power, and a stark warning that if I was going to take what I wanted, I'd have to fight for it.

Images instantly sprang to mind.

Of her nails on my skin. Of her teeth on my throat. Of her legs spreading as I subdued her to the ground and—

Stop!

My hands shook as I dropped my eyes.

Don't.

My nostrils flared as I struggled with self-control. I balanced on a knife-edge of staying where I was or launching myself at her.

And then her voice cut through my raging pain. Soft and tentative, grateful. "You didn't have to do that."

The shock of her kind tone wrenched my head up. My cock stopped trying to buckle me beneath its command. I sucked in a breath. "Do what?"

She licked her pink lips. "Swap the bread."

Her thankfulness sent me reeling. No one had ever been thankful. No one had ever used that tone toward me. *No one*. I cleared my throat, scrambling for forgotten words. "It was wet."

"I've eaten worse." Raising a shoulder, she half-heartedly shrugged. "I camp a lot. I don't always make an effort to cook decent food. I don't care about dirt or rain."

Was she *talking* to me?

Was this a trick?

Some sort of ploy to make me interact with her?

You're already interacting with her.

You're feeding her, housing her, wanting to fuck her.

I balled my hands, distrust overshadowing my sudden compulsion to keep her spilling her secrets.

"What's your name?" The question was sour on my tongue.

What the fuck?

Why would you ask that?

Who cared?

I didn't.

I didn't plan on keeping her around long enough to know why she camped or climbed or didn't care about dirt.

She was dangerous.

I knew that now.

I couldn't keep her as a pet. I couldn't house her during winter and use her body whenever I wanted.

She has to go.

Gritting my teeth, I steeled myself against any other unwanted softenings.

I would carry out the unpleasant task of her demise tonight. Today. This very fucking moment before it got any more complicated.

I raised my hand. "Don't. Don't answer—"

"Gemma." She bowed her head as if coming to the same conclusions I had. Spying a weakness in our boundaries, knowing that the more we conversed, the more connections would spring.

It was inevitable.

It was human nature.

It was the oldest trick in the goddamn book.

It had also been used against me far too many times to count.

And I won't let it be used again.

"Gemma Ashford. But everyone calls me Gem."

"I don't care." Dropping my gaze to my plate, I snatched a strawberry and shoved it into my mouth. First, I would eat. And then, I would kill.

She was nothing more than a creature caught in my snare with a broken leg and a bloody hide. I was doing her a favor. She'd thank me for—

"What's *your* name?" she asked, her voice quiet but strong.

I kept chewing and ignored her.

"What is this place?" She waved around the cell. "How many live here? Is it just you? Where are you from originally? Have you been here long—"

"Shut up. Eat. I don't have all day to finish this."

"Finish what?" Her voice caught with fear.

I looked up.

We made eye contact.

She sucked in a breath, reading the truth of what I meant. Not finish breakfast. Finish her.

Shaking her head slightly, she bit her bottom lip. “Why?”

Once again, I ignored her, grabbing the bread and tearing a mouthful off with my teeth. Her questions had made my own spring up. What was the world like these days? Where had she used to live? Did she have a husband back home? Would anyone miss her when I buried her in the garden? What was her favorite season?

I need to know everything.

I don't need to know a thing.

Stuffing a snow pea into my mouth, I chewed hard and fast.

Sensing my animosity, she reached for her own plate. She went to grab a strawberry, but then she paused. Throwing me a suspicious glance, she watched as I selected a stick of celery and crunched.

Swallowing, I cocked my head. Her stare made my hair stand on end. “What?”

“You tried to kill me yesterday, and you just admitted that’s still your intention. Is this how you’ll do it? Is that why you’ve given me food?”

“I’ve given you food so you don’t die on an empty stomach. It’s called being kind.”

Her nose scrunched in disgust. “*Kind* is letting me go. Kind is not touching me. Kind is letting me *live*.”

“Then eat, and you’ll live a little longer.”

She held up the berry I’d painstakingly nurtured from seed to fruit. “Is it poisoned?”

I turned to chilly stone. “I’d never tamper with food that way.”

“Yet you’ll tamper with my life.”

“Different.”

“How is that different?” She glared at me as if her hatred had just grown a thousandfold.

“I want the strawberry. I don’t want you.”

Her shoulders went to slouch, only for steel to force her straight. “You wanted me last night.”

My hands curled around my plate. “That won’t happen again.” Those four words were spoken in honesty, but they tasted like the worst lie I’d ever told. Would I be able to end her life before touching her a final time? Would I truly deny myself the chance to be inside her before she turned lifeless and cold?

She studied me silently, dropping the strawberry back onto her plate. She scanned the breakfast I'd generously provided, her eyes slowly filling with an empty darkness.

Once again, I was familiar with that look.

I'd seen it staring back at me in mirrors before I'd smashed them, and I'd seen it in the eyes of my prey. She'd stopped fighting against the inevitable. Her instincts sensed there was no way out. She was dead, regardless if she wanted to be or not.

Normally, with that realization came a hollow kind of peace. But in her case, she looked lost, terrified, and painfully alone.

Eating another snow pea, I tried to ignore the tug in my chest. The sensation of empathy that I'd long since crushed.

She placed her plate silently onto the floor.

That affected me to the core.

She'd been so grateful for the food only moments ago. And now, even in her immense hunger, she refused to take a single thing from me.

A stalemate sprang between us.

Her despondency made impatience and annoyance fill me, but beneath that, a minor trace of compassion burned.

Silence ticked for a while.

Her stomach grumbled.

I snapped, "Nothing is poisoned."

It was her turn to ignore me.

"Would I be eating if it was?" I growled.

She didn't look up, staring at her hands in her lap. "You could have just poisoned my share."

"I value food too highly to ruin it. On that you have my word."

Her hair slid forward, obscuring her face.

Needing her to look at me, I said coldly, "And why would I poison you, anyway? It would deny me the pleasure of squeezing your delicate neck again."

She swallowed hard, her swirling eyes flashing up to mine. "You're a monster."

"No, I'm dealing with a problem."

"Let me go, and I'll no longer be a problem."

"Let you go, and you'll bring a thousand problems in return."

She crossed her arms, trembling hard. “Go on then. Finish the job. *Kill me.*”

I tore off a piece of bread, a sudden coldness flashing through my heart. In the few short minutes of conversation, I’d remembered something that I’d so successfully forgotten.

With her trespassing, she’d brought life back into this place. She’d chased away the quietness that’d settled so deeply inside me.

After years alone, you tended to forget.

If enough time passed, you could even pretend it never existed.

But thanks to her, I remembered why I’d struggled so much in those first few years. Why I’d spent a year catatonically drunk before I’d had to make the choice to live or die. Why I’d turned my back on those who’d turned their back on me.

Loneliness.

It was a disease that once caught, there was no cure.

Its endless vacuum sucked up every emotion and thought until the only thing left was a husk. A wordless husk with bones so hollow, I expected one day just to shatter into dust and be done with it.

“Well?” she snarled. “I’m done waiting. You made me wait all night. If you’ve made up your mind to become a murderer, then just do it already.” Tears glittered in her angry eyes, a final attempt at hope blazing. “But...if you’re still looking at your options, I have money. I...I’ll pay you to free me. What do you want? A million? Two? Put a price on my life, and I’ll pay it.”

I paused. “You expect me to believe you have that sort of money?”

“I do.” She balled her hands, warming to her crusade. “I’m successful online. I haven’t had anything to spend my income on. I’m...a good saver. If I have to buy my life from you, then so be it. You can have every penny I have *if you let me go.*”

I sat back, stunned once again at her beauty. This time, it wasn’t her looks that made me hard but her fierceness. Her fury and skills at negotiation. She hadn’t accepted her end, after all.

When I didn’t speak, she licked her lips and rubbed her arms. “Well? Do we have a deal?”

She didn’t need to know that money meant nothing to me. What would I spend it on out here? It couldn’t be used to buy food, not when I couldn’t afford to reveal my existence. I couldn’t plant a dollar bill and have it sprout into parsnips.

It wasn't the money that she was willing to give me that made interest and hesitation billow. It was the fact she was willing to offer me anything at all.

It made my cock twitch.

It made me wonder...

Picking up my final strawberry, I ate it slowly, savoring the sugar and licking at its juice. "I don't know."

She froze. "But...you're open to discussing it?"

I shrugged. "I'm unsure at this point."

"What would make you sure? Why are you so intent on killing me? Tell me that, and maybe I can—"

"You don't belong here. I need you gone because I don't know any other solution. Because you have nothing to offer me other than complication and will end up demanding more than I can afford."

Silence tumbled between us, heavy with thought and consequence.

She let her arms uncross and hands settle into her lap. Her breathing turned slow and deep as her forehead scrunched. I watched it all as she shook her head, her eyes narrowing on the puddle next to her.

I couldn't guess what she was thinking, but whatever it was took all her concentration. All her courage. Everything she was.

Finally, after what felt like forever, she lifted her chin and captured my eyes.

She studied me. Her gaze dropped to my mouth, swept to my hair, then glided down my body.

She nodded once.

Inhaled hard.

Then murmured, "I have something else to offer."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

I ALMOST CHOKED.

I have something else to offer.

Six simple words yet the worst sentence of my life.

My captor stiffened before me. Ever so slowly, he pushed away the remnants of his strange breakfast.

I'd never been a stickler for meal plans and rarely stuck to menu suggestions, but his odd combination of celery, peas, and strawberries made me wonder if he truly was uneducated, or at the very least, uncaring about routines and practices.

Cocking his head, he eyed me in his severe, strict way. "Go on..." He waved a hand. "What could you possibly have to offer me?"

I licked my lips as a wash of shivers darted down my back.

If I did this, I already knew I'd lose parts of myself I'd never really known. If I offered up my body in a trade to keep my soul, I could quite possibly end up losing both.

He could fuck me and kill me anyway.

He could keep me alive and never return my freedom.

What was worse?

Certain death or unknown sexual servitude?

Inhaling hard, I rubbed at my chest where my heart hurled itself against my ribs. The palpitations were full of fear, adrenaline, and a fair amount of shock.

Alone in the dark, I'd tossed and turned all night.

I'd asked myself how far I would go to stay alive. What would I do at his bequest if he agreed to let me go?

My answers had varied.

They'd switched from stark, rage-filled refusal to stupidly giving him anything: accepting death and dying innocent and soon, or crawling on my knees in enslavement and doing whatever he asked in order to survive.

By the time the sun had risen, I'd been no wiser on what my choice would be.

Turned out, I'd just made it.

Survival instinct was too strong to ignore and everything else paled compared to death. I wanted to *live*. I'd barely begun. I would make any trade that would ensure I saw another day.

That includes letting a bastard like him touch me.

I looked at him.

I drank in the long shaggy hair, the silvery scars, the angry burning eyes. I studied the man who would most likely possess me in ways no other man had done before. He would know me better than any other.

And he would do it without my consent.

Sure, I was about to give him the right to touch me *if* he refrained from killing me. But it didn't mean I would be a willing participant. I would lock away my mind and fortify my heart. I would give him the shell of who I was to retain the most important part of me.

Sex.

Would this make me a whore? Bartering my body for my life? Would I feel shame as he took me or vindication that I was brave enough to endure whatever it took to live?

My eyes skittered over to the PLB and its saluting antenna. It'd been hours since I'd activated it. If help truly was on the way, didn't I owe it to them and myself to extend my lifespan? To give them a chance at finding me alive instead of some corpse hidden in this secret valley?

You can do this.

It's just sex.

Just physical, nothing more.

Just an act that doesn't mean a thing.

Raising my stare, I embraced every icy crystal in my blood from sleeping in this tomb and said as clearly, clinically, and coldly as possible. "My offer...is me."

His eyebrows tugged low, shadowing his dark eyes. A spark of lust gleamed over his pupils. His nostrils flared as if scenting my disgust at such an offering, and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. Once again, he looked at me as if his gaze could strip me, finger me, tongue me, and claim me.

My nipples pebbled as he stared at my breasts and licked his bottom lip. My core tingled with disgusting acknowledgment as he looked between my legs and made a cauldron of hate and unwanted need answer back.

The power he held over his sexuality was the worst kind of weapon. The fact that he didn't hide what he thought. That I knew *exactly* what he felt when he studied me. That he was moments away from snapping and mounting. That my offer had removed the shackles he'd put around his wrists, granting an almost sickening kind of disappointment.

He'd been looking forward to the fight. He'd wanted to be told no.

Why?

To humiliate me further? Because he had secrets of his own when it came to sex?

Either way, he nodded once, and a soft growl rumbled in his chest.

"You."

I curled my hands. "I'll...do whatever you ask if you allow me to live and let me go."

His eyes narrowed, pinning me to the floor. "Kneel."

I blinked.

I opened my mouth to question, to argue.

He just wiped a hand over his lips and repeated in a guttural whisper, "Kneel."

Had he accepted my offer, or was this a test?

Goosebumps multiplied over my body. I'd never been so powerless, so stripped of choice or refusal.

"*Kneel!*" he snarled, making me jump.

My knee nudged the PLB, tipping it over. The clunk was a reminder of why I'd offered, why I had to do this. With shaking hands, I righted the locator beacon and made sure the antenna faced toward the sky.

And then, I pushed aside my untouched, possibly poisoned breakfast and kneeled.

His harsh inhale made my stomach clench in ways I didn't want to analyze. The heady huff of a male who didn't hold back how desperate he was. How much his body burned. How much his lust broke him.

If I wasn't being forced, I would've found his desire the headiest aphrodisiac. My skin would've scorched beneath his intensity. My core would've melted. My legs would've trembled to open.

In all my searchings for a suitable partner, I'd never come across a man who affected me on such a visceral level. A level devoid of humanity and conversation. We'd spoken a handful of words to each other, yet the heaviness of his need blanketed me.

It made my skin sizzle and my breasts burn. It made me sway on my knees as I forced myself to make eye contact with him and wait.

For an eternity, he just stared at me.

The longer he stared, the darker his stare became. He began to tremble, his hands shaking, his body quaking, his lust shattering him from the inside out. A part of him looked ferocious, like any killer, rapist, or devil in history. But the other part of him looked bewildered, afraid, and recklessly inexperienced.

My heart pounded so hard, I heard it in my ears, I felt it in my veins. I swore he could hear its rapid rhythm, slamming drums against the basement walls.

Suddenly, he shot to his feet.

His bare toes planted onto the damp concrete, kicking away his mostly empty plate without thought. Taking two steps toward me, he stood over me. Towered above me as he reached down with his left hand and dug strong fingers through my leaf-tangled hair.

Cupping the back of my head, he stared into me as if he was seconds away from shattering. With our eyes knotted, he used his right hand to work the button and zipper of his slacks.

He fumbled and yanked, splaying the front of his trousers to reveal the bareness of his cock. No underwear. No modesty. The hard length of his arousal sprang upward as his unfastened slacks fell to his ankles.

His fingers dug deeper into my hair, asking for something.

I waited for him to jerk me forward. For him to fist himself and shove the thickness past my lips.

But he did neither of those things.

He trembled harder, his cock weeping pre-cum, his balls drawn up so tight they were almost invisible in the dark thicket of hair.

His lips drew back in a snarl, baring his teeth as a growl echoed in his belly.

I waited for instruction.

I *needed* to be told what to do.

Didn't he get that? I wouldn't willingly touch him. I *couldn't*. He had to *make* me do this. He had to release me from the shame of using sex for longevity.

His right hand fisted by his side, swinging slightly in time to his raging heartbeat. His drummed as fast and as heavy as mine, a chaotic song that made the cell pulse around us. Made the air spark with danger and longing.

He breathed hard. He groaned low in his throat. His hips rocked in time to his quaking. And *still*, he didn't touch himself or drag my mouth to his cock.

Why?

What is he waiting for?

Was this all a challenge to him? I'd given myself over to him, but he'd still found a way to win. To make me bow to his demands. To rip that fight from me even while I'd done my best to avoid it.

His right hand opened and closed by his thigh as his cock twitched with another bead of pre-cum. His jaw worked as he clenched his teeth, and his fingers closed around my hair, pulling painfully.

"Your choice." He bit out each word. "Live or die."

My knees dug into the cold concrete as my palms turned damp with fear. The thought of touching him, licking him, *sucking* him made my empty stomach flip over with acid. It made my mouth water for anything else but him.

He pulled me closer, his slacks rustling on the floor.

That was his only instruction. His only guidance. Not once did he touch himself. Not once did he even acknowledge the hard thickness throbbing between his legs.

My baby brother popped into my head.

An awful moment to think of my darling sibling but a potent reminder of why I'd made the offer in the first place. I wanted to see Josh again. I wanted to joke with him. Hug him. Let him scold me for ever going out of reception and finding a hidden house that was never meant to be found.

I couldn't die like our father. I couldn't just disappear.

I have to live.

My eyes snapped up to his, then dropped to his impressive erection. I'd pleased only two other men this way, and each time, I'd despised it. They'd shoved in too deep and come down my throat without warning. I'd felt used and dirty and unappreciated.

And somehow, even with this monster looming over me, using my life as a noose to dictate forced pleasuring, I felt more wanted than any other encounter.

I knew I was beautiful to him.

I knew I was everything he wanted in that moment.

I knew I had the power to shatter his world with just a single touch. One touch on his cock and he would break. That wasn't a secret he could hide. His stark confession blazed across his face with a thirst that made me wet despite my hatred.

One touch.

One touch and I could be free.

Sucking in a harsh breath, giving myself over to the galloping beats of my heart, I swooped forward and wrapped my fingers around his hot erection. Not letting myself think, I opened my lips and sank his heat onto my tongue.

And

Everything

Changed.

He crumpled over me.

He let out a bone-aching grunt.

He stumbled and steadied himself, using me as support as his entire body became mine.

I was the one submitting, but somehow, he became my prisoner.

A crest of agonizing heat rushed through me, arching through my blood and pooling in my belly. My core clenched around nothing, drunk on his lust, becoming infected by his hunger.

I was *affected*.

I was wet and heavy and utterly intoxicated in the way he gave me everything.

My world narrowed down to one thing.

Him.

I sucked hard.

I squeezed my fingers and stroked his blazing cock.

He snarled and thrust, his erection slipping deeper into my mouth.

My other senses exploded into hyperawareness. He tasted fresh, like blue rivers and green grasslands. He smelled earthy, like bracken and forest undertones. He pulsed on my tongue, delivering a salty musk that punched me with sex and seduction.

Both his hands dived into my hair, dragging me onto him. His muscular belly pressed against my forehead. His chest rumbled with grunts and groans. His vocal appreciation of what I did to him spurred me forward, erasing my humiliation at sucking a stranger in return for my life.

He changed me.

He showed me that my body wasn't on my side. That I could lust as dangerously as he. That I could want someone I couldn't understand or tolerate. He taught me that *this* was what I'd been missing.

This flair of dominance.

This threat of danger.

This delicious, disgusting power that drove me to my knees and allowed a monster to claim me.

"*Fuck!*" He threw his head back as I dragged my teeth along his cock. Tears rolled from my eyes as I fought my own battle of right and wrong. My breasts ached to be touched. My clit begged to be rubbed.

In a few manic moments, I'd become hotter and wetter than I'd ever been in my entire life.

I *hated* him for that.

I hated myself even more.

I sucked him harder, faster, crueler.

I needed this over with...so I didn't fall even deeper into this erotic nightmare.

Digging my fingernails into the velvet casing of his cock, I didn't sheath my teeth as I swooped up and sank down. I punished him while punishing myself, and when the temptation to snap almost broke me, when my teeth ached to bite deep, when tears drenched my cheeks and dripped off my chin, he snatched my hair and howled.

He gave me a warning.

He wasn't like the others.

He stiffened and jerked.

His cock spurted even as he withdrew.

Half his seed spilled over my tongue, the rest spurted all over my chest. Ribbons of white cascading in jets, sticking to my hair, smelling strong and uniquely him.

The second he stopped coming, he tripped away from me. He looked down at his still saliva-glistening cock, and the haggard expression that clouded his face was swallowed up by the blackest storm.

Snatching his slacks from around his ankles, he jerked them up and secured them. The top of his cum-smear'd cock popped out of the waistband, angry and raw. He swallowed and swiped both hands through his long hair, sending the mob of darkness to swing to his shoulders.

I sat back on my heels, still cursed with the wet heat inside me.

He'd had a release.

I hadn't.

He'd come expecting one.

I'd submitted, never expecting to feel an ounce of attraction.

We'd both been destroyed in a single interaction.

I saw it on his face.

He most likely saw it on mine.

The air crushed us, dense and accusing that whatever had just happened was outside both our control.

Bracing his shoulders and standing tall, as if he hadn't just been curled around my head while thrusting into my mouth, he seethed, "You'll stay alive another day."

And then, he was gone.



CHAPTER TWELVE

I SPENT THE DAY AS far away from the basement as possible. As far away from the *girl* as possible.

Gemma.

Her name is Gemma.

I scoffed and swiped at the weeds daring to encroach on my spinach patch.

Who cared what her damn name was? I'd been the idiot who'd asked, but I definitely wouldn't be the idiot who cared. It was a stupid name for a stupid girl. There was no other explanation for her.

She was stupid for exploring untouched ravines where she didn't belong. She was stupid for climbing into a valley without backup. She was stupid for entering a house that wasn't hers to enter.

But most of all?

She was beyond fucking stupid for offering me something I had no power to refuse.

I threw the handful of weeds into the compost, glancing down at my still eager cock tenting my slacks. All fucking day, I'd been hard as a damn rock. Every time my thoughts strayed to her—no matter how quick the passing thought—my cock went stiff.

It didn't make sense.

Eleven years ago, I'd never wanted to see another person again, let alone touch them, kiss them, fuck them. I swore off passion and pleasure of any kind for the rest of my life. I was happy to become a monk, living alone in the forest for the rest of my godforsaken days.

Yes, I'd been steadily getting more and more urges before she'd arrived. Yes, I'd struggled not to deal with it on my own. And yes, sometimes, the needs inside me were fucking *unbearable*, but I didn't want them, goddammit. The need for a release went against everything I'd become. I *hated* that my body had overpowered me and eagerly snatched up her offer. I cursed the fact she'd read me, understood exactly what I wanted, and been *stupid* enough to offer up her body.

How the hell was I supposed to refuse that?

Especially when I would've taken it anyway.

I wouldn't have been able to stop myself. I would've killed her, but only after I'd had a taste. One forbidden taste that was no longer forbidden but willingly given.

Willingly?

I rolled my eyes as I stretched out the kinks in my spine and stalked barefoot through the long grass back to the kitchen door. She'd sucked me, but it hadn't been willing. If she didn't see a blade hanging over her throat, then she wouldn't have looked twice at me.

She would've refused to give me any attention.

She would've scurried up the cliff walls and vanished the second I even glanced at her.

And knowing the pleasure she'd given me wasn't freely granted made it taste all the sweeter. Didn't others deserve to know what that felt like? Didn't I deserve to be in a position of power for once?

My stomach snarled as I shoved my way into the kitchen and eyed up the vegetables I'd harvested this afternoon. A range of produce waited to be washed, prepped, and placed into the fridge to extend their usability during this heatwave.

I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I'd gone for a long run, a swim, and done hours' worth of gardening since leaving my prisoner this morning. Not to mention, I'd spent all that time violently denying the lust in my blood.

I was exhausted.

I was sick to death of the itchy hunger inside that had nothing to do with food and everything to do with my trespasser.

My cock had a fucking trance on it. It wanted to bolt to the basement and force the girl to worship it. It wanted to come again and again. It wanted to be used after a decade of forced celibacy.

Gritting my teeth, I ignored the incessant tug in my belly and focused on making dinner. I only wore my dirty slacks, having shrugged off the shirt during a fierce bout of digging potatoes, and sighed in relief as a cool evening breeze wafted through the kitchen.

In winter, dusk always depressed me. It came around too fast and settled in for too long. It brought ice and silence and nightmares. In summer, I liked dusk the most. It came with its pink glow and lingered with its gray shadows. It cooled off the intensity of the sun but left behind mugginess, granting a perfect temperature neither too hot nor too cold.

Would she be cold?

Down there in puddles and stone?

Do I care?

My cock twitched; apparently *he* cared, even if I didn't.

My thoughts once again skipped to my hostage as I sliced up fresh potatoes and tossed them in the rudimentary flour I'd made from the wild grass seed heads outside. I'd long since run out of oil, but I'd learned if I added a thin layer of flour and baked sticks of potatoes in the oven (an oven that'd lasted this long and hopefully wouldn't die for another few decades), I could achieve crispy french fries that rivaled any I might've remembered from a previous life.

I didn't bother cooking in the summer much. I ate most of the vegetables raw, and the game I caught was smoked or charred over a fire outside.

However, I wasn't just cooking for myself anymore.

Already, she'd complicated my world, and she'd only been here two days.

Her life for my pleasure.

Is that deal worth it?

This morning, with my cock down her throat and her tongue bringing me to a spine-snapping orgasm, I would've said shit yes it was worth it. Now, with the cool evening air and the knowledge that the seasons would change soon and the ease of living would grow difficult, I wasn't so sure.

Sex wasn't useful. Sex wasn't productive. Sex would get me into a shit ton of trouble that I didn't need.

Her blowjob had granted her another day of living.

Perhaps, that ought to be the fine print of our deal.
Notice me, pleasure me, and she could live to see another sunrise.
Deny me, upset me, and she would forfeit any and all leniency.
Liking those new rules, I pulled out two plates and prepared to feed my complicated possession.

* * * * *

“You came back.” She shot to her feet and braced against the wall as if she could run through it.

My eyes snapped to hers as I stepped into the cell and shut the door behind me. Two plates balanced on one arm, feeling like I was the one in servitude and not the other way around.

Ignoring the way her gaze locked onto me as if I might disappear again, I stalked toward her and placed the food beside the empty plates from this morning.

It turned out, she’d decided to take her chances and had eaten the same breakfast she’d suspected I’d poisoned.

It shouldn’t affect me that she’d eaten my food, that she’d willingly taken other parts of me into her body, but it did. It affected me more than watching my cock slide over her tongue. It made my heart twitch instead of my balls, and I stabbed it for ever thinking of betraying me.

“I…” She didn’t complete her thought, wringing her hands as she glanced at the dinner I’d provided. At the golden crunchy homemade fries, the salad consisting of lettuce, spinach, kale, and shredded carrot. No dressing flavored the leaves, and I no longer had any nuts, but I had found a wild honeybee hive and raided their stash a few weeks ago. Their honey drizzled the french fries, glistening in the harsh bulb above.

Nodding gratefully, she made eye contact for a moment. “Thank you.”

I clenched my teeth and fell into a cross-legged position before her. I was past pleasantries. I was hungry. Therefore, I was eating with or without her.

Shoving a few fries into my mouth, I chewed and enjoyed savory mixed with the sweetness of honey. Slowly, she sat down, sliding along the damp wall before picking up her plate.

Watching me wolf down my portion, she delicately plucked a fry before placing it into her mouth.

I froze. My cock hardened. My heart sputtered.

Shit.

I shouldn't look at her mouth.

At those plump lips that'd been around my cock. The same mouth that'd granted a convulsive orgasm. My eyes trailed down her bruise-shadowed throat, getting caught on the tangled hair hanging over her shoulders.

Dirtier than yesterday, the knots needed a brush, and the residue of my cum had matted a few strands together.

Her clothes were tight and obviously chosen not to snag on trees and rocks as she trespassed on people's valleys, yet she didn't seem to mind the dirt and smudges covering her.

What did she look like beneath them? Was her belly as toned as her arms? Were her legs tanned or pale? Did she have tattoos like some people in my past?

The longer I looked at her, the hungrier I became for other things. My cock had an unwavering obsession with her. It wanted to be inside her more than it wanted food. It wanted her pinned beneath me, crying, begging, taking everything I had to give.

But my heart...fuck, that stupid thing wanted a softness I'd never been given.

It wanted to listen and be listened to.

It wanted—

Shut the hell up.

She's a toy, that's all.

A toy that means nothing.

Clearing my throat, I tore my gaze away and shoved a handful of sticky fries into my mouth.

She shifted on the cold concrete, picking up a spinach leaf with her fingers.

She didn't try to speak again, and I despised conversation. I much preferred silence. That was where secrets lay. Stay silent around someone, and either they filled it with confessions or you could hear what they tried to hide.

The problem with listening in my past was I'd learned far too many dangerous things. Things I wished I could forget but always remembered in my dreams. Silence could backfire, I'd learned that the hard way—but I needed to know more about her.

Needed to know how far I could push, how much she'd give...before she broke.

We ate most of our meal in strained quietness. The crunch of salad on her teeth made my heart race. The vision of fries slipping past her lips made my cock throb. I had indigestion by the time I'd finished, thanks to my lust tangling me into knots.

"I appreciate you feeding me again." She kept her green and brown swirling eyes on my legs. Flecks of gold shimmered there too, reminding me of fantastical heroines from the books I'd consumed in the library. She was pretty enough to be some otherworldly creature. Someone whose origins I didn't know about. Someone who'd just magically appeared to serve me in whatever way I saw fit.

I stared at her with a new intensity, suffocating beneath the wash of heaviness and heat that made my body tight and achy.

Her shoulders tensed. Her back shot ramrod straight. She balled her hands as if she knew where my thoughts had strayed, waiting for a command that she didn't want.

Did she expect me to order her to suck me again?

I'd fed her, so I was fully within my right to claim something in return.

My cock swelled past bearable. Desire billowed thicker. I was a slave to the rampant need she'd conjured.

I stood slowly.

Taking her empty plate, I stacked it with mine and the discarded breakfast dishes before reaching for my fly.

She swallowed hard and shifted gingerly to her knees.

A flash of power shot down my legs.

I didn't even have to ask. Didn't even have to hint. She'd obeyed wordlessly and completely.

Fuck, if that wasn't the headiest trip she could gift.

I wanted to bask in that. To prove to myself how far I'd come. To imprint this moment so the darkness and its nightmares could never find me.

Dropping my hands from my crotch, keeping my fingers far away from my disgusting cock, I toyed with her. I dragged out the anticipation. I made her frown in confusion and rock back on her heels in worry.

"You...you don't want me?"

I tilted my head. "Pretty sure you can see for yourself that I do." My trousers hadn't dropped their tent since I'd walked into this damn basement.

She bit her bottom lip, her gaze skating over my erection before swooping back to my face. “Then...I don’t understand. We had a deal. You said you wouldn’t kill me if—”

“A little chat is in order before any other favors are granted.”

She crossed her arms, protecting herself. “What chat?”

“Will others show up here?”

Her eyes flared. “Why? Have you seen someone?” She glanced at the ugly, bulky cell phone beside her. Hope blazed over her face, hinting that maybe it wasn’t a useless piece of technology, after all.

Stupid girl.

Darting forward, I scooped it off the ground and clutched it in my fist.

“No!” She launched to her feet, her nails digging into my fingers and trying to pry it free. “It’s pointless. It just has...sentimental value. I have photos and things—”

“Photos? On a phone? You think I’m some imbecile?”

“No, I...just let me put it away.” Her fingers heated until her touch burned me. She branded me better than any fire, any ember. And *Christ*, it made me thirst. Made me hiss and smoke with violence.

I raised my arm, making her body stretch and fingers cling. Her face lost its reluctant submission, flaring with vibrant hate.

I knew it.

I knew there was a fucking hellcat hidden beneath her reserves.

“Give it!” She scratched my forearm.

I groaned.

Her touch on my skin. Her fight and fury incinerating her act of demure and downtrodden. She wasn’t meek. She wasn’t accepting.

She was stupid and reckless and just as mad as me.

“I knew you’d give me a war if I pushed hard enough.”

Her eyes shot to mine. “I’ve given you my body. I refuse to give you anything else.”

I raised my arm even more, making her stretched-out form crash against mine. We both sucked in a desperate breath. “Are you so sure about that?” Our noses brushed as I looked down at her. I trembled with her closeness, drinking in the rage of a pissed-off girl who was no longer free.

“You’re a bastard.”

“That’s what you think I am?” I smiled icily. “That word is far too polite for the likes of me.”

She froze, hanging off my arm.

For a second, we were both trapped in a web of hatred and heat. An intoxicating curse that blurred every rule and erased every line.

My mouth watered to kiss her.

My cock begged to fuck her.

I couldn't stand having her this close. Her very nearness set my mind on fucking fire and the walls I'd built shivered with fear.

Dropping my arm, I grabbed her wrist with my other hand. Ripping her hold off me, I held the device to the side as I jerked her against me, making her slam into my chest. "This isn't just a phone, is it?"

She struggled and squirmed, her lips thin and angry. "Let me go."

"What is it?"

"You're hurting me." She tried to pry my fingers off her wrist.

"I'll hurt you worse if you keep lying to me." I gripped her harder, not caring my nails punctured the paper-thin skin around her breakable bones. I shook her. "Is this how people will find you?"

She gritted her teeth, her eyes no longer gold-flecked hazel but heated with flames. "Fuck you."

"Is that an invitation?"

"It will *never* be an invitation!"

"No?" I shoved her away from me and raised the unknown device above my head. "I think time will change your mind."

"Wait! *Don't*." She threw herself at me, but it was too late.

I tossed the thing as hard as I could against the concrete, smiling coldly as it smashed into smithereens.

For a second, she stood in shock even as blood trickled through a slice in her legging where a chunk of plastic had ricocheted and cut her, then she dropped beside the wreckage, scrambling to pick up the fragments and shove them back into whatever they once had been.

"How *could* you?" she hissed under her breath. "God, I'm an idiot! I should never have—"

"Trespassed? Yes, my thoughts exactly."

"Go to hell."

"Already been." I raked a hand through my long hair and looked around the cell for any other weapons or inconveniences. It was time she knew her place.

I've been too gentle on her.

Spying another device by the scratchy blanket she'd made into a nest, I stormed forward and stole yet another piece of her life.

"No!" She shot upright and once again tried to attack me. "Give that back! *Please*. It's the only thing I have left!"

"You shouldn't have brought it into my valley then, should you?" Holding it out of her reach, I permitted her to scratch at my naked chest, to kick at my knees, to believe she could overthrow me. Each strike and injury threatened to shove me deep, deep into my memories. Each punch against my scars, each scream into my ears covered me in the darkness that I'd done my best to crawl out of.

Don't push me, girl.

You won't like what'll happen if you do.

Locking down the blackness threatening to burst through my heart, I stayed immobile and unmoved. I didn't flinch when she struck. I didn't retaliate when she hurt.

I let her use up valuable energy. To drain her so there was nothing left but obedience.

Only once her fury switched to raging tears and her hits lost their ferocity did I let go of my tightly reined self-control.

If I killed her, I would do it on my terms. Not because she'd driven me to it.

"Are you done?" I grabbed her by the throat and marched her into the wall. "My turn."

Her spine hit with a thud. Her skull followed with a clunk. Her hands wrapped around my wrist while her face shone with despair. She acknowledged I was stronger, bigger, badder. Whatever violence she'd thrown my way, I could return tenfold. Whatever curses or threats she thought she could deliver, I would grant far worse consequences.

She didn't speak as I held her captive.

Her pulse hammered against my fingers, out of control with grief and loathing.

Silence once again throbbed between us as I shoved her harder against the wall. With our eyes locked and that unbearable tension coiling from my chest to hers, I raised my fist and threw the device she'd fought so hard to protect on the floor.

It didn't shatter like the last one.

The glass smashed and it went scattering into a puddle, but it might still be useable. Might still have some way of summoning people to find her. Those people would take away what was mine. They'd come for her and for me.

That can never happen.

My fingers twitched around her neck, squeezing the very same column of muscle that I'd bruised when we first met.

She winced. Endless hatred flashed in her stare. Her lips parted for breath, but she didn't beg or plead. She just dug her nails into my forearm and waited. Waited for me to kill her. To command her. To prove that I was as dead inside as I appeared.

Or waited to prove that I wouldn't do it.

That my threat over her life wasn't worth fearing.

I'll show you fear, girl.

"If no one has come for you by now, then no one will. This valley has been kept secret for generations." Running my nose along her tear-wet cheekbone, I murmured, "Know what I think? I think you're alone and always were. I think you were stupid enough to venture into my territory without telling anyone. I think you're dead to everyone but me."

"No, I—" She struggled all while I squeezed a little harder. Her stubborn strength flickered. "Wait, stop."

She blinked; her eyes went fuzzy. Her nails dug deeper into my arms as instinct made her fight. She thrashed as my hand tightened. And tightened.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak.

I shook as her pulse turned into erratic spurts beneath my thumb.

Her mouth opened, gasping, her hands struggling to stay on my arm as her oxygen levels depleted.

Finish it.

The repetitive urge to end this nightmare raced down my fingers.

I didn't want to have to deal with this shit. Sex wasn't worth it. I wasn't strong enough to keep my past buried and believe I could fuck a girl who had no choice but to spread her legs for me.

Do it.

I squeezed.

She fought harder, kicking, gasping.

I squeezed.

Her eyes bugged with horror then reluctantly fluttered shut.

Her knees gave out.
She slithered down the wall as I let her go.
All that fight. All that passion.
Gone.
Fuck.

The pressure in my cock transferred to my heart. It smothered my insides. It cracked my ribs. It physically fucking hurt to see her crumple on the floor unconscious.

I backed up.
What the hell did I do?
She deserved it.
She can't be here.
You can't be around her.

I dug ten fingers into my hair, clutching at my skull where such misery lived.

In the short time she'd been here, her spirit had tainted this place. Fables wasn't empty before. Now it was. It grew colder the longer she lay unmoving at my feet.

My stomach clenched.
I felt sick.
Come on, breathe.

Dropping my hands, I nudged her with my bare foot. I wasn't ready to stop playing this game. I wasn't ready to admit that whatever she'd done to me hadn't ended when her heart did.

Come on...
Breathe!

For a few endless moments, she remained dead. Her soul teased with the idea of leaping free and escaping me. But as I turned to grab a cup of water from the tap, to splash her with ice, her mouth wrenched wide, and she gulped air.

She coughed.
Over and over, she gasped and choked.

Rolling onto her hands and knees, she retched. Her back arched with frantic breaths, and her hair cascaded around her, leaving her looking as wild as I felt.

Relief washed through me.
What the hell was that?

Why do I care if she lives or dies?

I backed up until my spine hit the opposite wall.

I stood in silence as her body slowly calmed and her lungs gulped their fill of oxygen. Only once she stopped coughing and the blue tinge from her lips receded did she drop to her ass and touch both hands to her tender throat.

With glossy, hate-filled eyes, she glowered at me across the room. “You said...” *Cough*. Followed by a painful wince. “That I’d live...another...day.”

Crossing my arms, I didn’t speak.

I didn’t give her what she wanted.

She could wait forever, but she’d never hear me apologize, explain, or promise never to hurt her again. They would be lies. Whatever minor weakness I’d just felt were gone. Dead. *Over*.

Unfortunately, her face was now even more stunning. Her skin ghostly white, her cheeks bright red, her eyes a slash of leaf and earth. She looked touched by death and slightly unhinged because of it.

She almost looked like me.

With gritted teeth and sluggish movements, she forced herself to her feet. Swaying a little, she clutched the wall behind her and tipped her chin with anger. “You destroyed my things.”

“You’re in my home. That makes them mine. It makes *everything* mine. Mine to use. Mine to destroy. Mine to kill.”

Get it?

She bared her teeth like a feral cat. “If you use me, you can’t kill me.”

“Says who?”

“Says our deal!”

“A deal I’m still debating if the trade-off is worth it.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re a trespasser.”

She stiffened. “How long?”

I scowled. “How long what?”

“How long must I remain your plaything?”

“Until I tire of feeding you, talking to you, fucking you.”

“I want...” *Cough*. “To go home.”

I shrugged. “Not my problem you ventured somewhere you weren’t wanted.”

“If I’m not wanted, then let me go.”

“And risk you bringing more people to my door?” I pushed off from the wall. “No fucking chance.” Moving toward her, another bullet of desire exploded between my legs. Her fight was back. Her tenacity filled the basement. Her hatred heated my veins.

I might not like this girl but *Christ* she turned me on.

“What else are you hiding from me?” I dragged my gaze down her body. “Any other knives? Phones? Implements in which to kill me?”

Spreading her arms, she hissed, “My pockets are empty, you bastard. See for yourself.”

“I think I will.” I closed the distance between us.

She didn’t flinch at my closeness. Didn’t cower.

She stood taller and met me with strength, even as my hands landed on her shoulders, cupped her breasts, then curved their way along her hips to her thighs.

Desire made me tremble but practicality kept me sane. No other weapons or telecommunications hid in her pockets. Just pure, feminine flesh.

Her nostrils flared with pure hate. “Happy?”

“I was happy before you arrived and fucked everything up.”

Her breath hitched, and once again, that damn awareness prickled us. That heat. That current. That unexplainable connection.

She made me want to press her to the ground and sink inside her. Made it impossible to ignore the urge to switch her bravery to fear.

Her tone was as cold as mine as she pushed my hands off her body and snapped, “If I’m to stay here, the least you can do is let me use a proper bathroom.”

New mottling ringed her throat, bruises upon bruises. The shadows of muscles contracted as she swallowed again, doing her best to erase the pain I’d caused. “I need a bathroom.”

I cocked my head at the bucket in the corner. “There’s your bathroom.”

“I refuse to be treated like an animal.” No shame entered her eyes. No shyness existed as she barked, “I *need* the bathroom. Do you understand? I don’t know how long you’ve kept me here, but my body isn’t coping. I need sunlight. I need air. I need a toilet that flushes and a shower to wash away my filth and a blanket that doesn’t make me itch until I bleed.”

Her voice slipped to a black hiss. “If you want to fuck me, you need me clean. If you want to keep playing these sick little power games, you need me strong. You need my body working. If you keep me down here, I will die.

And you won't be a part of that ending. I'll perish slowly, messily. You'll be stuck cleaning up the stench and the decay. Is that what you want?"

"What I *want* is to be left the hell alone."

"All you have to do is open the door, and I'll be gone. You can be alone again."

"Alone but not safe."

"I won't come back. You have my word."

"Forgive me if your word is useless."

She sighed heavily, her fight taking its toll. Closing her eyes for a second, she inhaled hard, fighting her bruises and a cough, struggling for composure. She battled with decisions—hurt me, decapitate me, try to escape, versus accepting she could never do those things. The only way to earn an inch of compassion was to do exactly what I said.

Her chin tipped down as her shoulders forced themselves to submit instead of stiffening with rage. "I don't even know your name."

I crossed my arms. "My name isn't important."

"If you're going to keep me, then I need something to call you by."

"Why? I have no intention of calling you Gemma."

"Ah-ha!" Her eyebrows shot up. "So...you *were* listening." She softened, her hair dancing over her dirty shoulder. "Gem. Call me Gem and—"

"I told you. I don't care what your name is."

She gritted her jaw and balled her hands, another dose of fire appearing on her gorgeous face. "You will care. I'll *make* you care."

I bared my teeth. "Bold claim."

"Truth." She rubbed her bruised throat. "You force me to stay here? You force me to sleep with you? You force us to spend time together? Well, be prepared for the consequences."

I smiled blackly. "Consequences? Is that supposed to scare me?"

"Depends what scares you."

I balled my hands, a threatening growl escaping. "Tread carefully, girl. I'm not afraid of anything."

Her gaze locked on mine, defying me and ripping my lie to shreds. She knew. She could tell that I'd once been so fucking afraid I'd screamed for nine hours straight. I'd cried until I'd passed out. I'd begged until blood ran down my throat.

Shut up!

Shoving those nasty memories back behind the door where they belonged, I dug my toes into the concrete and glowered at her. I waited for her to push me just a little more.

To shove me into places where she'd undoubtedly end up broken by my feet. However, she seemed to sense I balanced on a blade that would slice deep if I fell off it, and murmured, "Humans weren't meant to live alone."

I blinked, unsettled by her odd sentence. "What?"

"You guessed correctly about me. I am here alone. And, until you smashed my PLB, I potentially had people coming to find me." She shrugged. "But now, I'm truly alone. I probably shouldn't confess that to you. I definitely shouldn't have shown you how much my phone and PLB meant to me. That was an idiotic move on my part. Unbelievably moronic. But I'm slowly learning how to navigate this. You see, I'm not like you. I'm not used to ultimatums and such black and white. I'm used to decency and kindness. I'm used to being safe and come from a world where 'NO' is a shield that protects you."

"That word doesn't exist in my world." Shadows gathered on my thoughts, swirling with memories of how many times I'd yelled no and been hurt anyway.

She continued as if I hadn't spoken, blurting out more sentences in a few seconds than I'd heard in eleven years. "I know I should tell you that I have friends who, at this very moment, are searching for me. I should tell you that I have a brother who will turn the globe upside down to find me—which I do, by the way. He won't stop. I know he won't."

She sighed sadly, her gaze ripping out my pieces one by one. "And who knows, maybe that's exactly what they're doing right now. Your private paradise might be invaded by more than just me. But...here's the thing. I know things about you too, you bastard. I know you're sheltered and very secluded. I'm beginning to guess you've lived here on your own for a while. Long enough for you to forget some very important things."

I froze. "What things?"

Pushing off from the wall, she dared step closer to me. Her breasts rose and fell beneath her grubby jacket. Her legs flexed beneath tight leggings. My belly coiled to rip off her clothing and command her to her knees.

She stopped only once her body heat kissed mine.

My skin scorched with flames, electricity crackled up my legs and into my balls. My heart lost its structural steadiness and turned demonic instead. It

took everything not to sink my hands into her hair and drag her closer.

“I don’t know who you are, and I don’t know why you’re keeping me prisoner, but I do know that you’re different.” Her hands landed on my naked chest, sending bolts of lightning through my ribs, electrocuting my racing heart. “I will *never* forgive you for strangling me. Twice. I will never let my guard down around you. I will make it my life’s work to ensure you pay for everything that you’ve done to me. But...I also can’t admit that you’re evil. You’re messed up and clearly have trauma. You’re mean and cruel and believe just because I’m a woman that I was put upon this earth to serve you. But I also know things you can’t hide.”

My back filled with icy lead. “What—”

“Where I come from, people have mastered the art of lies. Social media has taught us to hide our true parts and only show what we want people to see.” Her head turned to the side as if she studied me, judged me, and found me lacking in every fucking way. “And you...whoever you are, you don’t possess those skills.”

“What fucking skills?”

What the hell is she talking about?

My ears rang.

My head swam.

She provided more entertainment and stimulation than any animal, tree, or chore in the decade I’d lived here. She made spaces come alive, she made air tingle with power, she made me wake up from the wordless beast I’d become to a man slowly stretching back into humanity.

But she also confused me, frustrated me, made me furious with her very existence.

Was I supposed to find her this annoying? This fascinating? Was it a by-product of living alone for so long?

I didn’t like it.

I don’t like her—

Her voice lowered to a whisper, made huskier by my second strangulation. “You reveal everything that you’re feeling. I know you want me. I know you think you deserve to hurt me. I know I’m driving you crazy, talking about things you can’t understand. And I know you’ll rationalize raping me because, in your mind, making me live in this damp prison is entirely justified—”

I slapped a hand over her mouth, shutting her up.

I couldn't listen to another syllable.

My head hurt from her accusations. My body trembled with the war she was determined to have. She backed up, slapping my hand away and sucking in a breath, ready to launch another torrent of words, despite her bruised throat.

No way.

I was done listening to this shit.

I was too quick.

Rushing her, I snatched her around the waist and plucked her from the floor. Up close, she didn't smell as fresh as my valley anymore. She smelled stale and sad. A cloying despair that did nothing for my desire.

Almost everything she'd said to me was bullshit.

She didn't know a goddamn thing about me.

But she was right about one thing.

She needed a bathroom.

A shower.

To be clean.

And then, once she was clean, she owed me.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“LEAVE.” I CLOSED MY ARMS, ignoring the cramping in my stomach and the filth coating my skin. My eyes wanted to dart around the bathroom where he’d taken me. An opulent silver tiled affair with fluffy white towels waiting for no one, coin-shaped soaps with gold wrapper, and the empty lacquered frame where a mirror used to be.

My ribs still hurt from him carting me up the stairs like a dead cow. His naked chest wedged into my belly, his strong legs swooping me up the marble stairs as if I weighed nothing.

He chuckled coldly. “I’m not leaving.” Slouching against the doorframe, he crossed his arms. “Strip, shower, get on your knees.”

Goosebumps of hate shot down my arms. The way he couldn’t tear his eyes off me made my already painful stomach somersault with repugnance. I’d sucked him this morning for survival. I’d plotted in the darkness of my cell as daylight switched to twilight, hoping to come up with a solid ruse. I’d eaten every morsel of breakfast and done my best to ignore the calls of nature.

I would pee in a bucket, I would sexually obey him, but I would not—*could* not—do anything more. It wasn’t just the shame of lowering myself

to such a level. It was a physical impossibility. My body had shut down. It flatly refused to operate.

Exhausted tears stung my eyes as I mimicked him and crossed my arms. The toilet sat behind a tiled wall, unseen from the doorway but within listening distance.

Who would've thought that I could handle blowing a complete stranger, yet the thought of going to the bathroom in front of him...that was what tipped me over the edge.

Hugging myself, I debated how best to get through to him.

He hadn't appreciated my tidbit that I could read him. That his secrets weren't so secret. That I knew he felt pride when I'd eaten his food. That he battled between wanting me and doing the right thing.

If he even knows what the right thing is.

His expressive face was the reason I was fumbling in this mess. If he'd worn the mask of a murderer and had soulless, lifeless eyes, I would *never* have been stupid enough to keep my PLB and phone in visible distance.

I'd been idiotic to believe he didn't have a clue what they were. He honestly didn't. His confusion when he'd first seen them hadn't been faked. But I'd underestimated his need to stay hidden, and I'd miscalculated the aggression hidden beneath the glimmers of kindness in his stare.

He wasn't cruel by nature but he was by design, and I struggled to remember that, especially when I caught him looking at me as if I was more dangerous to him than he was to me.

Rubbing my arms, I swallowed past the new bruises he'd given me and prepared to use honesty to hurt. To make him understand. To appeal to the boy inside the man who'd obviously been tortured at some point in his life. Who wore his trauma so plainly—*too* plainly. He was the scarred dog left behind by a family who'd mistreated him. The dog who'd grown up left to his own devices, remembering faint rules on how to behave but far too removed from them to be governed.

He cleared his throat, impatience radiating off him. "Strip, shower, and ___"

"Please." I took a step toward him, allowing my shields to drop. For my bravado to vanish against the true pain and embarrassment I felt. If his honesty could scramble me this badly, then perhaps my honesty could do the same to him.

I wouldn't lie or threat.

I would be myself.

I won't betray who I am.

I made another deal. A deal that sounded weak to my ears but was the only way I could think of to win. "*Please...*" I didn't know his name so I couldn't add that as an extra tool of persuasion. "I know you don't like me, and I did something unforgivable by trespassing in your home, but...I'm begging you. I need some privacy. I need..." I looked over my shoulder at the toilet and flushed with heat. "I need you to close the door and leave me alone."

He shook his head, his forehead furrowing into harsh skepticism. "If I leave, you'll climb out the window."

I glanced at the window in question. The glass wasn't frosted and showed the convenient vines of ivy and other plant matter that would be a perfect ladder down to the ground. Even if I wasn't a professional climber, I could've scaled the wall and been gone within a matter of moments.

My stomach cramped, and I dropped my arms to hug there instead of my chest. "What do I have to do to convince you to leave? What if I promise to come get you the moment I'm done? Then I'll let you watch me shower. Then you can touch me, command me, use me in any position you want...all you have to do is let me have a few moments alone."

His jaw clenched; his dark eyes turned black. His long hair tumbled to the side as he tilted his head. Obvious lust flared, but his lack of trust was stronger. "Nothing will convince me. I'm not moving."

I glanced around the room. I tried to come up with a way to assure him I wasn't going anywhere even though every molecule in my body screamed to bolt. A curtain cord bound the white gauzy drapes by the non-existent mirror. Odd to have curtains in a steamy bathroom, but it only added to the level of silver luxury.

Dashing forward, I unwound the cord and held it up. "You could tie my ankles."

"Won't work. You'd just untie yourself if I didn't bind your hands."

"I need my hands to...eh, undress."

He shrugged. "So I stay. And I watch."

Nausea flowed up my throat. "I literally won't be able to do a thing if you do."

"Not my problem."

"It is your problem. My death will be your problem."

“Your death would be a relief.”

I narrowed my eyes. That wasn't a flippant phrase. He genuinely meant that. He showed no fear of corpses or the hypothetical clean-up of my demise.

Argh!

How could I get through to him? How could I make him care?

You can't. You're his enemy.

The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be.

Easy?

Ha, this would never be easy!

Every second with this bastard was the hardest thing I'd ever endured.

I...I—

Gem, stop...

The sleeplessness. The stress. It all crushed me until the stinging tears refused to be swallowed back any longer.

No.

A few escaped, sliding down my cheeks.

I swiped at them but couldn't stop the many droplets following swift behind.

All I wanted to do was use the toilet.

Such a basic human right. Such a factual part of nature that should be private and personal, and if he couldn't even give me a few minutes alone—

I can't win.

I can't do this.

I choked on a sob, refusing to let it sound.

He froze against the doorjamb, his ever-watchful gaze tracking my tears. The front of his slacks still showed his arousal. His naked chest strained as he inhaled, drinking in the sounds of my sadness.

He watched me fighting, doing my best not to break.

He didn't say a word as I silently slid to the floor and bowed at his feet.

This wasn't me giving in. This wasn't me accepting that I wouldn't keep fighting, keep trying. This was me reaching my limit for tonight. Tomorrow, I would be stronger. Today, I was done.

“I'll ask you one last time.” I caught his tortured stare. “Leave.”

He inhaled sharply.

I'd kneeled before him this morning and put my mouth on his cock. I'd been submissive and not at all the badass warrior I'd hoped I would be. I'd

done those things while doing my best to figure out how to play him. I had reasons for giving in.

But now? Now, I had nothing left.

If he could strip me of such a simple part of life, then he honestly didn't care about the rest of it. I was just a vessel to fuck until he tired of me.

On the floor of his pristine bathroom, I came to terms with the stark truth. Up till now, I'd dabbled with the idea that I could get him to like me. That the way he watched me meant there was a feeling, breathing male beneath all the coldness. I'd had hopes that by giving him my body, he might give me something greater in return.

He had that capacity inside him.

I've seen it.

But that all shattered now.

I didn't even cry. Not really.

I just...shut down.

I tuned it all out and slouched on the cool tile, ignoring every ache and discomfort in my body.

I didn't know how much time passed, but eventually, his feet scuffed on the marble as he pushed off from the doorframe. He came toward me, tipping my chin up with his finger. He looked deep into my eyes and studied me.

I didn't look back.

I blinked without seeing.

I deleted him from my existence.

I honestly didn't care what he'd do.

But then...he was gone.

His finger left a slight burn where he'd touched me, his body leaving a small cloud of his sunshine and shadow scent.

It took a stupidly long time to understand that he'd not only left the bathroom but the bedroom too. He'd left me. Alone. Just like I'd asked.

And that was when I truly cried.

The sob couldn't be contained, and I crawled to the door on my hands and knees. I slammed it shut as tears gushed down my cheeks. I scrambled to my feet and stumbled to the toilet.

Ripping off my leggings, I cried even harder as I sat on the cool porcelain and let go.

The relief was instant.

The gratefulness for his disappearance immense.

My body purged, and once it was over, I shook with hunger, fear, and tiredness.

I'd never been so twisted and knotted. I'd never been denied cleanliness or safety. Now that I'd been granted a few moments alone with a shower nearby and my stomach no longer in agony, I couldn't ignore the pull.

I should launch myself out the window and run.

I should throw caution to the wind and get as far away from here as I could.

But...I'd always been a savvy climber. I was the smart one with the right equipment, enough rations, gear, and technology to prevent a tragedy like the one I'd stupidly fallen into.

And if I ran now, I wouldn't last long.

I barely had any food in my system. I had no water. It was dark, which meant I couldn't see where I had to go. I could end up breaking a leg or falling off the cliff as I attempted to escape.

And besides, I'd made a promise.

I'd said I'd stay if he left me alone. If I failed and he brought me back, I would never get another chance to cultivate his trust. To plot a better escape. One where I would succeed.

Tomorrow.

Survive tonight.

Run tomorrow.

With a racing heart, I tore at my dirty clothing.

I kicked off my hiking boots along with my leggings and underwear. Unzipping my windbreaker, I ripped off my hoodie, t-shirt, and exercise bra and threw them all into the corner.

Naked and highly aware I still had streaks of his dried cum on my chest—even after washing the best I could in the dungeon—I darted into the shower and turned on the tap.

Icy water hit me.

It felt sublime.

I didn't mind it was cold or that my shaking increased until my teeth chattered and kneecaps bounced. I'd never enjoyed a shower as much as this. Never felt so baptized from dirt or refreshed by liquid.

Water sluiced over my face as I tipped my head under and gasped at the chill. My hair plastered down my back. With eyes blinking back droplets, I

grabbed the gold-wrapped soap and tore it open, running the flowery scented suds from the top of my head right to my toes.

Heaven.

Hell.

Everything in between.

Only once bubbles covered me did I step back under the cold spray and rinse. My skin burned from the cold, and the contrast between the muggy air and the snowy water was almost an aphrodisiac. My senses were on high alert and strung out. My jumpiness at an all time high.

Thanks to hypersensitivity, I knew he'd returned. I knew before the door even opened. Instincts did their best to protect me, sending my heart hiccupping before catapulting into an all-out sprint.

The bathroom door opened.

He strode in.

Our eyes locked from across the room. Droplets continued to rain over my face, and his naked chest glittered with the numerous scars that painted a story of his pain.

His gaze dragged from my eyes to my bare breasts, exposed stomach, naked core, and every inch in-between.

He didn't slouch against the doorframe this time.

He stood stiff and solemn.

He didn't reach for his straining erection or attempt to provide any relief to the stark arousal on his features. His hands balled into fists by his thighs as he continued to drink me in. His tongue wetted his bottom lip as he became transfixed by my ass as I turned my back on him and shot him a glower over my shoulder.

He acted as if he'd never seen a naked woman before, but beneath that eager innocence, something far too dark to understand existed. Flashes of it appeared and disappeared in his eyes. Something cruel and sadistic. Something that hinted he wasn't innocent at all and had done things I could never imagine.

More time passed between us as he watched me finish my shower.

He didn't rush me or bark orders for me to come to him.

It was almost civil in the way he stood like a gentleman, granting me his every thought and desire through the heat in his blackened gaze.

Beneath the chilly water, my core clenched despite myself. It reacted to his severity, his strength, his savagery. He was a man who would never

survive in society because of whatever had happened to him out here.

What did happen to him?

Was I once again making things up? Was I romanticizing a situation that had nothing romantic about it? Whatever tales I came up with about his background, they were all wrong. The most logical explanation was, he was a wanted convict who'd been hiding from the law for whatever crime he'd committed. Judging by how easily he'd strangled me and continually threatened to take my life, he was probably wanted for murder.

Whatever heat had threaded through my core dissipated, leaving me shivering even harder beneath the spray.

Almost as if he knew I'd reached my limit, he stalked in bare feet to the rack and plucked off a fluffy cream towel. Silently, he came closer to the shower and spread it wide, ready to wrap around me.

A white flag perhaps?

A sign of truce between us?

Never looking away from him, I turned off the shower and gingerly stepped across the wet tiles. I paused before him. More naked than I'd ever been before someone. His eyes once again fell to my breasts and lingered on my pebbled nipples.

I was confident in my body. I'd trained it to keep me safe while climbing and to stay healthy in all my risky endeavors. I was toned. I was strong. Past lovers had appreciated my hard work and commented on muscles they didn't even have.

But no man had *ever* watched me as he did.

No man had ever given me his utmost attention.

No man stopped breathing or began to tremble the longer he studied me.

The way he watched me was borderline worship. He made me feel both like I was his for the rest of my life and that I was the ruler for the rest of his. He made no attempt to hide such fervency. No masks or quips to keep the upper hand. No games that so often existed in the bedroom between new partners.

Silently, I turned and gave him my back.

His sharp inhale sent my skin prickling, followed by the almost unfightable reaction to crumple at his feet as he draped the soft towel around my body and wrapped me tight.

I froze as he rubbed my arms, drying me off. Such a simple kindness. An unthought moment of sweetness.

But then his fingers dug into my biceps as if remembering our dynamic, and he stepped away from me. He backed up so quickly, I swayed as if he'd removed a wall from behind me.

Grabbing the towel, I turned to track him.

His jaw was clenched beneath his thick shadow of scruff, his long hair kissed his shoulders, and the tattered condition of his trousers hinted I wasn't the only one in need of a shower.

He needed a shave. A haircut. He needed someone to groom him and teach him and perhaps, someday, remind him that whatever life he'd been living out here wasn't a life at all.

It seemed whenever we were close, our eyes refused to unlock. I couldn't look away from him—partly out of wariness in order to react quickly if he tried to hurt me, and partly because...despite everything—despite the two nights in a cellar drinking tap water and peeing in a bucket. Despite him shattering my cell phone and PLB. Despite the two strangulations and the forced blowjob, there was *something* inside him.

Something I'd been seeking ever since I was stupid enough to type up a dating profile. Something that no longer existed in men bred in today's world.

That intoxicating blend of danger and doting. The ability to hurt but also to heal.

He kept watching as I dried off. I ought to have been embarrassed to rub the towel over my breasts and between my legs. Ought to have turned away and hidden all the pieces of me that I could.

But...if his lust could be harnessed—if I could do the unthinkable and make him free me, then I wasn't embarrassed to use my body as a weapon.

The cold water and bathroom break had rejuvenated me.

I'm ready to fight again.

The longer I wiped off every droplet, the harder he trembled. Pain etched his eyes as his cock tented his trousers until the zipper strained and the button popped free. He looked in agony, yet he didn't touch himself.

Licking my lips, I said in a voice that shook against my will. "I don't have any other clothes. Do you..." I glanced past him to the bedroom. In my uninvited trapeze of his home, I'd noticed wardrobes full of clothing. Some for men. Some for women. All rich and decadent and unused. "Would you allow me to borrow something while I clean mine?"

He lowered his head, his eyebrows shadowing the darkness of his stare. “A favor for a favor. Don’t get ahead of yourself.” His tone bordered a growl, thick with lust and frustration. Looking down at his cock, he snapped, “Deal with that, and you can have whatever clothes you want.”

Deal with that.

What does that mean?

He spoke of his body as if it was a traitor. As if the pleasure he was feeling and the anticipation of a release was torment instead of bliss.

“How...?” I swallowed, activating the fresh bruises around my neck. “Do you want to, eh—” I thought I’d come to terms with this. I *had* come to terms with this. I’d been prepared to offer my body in exchange for hope. Yet for some reason, verbalizing it took a strength I almost didn’t have.

Arching my chin and tapping into new courage, I asked clinically, “Do you wish to fuck me?”

He jolted.

His eyes snapped shut.

A guttural groan escaped his parted lips.

My belly coiled, and I was suddenly no longer cold from my shower. I was hot. I was steamy. But I didn’t want it. I couldn’t understand why my body reacted to his.

“Your hand,” he grunted. “I’ll fuck your hand.” His eyes opened, blazing coal and smoke. “Drop your towel and come here.”

Survival, Gem.

The only thing that matters.

Locking down my emotions for what was about to happen, I did as he requested.

I dropped the towel. I strode toward him bare. I stopped before him, suffering a full-body shiver at the heady heat rolling off him.

He didn’t touch me.

He looked as if he’d locked himself in place with shackles of invisible iron. “Free me.”

My heart somersaulted.

My inner battle for survival tangled with the ugly submission of giving in. Offering myself up verbally had been hard enough...willingly initiating sexual contact threatened to shove me back into the empty void from before.

“Do it,” he breathed, harsh and haggard. “Don’t and you’ll wish you obeyed.”

I looked up, fighting the urge to hide my body. “Do you...do you intend to touch me in return?”

I have to know.

Mentally, I had to prepare.

His jaw worked as his dark stare stroked my nakedness. “Make me come and you’re safe tonight.”

“And tomorrow?”

His lips thinned. “Tomorrow? Nothing is guaranteed.” Impatience etched his mouth. “Enough talking. You owe me. Do it.” His hips rocked, almost against his will. “Get it over with.”

Get it over with?

Another hint that sex for him wasn’t normal. “If you don’t want—”

“I want. I want the pain gone,” he muttered. “Now. Give me your goddamn hand.” Grabbing my wrist, he forced my trembling hand to press against his zipper.

The second my fingers made contact with his stiff arousal, he let me go. “Don’t stop.”

Just do it, Gem.

Freedom comes with a price.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I ordered my hand to obey, shaking and wary, dragging the zipper down.

He grunted as the fabric pressure on his cock vanished. The ruined slacks slipped down his legs to the floor. The muscles in his belly stood out in explicit detail, cords of strength and ridges of vitality.

No underwear.

I paused for a second, studying his erection just as he’d studied me. I’d tasted him, pleased him. I knew his body before I knew his mind. The thicket of hair was as wild as the hair on his head. Untrimmed and unruly, hiding the balls drawn tight between his legs. And thanks to the lights gleaming above, I noticed something I hadn’t in my gloomy cell.

Scars existed on this part of his body, too.

Tiny snaking lines followed the thick arteries pumping blood into his cock. An awful tapestry of yet more pain he’d endured.

Was it self-inflicted?

Was it punishment?

Who is this man?

And why did he fill me with equal parts hate and the unfathomable need to nurture?

“*Touch it,*” he snarled, frustration thick in his throat.

I jumped from the spell I’d been put under, seeming to slip whenever I was too close to him. I cursed it. It shouldn’t happen. This was my enemy. My prison guard—

“*Fuck, please—*” He groaned as if his frustration had escalated to pitiful misery.

Once again, he scrambled me up.

Here was a man who didn’t hesitate to hurt me, who could kill me where I stood, yet...his beg was full of despair. It made me want to obey more than any threat he could utter.

He wanted to come via my hand.

He’d spared me the task of having him inside me. He said he wouldn’t touch me in return.

I was grateful for that.

I wouldn’t risk him deciding otherwise.

Taking a fortifying breath, I reached for his impressive length. The moment my fingers locked around his velvety girth, his head tipped back, and he collapsed against the wall behind him. “*Fuck.*”

Once again, he gave me everything. He put himself entirely into my hands as I stroked him from crown to stem.

He groaned long and low as I cupped his balls with my free hand, tugging down as I stroked up with my other.

I wouldn’t drag this out. He wanted to come? I’d make him release as quick as possible.

“*Christ.*” His forehead furrowed, and his eyes stayed shut, squeezed tight as if in agony and anguish. His hips thrust forward, pushing his heat through my fist, doing what he said and fucking my hand.

The wildness inside him sprang to the surface. A demonic forest dweller who followed no rules and found pleasure wherever the hell he wanted.

He thrust sharper, quicker into my palm.

I matched his pace.

I stroked and tugged, rolling my wrist and dragging my thumb over the slit already damp with pre-cum. His balls throbbed in my hands, growing hotter with every thrust.

It was wrong.

Very wrong.

Yet somehow, I felt powerful. I had a man quaking from my touch. A man who looked as if he could raze entire villages and challenge any other male to death if they came within sniffing distance.

His power transferred to me.

He gave it to me the entire time he shivered under my touch.

I squeezed him harder.

He buckled and thrust faster.

The chemistry between us deleted everything, leaving only misty lust and feverish shame.

“God, don’t stop. Don’t...fucking...stop.” His voice wasn’t human anymore, thick as bristled fur and black as midnight.

I stopped thinking.

I became his to use as he worked himself deeper and faster into my fist.

The muscles in his belly twitched into starker definition. His thighs bunched, and his hands landed in my hair as his lips opened in a feral grunt. His face was one tight grimace. His teeth sharp and features entirely primitive.

“Fuck...” His hair swung around his ears as he tipped his head forward and thrust a final time into my palm. “*Fuuuuck!*”

His fingers pulsed in my hair in time to the ribbons of cum jettisoning from the top of his cock. My hand grew sticky as the scent of his musk infiltrated the bathroom. On his last clench and jerky sigh, his forehead crashed against mine, and my heart stopped.

His lips sought for me.

His breath skated over my lips.

He dragged me closer by my hair, losing himself to the inevitable kiss.

I couldn’t move.

I couldn’t pull away.

I panicked at the thought of what a kiss from this man could mean.

At what it would do to me.

Don’t...

But as his lips almost touched mine, as the heat of his mouth seared my own, common sense slammed into him. He shoved me away so quickly, I tripped over my feet and skidded on my discarded towel.

Falling to my knees, I looked up at him. I blinked at the sudden change, then glanced down at the white threads of his seed all over my hand and

wrist. I held evidence that he'd come undone, that the wild beast before me had granted me his power, even if it'd been for a few seconds.

He was about to kiss me...

Raw rage painted his face, killing all the passionate chaos inside him. Raking ten fingers through his hair, he blew out hard then ducked and wrenched up his slacks. He buttoned and zipped with quaking hands, almost as if being naked for longer than necessary was a sin he couldn't commit.

It went against how I'd met him.

He'd worn nothing that day.

He'd run as if not wearing clothes was familiar and enjoyed.

He'd been a savage barbarian as much as a beast.

So why did he act as if I had no right to see him undressed now?

"Clean that up." He wrinkled his nose in disgust at my cum-covered hand. "Once you're done, join me in the bedroom."

He stalked out before I could blink.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I PACED.

I wanted to run. To bolt. To gallop so far and so fast that this godforsaken place could never trap me again.

She was wrong.

She was *dangerous*.

Her touch had felt a million times better than any touches from my past. Beyond intense. Terrifyingly consuming. A simple squeeze had stopped my heart. A quick tug had made me detonate. What was I supposed to do with that? How was I supposed to stop my body from wanting more when she put a fucking hex on me?

Christ.

Pacing to the window, I glanced out at the dark-shrouded wilderness. A coyote dashed past in the moonlight, followed by the chatter of a raccoon in the distance.

They were free.

I was not.

I thought I'd earned my freedom; turned out, I was still chained to this place, and now I had yet another cross to bear.

Her.

“I'm...clean.”

Her voice whipped me around.

She stood wrapped in the towel I'd given her, blond hair darkened by water, her hands blessedly washed from my mess. Seeing the evidence of how badly I'd lost control had pissed me off. I'd never liked the by-product of sex. I always found it almost as disgusting as the need for sex itself.

The pleasure she'd granted had blinded me and struck me dumb, but the crash afterward had never hurt so much. I couldn't keep doing this, but I also couldn't fucking stop either.

Gritting my teeth, I marched across the bedroom and yanked open the closet. I'd cleaned this room last month. It was my second least favorite in the house. Not because of the red and silver color scheme but because of what'd happened in that bed.

At least the clothes in the wardrobe were ownerless. No one had left them behind. They didn't smell of another. They were spares in case someone needed a gown, lingerie, or outdoor attire.

Stepping back, I waved stiffly at the hanging offerings. "Take what you want. Makes no difference to me."

I couldn't wear any of it. If my stash of male clothing eventually ran out, I might learn how to cut up a ball dress and fashion a shirt, but until that day came, I wanted nothing to do with them.

"Thanks." She offered a small nod and drifted toward the wardrobe, her hands that'd touched me now clutching her towel as if it were a force field against me.

The sweep of her shoulder blades sent another crackle of lust down my legs as she turned her back on me and rifled through the clothes.

I wanted to snatch the towel off her. To reveal her nakedness beneath. I hadn't drunk my fill before. I doubted I ever would, even if I commanded her to walk around naked for the rest of her imprisonment.

All my questions about her body had been answered.

Her stomach was toned.

Her legs were pale but not ghostly.

Her muscles were lean and carved beneath soft ink-free skin, adding definition to the curves of a woman who had substance. If I hadn't believed she climbed here before, I did now. Even her fingers were strong. Her grip had rivaled anyone who'd ever touched me. She'd squeezed hard when I'd needed it and relaxed when I'd spent. She had the uncanny ability to read me, and it fucked with my head.

She was supposed to be the one afraid. She was the one trapped. So, what the hell was going on between us?

Moving toward the bed, I sat stiffly while she pulled a soft charcoal sweater from the wardrobe. Bending, she opened the drawers below, selecting a pair of lacy white underwear, some black satiny slacks, and bronze threaded socks.

Beside me rested the item I'd gone to fetch when she'd shut down.

She'd mentioned a way to tie her.

It'd reminded me of something.

That something was now resting against my hip and waiting to be used.

Glancing at me over her shoulder, she bit her lip as if debating whether to take her stash back into the bathroom where I couldn't see her or perform a reverse striptease for me.

Leaning back on my hands, I tilted my head, waiting to see what she'd choose.

Her eyes locked on the leather coil beside me. Questions ghosted over her face, followed by stubborn pride not to ask. She was smart beneath her stupidity of trespassing and offering herself up to me, so she probably already knew what the cuff entailed.

Another means of captivity that she wasn't prepared to address right now.

Once again, she stood in a dilemma. She swayed toward the bathroom, hugging her chosen clothes. If she left, I'd order her to return. I wanted to watch. Therefore, she had no choice but to let me.

She seemed to know that—once again reading me correctly.

That unnerved me but could also prove useful. If I groomed her well enough, all it would take was a simple stare, and she'd be on her knees ready to serve.

My balls tightened.

She'd surprised me that she hadn't run when I'd left earlier. Then again, the hollowness in her eyes when I'd tipped up her chin hadn't been faked. No one could fake that depth of unhappiness. In that, we had things in common, and I was both proud and slightly sick that I'd been the one to put such sadness there.

She surprised me again as she finally made her choice. Inhaling sharply, she whipped her head back around and dropped her towel.

Instantly, my cock swelled and ached.

I'd seen hundreds of stunning women. Slim ones, expensive ones, cruel ones. But never had any of them come close to the provocative perfection of this girl. If I had the freedom to touch myself, I would have.

I would've unzipped and fisted and worked myself to another release all while she bent over, silently stepped into the underwear, and slid them up her thighs.

I swallowed a groan.

She didn't dress seductively. She did it quickly with jerky hands as if my eyes on her made her twitch, but no matter the perfunctory motions, she couldn't stop the electricity sparking between us.

Maybe she didn't feel it, but I sure as hell did.

I doubted I needed batteries and solar power to work the lights for Fables. Her power alone could light up this entire valley—shining spotlights into all the dark corners, the blackened corridors, and the many shadowy rooms where a thousand secrets refused to die.

The satiny pants clung to her legs as she pulled them to her waist. The outline of her spine, flanked with powerful muscles, flexed as she slipped a white T-shirt over her head, followed by the gray sweater.

The clothes were a little tight, adding to the sex appeal of her strength.

With her nakedness now covered, her shoulders slipped back with more confidence. She slowly turned to face me with balled hands and a cool look in her eyes. "Thank you for the clothes." She licked her lips. "Are there any spare amenities I can borrow? A toothbrush? Hairbrush? Maybe some face moisturizer?"

I stayed where I was on the bed. I couldn't get a read on this girl. She refused to be afraid of me. She remained polite despite her entrapment. She obeyed me when I commanded pleasure, and apart from her moment of emptiness inside the bathroom, she'd shown no signs of breaking.

She would've made a good member of our team...before the end came.

The Fable household would've benefited from her more than most. She would've been worth any price if she continued to protect her soul and trade her body for things that benefited her survival.

"Did you hear me?" she asked quietly. "Any spare toothbrushes at least?"

"Vanity. Bottom drawer." I waved toward the bathroom. "There's a kit."

"A kit?"

"Spare items that a guest might require during their stay here."

Her eyes flared. “So, you *do* have guests? What is this place? Some type of Air BnB?”

I scowled. “I have no idea what that is.”

“It’s a third-party program that allows homeowners to rent their properties to vacationers. Kind of like a hotel, but you stay in their personal homes.”

That sounded godawful. “You sleep in someone else’s bed?”

She shrugged. “Well, yes. Isn’t that the same principle of a hotel? Multiple people sharing the same bed? The sheets are changed, but the mattress is the same.”

My skin crawled, and I shot off the bed I was sitting on.

Fables wasn’t that sort of place. We weren’t a venue for hire. Randoms couldn’t just pay to stay here. To be invited meant you were elite. To have a permanent bedroom here meant you were untouchable.

“Get the kit and finish whatever you need to do. I’ve wasted enough time on you.” Crossing my arms, I lowered my voice to a snarl, “Hurry.”

She backed up, keeping her eyes on me as she crossed the bedroom to the bathroom. With a wary look, she darted inside. The sound of a drawer opening, followed by the zipper of a leather bag echoed back.

Tracking her on silent feet, I leaned against the doorframe as she unwrapped a toothbrush, squirted a new tube of paste onto the bristles, and almost sank in relief as she tasted minty freshness.

I never looked away as she cleaned, spat, rinsed, then applied the expensive moisturizer to her face before quickly running a brush through her shower-damp hair. My cock never deflated, and by the time she was done, I danced on the decision to make her serve me again.

She was nice and clean. Skin dewy fresh and lips just begging to be messed up with my cock.

Placing everything neatly back in the bag, she zipped it up and went to put it in the drawer.

“Keep it,” I said, pushing off the door and wincing at the pain between my legs. “Take it with you.”

“Take it where?” Her eyes met mine as she spun to face me.

“Where do you think?” I stepped toward her. “Your accommodations, of course.”

She balked. “Wait...you’re taking me back down into the cellar?”

I laughed with ice. “You didn’t think I’d upgrade you to this room, did you?” Waving my arm at the opulence and the many escape routes, I shook my head. “And give you the keys to run? This isn’t secure. We both know that.”

Even with a leash, she could possibly get free if I wasn’t here to supervise.

I wasn’t prepared to take that chance.

She huffed. “I won’t run. Didn’t I already prove that to you?”

“You merely proved your limits. You let bodily functions get in the way of your ability to stay strong.”

And you don’t?

The fact that I couldn’t touch my own cock. That I could handle anything—literally any-fucking-thing—yet I still couldn’t get past my aversion of self-sex. If I was braver, I had the answers inside my messed-up skull. Somewhere inside me, I knew why that was. But if I had my way, I would never remember.

Fury blazed through her gold-hazel eyes. “You’re saying you find me weak?”

“I’m saying you need to get over such things if you’re to survive here.”

“And that turns you on? Watching me use the bathroom in front of you?” Her lips turned into a sneer as she glanced at my stiff erection. “Any other fetishes I should be aware of?”

“Not a fetish. Just a part of life.”

A fragment of memories shot into my head. The soothing tones of a girl I’d once loved. The sobs of a boy I’d hugged in the dark. The stench of a communal bucket being used by all of us. We hadn’t had the luxury of being given a bathroom. We hadn’t been given privacy. Fuck, our bodies hadn’t been ours since the day we’d stepped through the cave and entered this place.

Christ.

Ice water shot down my spine as I shoved such things away and slammed the door in my mind.

What the fuck?

That shouldn’t have happened.

I’d spent a decade forgetting. I would forget for the rest of my life. Until she’d arrived, I could go months in blissful oblivion, alone and not fully recalling why, content in my loneliness because I knew there were things far, far worse out there.

First the sleepwalking and now remembering while I was still awake?
What's next?

Full-blown recollection of things I couldn't afford to recall? What if my nightmares entered my reality again? What if I couldn't shut it off?

Panic made me angry, and anger made me short-tempered. Snatching her by the wrist, I barked, "Enough. Time to go home."

She pulled against me as I dragged her from the bathroom. Her socked feet slid on the marble tile, skidding into me. "Wait. I don't want to go back down there."

"I don't care what you want."

"Please. Lock me in here. Let me have access to sunlight and a toilet, for god's sake."

Hauling her through the room, I glowered at the crimson and silver space. Luckily, no other memories sprang forth. Only the vague sensation that something bad had happened here, and it was time for me to go.

Reaching the door, I changed the subject. I deflected back onto my tempting little trespasser. A prisoner I should probably get rid of but still wanted far too badly. "How many exits do you count? Be honest, I'm curious."

Her forehead furrowed, her arm still squirming in my hold for freedom.

I waited for her to play dumb. To pretend she hadn't searched every wall, nook, and window for signs of easy breakouts. However, she once again surprised me when she stopped fighting and went with honesty instead. "I really shouldn't say this, but at first glance, I see one in the bathroom and at least three in this bedroom."

The door, window, and balcony.

I stopped pulling her, and we stood far too close. So close those damn currents of energy crackled between us, making my belly coil and thighs bunch. "The windows being the obvious choice."

She nodded reluctantly. "That and this door. I remember the layout of the house. If I could pick the lock, I could run down the corridor and out the front door."

"There aren't any locks." I clenched my jaw against hazy awareness of why that was. Why this entire place didn't have a single lock on any door or window, apart from the cells below and my rigged attempts in my dorm. I'd made deadbolts for the exterior doors but hadn't bothered with the internal

ones. It'd been yet another mind game. A power trip to those unfortunate not to be guests here but permanent residents.

"Is that why you won't let me stay in this room?"

"What do you think?" I sneered.

"I think I proved you can trust me."

I laughed. "It'll take a lot more than that to earn my trust."

"Tell me, and I'll do it." Her green swirling eyes melded with brown, firing with so many things. The intensity of her made my heart pound. She made equal urges of violence and protection fight for space in my chest.

It couldn't be permitted to continue.

Shutting everything down, locking her out of my goddamn heart and head, I dug my fingers into her wrist and dragged her down the corridor.

"Wait." She once again tried to free herself. "Stop! Let's talk about this —"

I barely even noticed.

I was done with this.

I wanted to be alone.

Her pleas, threats, and curses made no difference as I relocated her from splendor to squalor. Down the stairs and into the dank darkness.

"Sleep well." I gave her a shove, tossing her inside the cell before slamming the door in her face.

* * * * *

That night, I didn't sleepwalk.

I dreamed.

I fell into the pits of my desolated and demented mind, coating myself in filth I could never be free of, drowning in memories that I refused to recall.

And I died a little more.

I'd been dying ever since I'd arrived in this putrid house.

"You all good?"

I raised my bruised head and forced my eyes to focus on Zanik. It took effort to see again. To summon the will to pay attention instead of wishing on a minutely basis to be blind.

Zanik stood as straight as his last beating would allow him. His bronze skin a shade lighter with agony. His black eyes and midnight hair were as feral as the rest of us.

He said his father was Jamaican and his mother Irish. They'd been good parents. Until they weren't.

I grunted a non-answer and pushed off from the door where I'd been swaying with the sudden urge to vomit. Climbing the stairs had pushed me to my limit.

I swallowed bile, ignored my wounds, and shuffled to my assigned dormitory bed. I didn't bother stripping or washing or even pissing in the bucket. My body was done. I had nothing left. I fell face-first onto the uncomfortable mattress and groaned in pain.

Feet whispered their way toward me. The presence of a boy trapped in hell just like me hovered by my arm. His closeness set off the chain reaction inside me. I couldn't have someone close to me right now. Not after what they'd done tonight.

But Zanik was like me.

He cared even while they broke him. He wouldn't let me suffer alone even though that was all I wanted.

When his hand stroked my back, the pain of his kindness almost tore me in two.

A heavy sob clawed up my throat, but I choked it back down.

No one cried here anymore.

No one.

"You're okay, Kas. We'll protect you for the rest of the night. Won't we, guys?"

My ears pricked as the other unfortunates in this prison all spoke as one. A mumble of misery with our messed-up brotherhood sisterhood.

"We'll watch over you, Kassen."

Female blended with male.

There were no separate bedrooms for different sexes. No screens for privacy when we changed or had to go to the bathroom. We were as intimately linked as any person—family or friends could be.

Forcing strength I didn't have into my body, I sat up. I flopped onto my ass and gritted my teeth against the pain resonating from my asshole to the base of my skull.

They'd been extra 'attentive' tonight. Rough and ruthless. Not sparing me an inch.

A girl with blond hair, a gap in her teeth, and pretty hazel eyes slid off her squeaky bed and came to me. We stared at each other for a moment. Her

pity for me was obvious. My pity for her was equally visible. We all stank of pity for one another.

Wordlessly, she opened her arms and crawled into bed with me.

I flinched against her contact.

I didn't want to be touched and had long lost the privilege of touching another, but she didn't give me space to become rotten with what they'd done. They could take away so much from us, but here, in this tiny dormitory, we all did our best to patch each other up, glue up our holes, sticky-tape our breaks, and not shatter completely.

Her small body fitted against me, and Zanik joined our awkward hug. He sat on my other side, wrapping his arms around me and Quell.

And we just sat there.

We sat there for so long, exhaustion found me, and I started to slip into sleep.

I was only vaguely aware as more of my family joined us on my bed.

Nyx and Jareth, Maliki and Sarez.

My heart tried to heal but, instead, tore itself to pieces, knowing that our fractured unit wasn't complete. Elise, Neo, and Wes were still serving.

I'd been the first to finish. I wished I'd been the last so the others could be here. Safe in the arms of each other. Protected from more pain.

Tomorrow, I would try all over again to figure out how to save them. I would do my chores and get on my knees, all while seeking out the weaknesses of this place.

But until then, I would sleep. I would heal. I would grow stronger and smarter so I could keep the promise we'd all made.

The promise that had been bound in blood almost two years ago.

It'd been Nyx's idea.

The shy little redhead who was the youngest of us all. She'd tried to climb out the window. She'd been caught. Whipped. Brought back bleeding. But instead of crying like so many of us did in our first year here, she'd merely smeared the blood over her fingers and approached us one by one.

"We'll survive another day."

I'd been the third one she'd marked, but I'd been the first to grab the large splinter from the decaying window frame and prick my finger. I'd run crimson over her in return, repeating what she'd said. "We'll survive another day."

*The rest of them followed until we all had dried blood and healing
puncture wounds scarring us with our oath.*

We'll survive another day.

And we had.

Another and another and another.

Until finally, there was no more to endure.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAWN CAME AND WENT, according to the slivers of light through the crumbling mortar. Stomach rumbles demanded food, then gave up and went silent. The urge to pee grew from annoying to unavoidable. The shame of using a bucket once again shoved me closer to my limit.

How could he throw me back down here?

Why, when he had an untold number of unused rooms above, did he keep me locked in filth? Surely, it would be to the molester's advantage to have me clean and hygienic? Surely, I had rights as a prisoner to basic facilities and care?

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I stewed in the dark.

I need a weapon.

Next time he comes for me, I'll stab him instead of blow him.

I'd been too accommodating, too weak.

If I didn't fight, this would be my life now. Abused and discarded. Pulled from the darkness to perform a sexual act, then shoved back in the moment I'd pleased him.

My hands curled into fists.

I'm done.

I need a new plan.

As my mind whirled with concepts of freedom, I listened to the faint twittering of birds outside. While they sang, I picked up the tiny shattered pieces of glass from my broken cell phone, looking for a shard that could be used as a blade.

He'd taken the two devices last night.

What had he done with them? Would the signal still work even in pieces? Were people still coming to find me?

Josh will be looking. I know my brother. He'll be furious I haven't checked in.

My teeth sank deeper into my cheek in worry.

Wait.

Didn't I tell him to wait five days before raising hell?

How long had it been?

My mind was scrambled—second-guessing the hours I'd spent in this godforsaken basement. Three days or four? Two or five? Without access to the sun's cycle, it all seemed the same.

While running my thumb along a fragment of glass, the sound of the door opening wrenched my head up. The light bulb overhead blazed bright, making me squint and cower in the sudden flood of illumination.

Then *he* stepped in.

Once again, he had two plates. A mismatch of food like before. A peach this time, along with a hard-looking bread roll, raw carrot complete with its green top, and what seemed like a ramekin filled with honey.

My stomach growled, perking up at the thought of being fed. That was the only part of me pleased to see him. All other parts hissed in warning to leave me the *hell* alone.

Last night, after his rare show of compassion by leaving me alone in the bathroom, gratefulness had cultivated warmer feelings toward him. I'd wondered—just for a second—if my plan at being amiable and obedient was working.

I'd granted him an orgasm without too much hate in my heart. I'd let myself soften as he'd trembled under my hand. I'd had more hope than hate if I was honest...clinging to belief that honesty would get me free.

But once again, I'd been so stupid.

I hadn't attacked him or fought. I hadn't cursed or put up any sort of fuss.

I was ridiculous.

I mean, I'd dressed in front of him for goodness sake! I'd allowed him to command me, all because I believed each glimpse he earned of my body, each secret that I shared would slowly grant me his trust. Trust I could use to make my escape.

You're an idiot, Gem.

A total star at bad decisions.

All that stupid hope and all those stupid plans had blown up spectacularly in my face as he'd hauled me from a perfectly adequate bedroom to a mildew-rotten basement.

I had no more friendly attempts. No more hope that I could appeal to him. He'd proven he wasn't normal.

He was dangerous in his unpredictability. Cruel in his brokenness.

And I wasn't playing this game anymore.

I will get free.

I'll kill him if I have to.

Making eye contact, he stopped before me and dropped to the floor. Sitting cross-legged didn't fit his physique or his tight slacks. The abused material strained over his thighs, the stitching pulling apart between his legs. I tried to look away. To refuse the plate as he slid it across the floor to me. I didn't want to watch him with fascination as well as fear.

His shirt was once again the beige affair with stains and buttons missing. His cuffs were gone, and a hole had begun against his rib cage where his chest burst the threads. He'd somehow taken expensive clothing and turned them into rags. His scruffy jaw and unruly hair down to his shoulders completed the portrayal. The only thing about him that didn't scream destitution and loneliness were his eyes.

Nondescript in color, they were dark enough to blend with his pupils, leaving his stare almost supernatural. They gleamed with obsidian thoughts, coal-black with opinions, ice-cold with secrets.

"Eat." He cocked his chin at the plate.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall. "If I eat, I'll need a bathroom again." I gave him a nasty smile. "Cause and effect and all."

"And I told you, you already have a bathroom." Looking over his shoulder, he glanced at the bucket. "You'll become accustomed to it soon enough."

"But that's the thing." I bared my teeth. "I don't *want* to become accustomed. No person should. I'm a person, not an animal. I'm a girl—"

“You don’t have to remind me what you are.” His dark gaze cast over me from head to toe. “I’m fully aware of your sex and species.”

“Then why won’t you treat me as one?”

A sudden cold laugh fell from his lips. “You think being human automatically grants you shelter, food, and comfort?”

“Don’t forget safety.” I sniffed. “Safety from illness, pain...injury.”

He smiled just as evil as his laugh. “Safety is not a right, girl. Safety is an illusion.”

“Safety is what you promised me if I did what you asked.”

His mouth bracketed with anger, grooving his skin and highlighting his scruff. “And you haven’t done what I asked.” His brows dipped, shadowing his gaze even more. “At least, not today.”

My stomach flipped.

Bastard.

“And I *won’t* do what you ask until you move me to a better prison.” I shivered against my will but added a cough with sly intentions. “I’m getting sick. I’ll die of pneumonia down here.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Eat your food.”

“No.”

“You’ll do what I command. And after, once your rumbling belly is full...I’ll think of something else you can do.” His gaze once again lingered on my breasts.

My traitorous nipples pebbled beneath my borrowed clothes.

Instinct told me to look away, to barricade myself from his thinly veiled threat, but I couldn’t stop watching him.

I watched him watching me.

I wanted to memorize his face, so I never forgot the man who’d trapped me, belittled me, and abused. I would find some way to punish him.

I will.

As long as I knew his face, I would track him down and ensure pain for my pain, despair for my despair. I didn’t even need to know his name.

Dipping his bread into the honey, he took a controlled bite. “If you behave and do what I ask, you’ll survive another day.”

I gave him the finger. “If this is my life, why would I *want* to survive another day? If you’re going to keep me down in the darkness, why the hell would I be nice to you?”

He stilled. His fingers wrapped around the bread until it broke into crumbs and scattered over the damp floor. “Are you forgetting who’s the guilty party in this mess?”

I kept my head high. “You. *You* are. You’re holding me prisoner.”

He glowered and discarded the crushed bread for his peach. He bit into it. Juice glistened on his lips as he licked them slowly. “I’m not going to repeat our circumstances. I’m not going to repeat how *you* were the one to enter without permission. You’re the one forcing me to gather double the food and fuel necessary for a long winter. You’re the one who’s demanding things of me I don’t have the capacity to give. *You*.” He pointed the dripping peach in my direction. “*You’re* the guilty one. All I’m trying to do is protect myself. I can’t let you go because you’ll talk. I can’t seem to kill you until I’ve had my fill. Whatever I do to you is entirely my right because you upended my world. You’ve ruined *everything*.”

He massaged his temples and shook his head as if scattering painful thoughts. Inhaling hard, he snapped, “If I can be nice enough to provide for you—all when I had no intention of ever sharing my home again—the least you can do is quit your fucking complaining, eat your goddamn food, and agree to do whatever I ask.”

I sucked in a breath.

It was the most he’d ever spoken to me. His voice shaking off the cobwebs of silence. His fury was a tangible thing, snaking through the air, caressing my arms, running hot fingers through my hair.

Tension crackled between us the longer we stayed locked in a stare. His body stiffened, coiling with power as if he were two heartbeats away from launching himself at me.

He was hard, tenting his slacks with obvious arousal.

His face once again held no masks or pretends. He was angry—almost as angry as I was. He was horny—a constant state for him, it seemed. And he was...sorry.

I gasped at the naked apology buried deep within his eyes.

He feels sorry for what he’s doing?

My lungs filled with fight. “Stop doing this. I see your guilt. If you feel sorry for the way you’re treating me, then—”

“*Quiet*,” he hissed. “I feel nothing.”

“You feel something.” I dropped my stare to his erection. “If you want me as badly as you seem to, then be *nice* to me. You can choose to be my

friend instead of my enemy.”

He laughed—a tattered noise that sounded as if it’d been wrenched from bleeding memories. “I don’t have friends.”

“Did you hurt them?” I spread my arms wide at the empty mansion. The ivy-covered palace hidden deep within a valley. “Is that why no one lives with you? You killed any friends and family like you keep threatening to do with me?”

His muscles bunched into knots as rage coated his face. “I’d shut up if I were you.”

“If words are my only weapon, I’ll use all that I can, thanks.” Bracing myself, I asked, “What happened here? What happened to you? Who gave you those scars?”

For the first time, shutters slammed over his gaze, blocking me from reading him. His hands shook as he threw his plate against the wall, smashing the crockery and sending his untouched carrot and breadcrumbs flying. “Questions like that will hurt you far fucking worse than they’ll hurt me.” Any emotion he might be feeling—any ability at sniffing out his truth vanished as black hate blazed over his features.

My skin prickled with electricity.

My heart hiccupped.

The entire cell filled with war.

He was a stranger.

He was my jailer.

Yet in that raw, vicious moment, my body sprang to life. My core clenched to be filled. Wetness gathered from all the shadows that existed inside me. I’d had those shadows for far longer than I could remember. I wanted things that went against my wishes. The strangeness I’d felt all my life. The sense of searching for something—wanting danger and darkness that went against every rule of living a safe and normal existence.

I felt linked to him.

Connected in some awful, unthinkable way.

I was more in tune and aware of him than I had been with any other male.

And it wasn’t fair.

It wasn’t right that I’d found such an intense physical reaction with someone who lived alone, looked like a forgotten castaway, and constantly threatened my right to live.

Why him?

Was I that starved of contact that I'd begun to seek it in cruelty instead of kindness? Was that why I hadn't met anyone normal?

Because *I* wasn't normal? Because I had a soul that was veined like granite. Light parts, black parts, quartz, and impurities combined.

Perhaps it was the tightrope of life and death I currently balanced on.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep and abundance of adrenaline—whatever my messed-up reasons, molten heat built between my legs.

His nostrils flared, and he swooped to his feet. A seam on his shirt ripped further as he jerked with need. Reaching for me, he grabbed my shoulders.

“Kneel.” His teeth flashed. His fingers bit into my skin, manhandling me from cross-legged to kneeling.

I fought him. “Let me go.”

“*Kneel.*” He pulled me forward, arranging me against my will. The moment I balanced on my knees, he tore at his fly, tearing the zipper down and popping the button. The slacks fell gratefully to his ankles, giving up their attempt at keeping him covered.

His bare cock did its best to stand to attention, thick with need and desire. However, his large size meant it hung heavy, stabbing into my chest instead of the ceiling. He quaked against the contact. His eyes hooded, and his voice turned into blackness itself. “Touch it.”

I scowled and rocked backward. “No.”

“No?” His eyebrows shot into his wild, roguish hair. “No is no longer an option for you. Do. What. I. Say.”

“Not until you give me sunlight.”

He groaned as a bead of pre-cum glistened on the tip. His hips thrust forward as his hands latched tighter around my shoulders, pulling me into him. “Suck me.”

I turned my head away, my hands landing on his thighs and pushing against his pulling. “No.”

“Do it!”

“No!” I strained to look up. Along his body to his eyes. His ripped and scarred body. His muscles etched beneath his shirt, his biceps threatening to shred the rest of the material dressing him.

With a savage growl, he ripped a hand off my shoulder and reached for his cock. For a fraction of a second, he wrapped his fist around himself and angled it closer to my unwilling mouth.

But then, he dropped himself as if he were laced in poison. He shook out his hand as his cock bobbed and his thighs clenched with dissatisfaction. His balls had drawn up so tight against his body, I couldn't see them amongst his hair.

He shuddered and glanced at his hand again, almost as if he expected to see his skin being dissolved from daring to touch himself.

I froze.

What did that mean?

I could touch him, suck him, pleasure him, yet he couldn't touch himself?

His tortured eyes met mine, no longer guarded by a shield but open for my rifling. Something terrible had happened to him. Beyond terrible. Something so painful, so intrinsically linked to self-pleasure that it'd forever destroyed his ability to masturbate.

I didn't need to ask.

I knew.

And with a feral groan, he knew I knew.

He slapped me.

His palm bit hotly against my cheek, making me gasp with shock.

He stumbled backward, wrenching up his slacks. "I...I—" For a second, he looked like he'd be sick. As if physically raising a hand to me had driven him into a space he couldn't breathe.

My cheek blazed, but the discomfort was nothing compared to the bruising he'd left behind from strangling me. He'd done far worse than slap me, so why did this abuse torment him the most?

"I...I can't stay here." With drunken steps, he bolted away from me and ripped open the door. At the last second before he disappeared, he looked over his shoulder, his manic stare meeting mine.

He swallowed hard, hate tangling with horror and horror knotting with need. If there was a word for the state of pain he was in, I would've said harrowed. He was harrowed and wanting and completely screwed up from a past that echoed with agony.

His lips pulled back, anger drowning his panic. "When I return, you will do *exactly* what I say, without fucking question. Just try to say no to me again." He fisted the door handle, stalking over the threshold before snarling, "And eat your goddamn food!"

The door slamming ricocheted in my ears long after he'd gone.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'D TOUCHED MYSELF.

She'd made me angry enough, lust-fogged enough to grab that grotesque thing between my legs and *touch* it.

Oh, God.

The urge to vomit came strong again, bringing with it a chariot of memories, all screeching to be noticed, pounding fists at the barricaded door in my mind.

I fell to my knees the moment I bolted from her cell.

My head ached as if any second now, my skull would splinter, and my past would devour me alive.

I can't breathe.

Memories swirled faster, blacker, thicker. No longer content to stay in my dreams, they scratched at me until I bled.

No, please.

Digging my nails into the concrete, I fell forward onto all fours, gasping and fighting, doing my best to cling to the present and not tumble back to my past.

Don't.

A flicker of Fables when the corridors were full of evil laughter.

No.

A scent of white sage from the incense Mrs. Colta burned in her room.
Don't!

A shard of pain as—

“See, Kas. See how good it feels?”

I gritted my teeth as Mrs. Willby curled her hand around mine, forcing my fingers to wrap around my flaccid cock. Her third husband stood behind me, naked and hard, stroking the crack of my ass.

He was new to Fables, but he'd embraced the lifestyle of his deviant wife with a lot more enthusiasm than her prior husbands. Each time they visited, they always requested me.

Just me.

To be shared by both of them.

Their favorite position was me fucking Mrs. Willby while her husband fucked me. The first time Mr. Willby took me, I'd screamed. I'd taken my pain out on his wife. Driving into her as hard as he drove into me.

They'd praised me.

They'd destroyed me.

Each time since, they chipped away at my strength, pouring me full of unhappiness and agony. My family of Fable slaves didn't have the power to stick me back together again at night. Quell was the closest to me, and even she couldn't stop the nightmares that'd started and never stopped.

Jareth had to gag me a week ago because they couldn't get any sleep with my screaming.

“I don't think you're paying attention to me,” Mrs. Willby cooed, her pink painted lips pouting. Her face had aged in the few years she'd been visiting, and her new husband was at least a decade younger. At least he was an adult while I'd been denied such a thing.

“Suck him, Patricia,” Mr. Willby snapped. “This is taking too long.”

“Is that what you want, my darling Kassen?” Mrs. Willby dragged her hand over mine, forcing me to masturbate. “My mouth?”

I swallowed back bile. I bit back pain. I did my best to disassociate with whatever was about to happen.

A hand swatted me around the ear from behind as Mr. Willby growled, “Answer her. Tell her what you need to get hard so we can have our fun with you.”

I knew what the punishment was if I didn't obey and satisfy our Fable guests, but today I was empty. Today, I had nothing left, and my body swayed

as Mrs. Willby dragged my hand up and down on a cock that no longer rose to attention.

Wes had been the same last year. I'd seen the scars our master had given him for not performing. The others thought he'd been taken away and disposed of.

Only I knew different.

Only I had found poor Wes chained in the cabin in the woods. He was fed drugs to do his duty. He lived alone in the dark, waiting to pleasure guests with nastier appetites.

That will happen to me if I don't snap out of this.

I would be sent to the cabin where I'd never return alive. I'd be used like Wes. I would no longer have the protection of House Rules that kept all Fable slaves bruised, bleeding, and well-fucked but never broken or dead.

Mr. Willby stepped forward and pushed his wife away. Our combined grip fell apart, and my cock was free.

Free for a single breath before Mr. Willby grabbed it and once again forced my hand to squeeze.

"I'm going teach you how to beat off, my boy. Show you how to get yourself hard so you never come to us in this pathetic state again." His eyes glinted as he pushed my thumb against my sensitive tip before grabbing my other hand and using it to cup my balls.

I wanted to kill him.

I wanted to die.

But slowly, sickly, my body reacted under his instruction.

He did what he promised and showed me that if I was touched in the right way, desire had nothing to do with it. Instinct kicked in. Nature took over and condemned me.

I grew hard all while I cursed the very feeling of my fingers working beneath his.

Of my skin on my skin.

Of my body betraying me.

Of my hand making me hard when all I wanted to do was run.

Of myself hurting myself.

I was the seducer.

The defiler, the traitor, the villain.

I was my own worst enemy.

*“Good boy.” Mr. Willby smiled as he removed his hand from mine.
“Keep going. Get that thing stiff as a stick, and then...we’re all going to have some fun.”*

“STOP!” I punched the wall.

I shoved knuckles into stone and rolled onto my back at the onslaught of agony. One of my knuckles cracked, and excruciation blazed through my hand.

However, instead of groaning in pain, I groaned in gratefulness. I kissed fresh blood trickling from a cut. I cradled the rapidly swelling appendage and sucked in untainted air.

With practice born from self-preservation, I snatched up all the memories and hurled them back into the blackness where they belonged.

They should never have escaped.

I’m getting worse.

With shaky legs, I climbed to my feet, stumbled up the steps, and ran through the kitchen to outside.

I didn’t stop.

I ran, and I ran.

I ran until splinters and stitches hurt my lungs.

And then, I ran some more.

I circled the valley twice, I skirted the cave, I followed the river, and by the time the sun slipped from morning to afternoon, I fell to my ass in the wild grass meadow and flopped onto my back, breathless, wrung out, and more wretched than I’d been since that first year of living on my own.

Why now?

Why had my chosen amnesia faltered?

Her.

That’s why.

I didn’t move as the sun cast me in heat, drying my sweat and burning my exposed skin. I wanted to forget the past few days. I wished I could erase any and all moments where a girl had trespassed, offered herself to me, and then successfully ripped open my carefully patched-up wounds.

Damn her.

Screw every person who ever existed.

I didn’t need anyone.

I didn’t want anyone.

And I definitely don’t want her.

Forgetfulness was the only way I could survive. I fucking refused to live in fear of what was inside my head. Not for anyone.

Releasing a tattered breath, I sat up and picked a piece of long grass. Chewing the sweet tartness from the stem, I scowled at the mansion before me. At the ivy dripping from the roof, at the flowers growing in the gutters, at the stonework that had once housed sex and screams and now echoed with its crimes.

She's still in there.

I dropped my stare to the ground, trying to see through soil and concrete to the prisoner who'd made me touch myself.

I thought I could do this. That I could give in to sex after hiding from it for so long and not stir up the hornet's nest inside my fragmented mind.

Fucking stupid really.

I should know better.

And you know what you need to do then, right?

I couldn't keep her.

Sex for me would forever be tainted. It was better for everyone if I abstained for the rest of my life. If I had to choose between pleasure and insanity or celibacy and forgetfulness, then I would choose a blank memory each time.

In a couple of years, all of this nonsense would be forgotten. I wouldn't remember a girl with strength in her arms and seduction in her eyes. I wouldn't recall her name or how her tongue felt on my cock.

She would be yet another hollow void inside me, keeping me safe from my past.

Get it over with.

Pushing to my feet, I curled my hands.

No more procrastinating.

Today was her last day. No more favors. No more surviving.

I'm done.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED, I knew something had changed.

There was no lust in his eyes. No food in his hands. No challenge or dominance in the way he stepped over the threshold.

There was only acceptance, grim determination, and a coldness that slinked through the air and settled like frost upon my skin.

“Get up.” He waved his hand as if through sheer will he could levitate me to my feet.

I sucked in a breath at the emptiness in his tone. His long hair hung damply to his shoulders. His bare feet were dusty and smudged, while his slacks were stained with pollen and wherever else he’d been. His chest was naked, revealing glistening sweat and the undeniable scent of a male who’d been physically active.

Pushing to my feet, I dropped my gaze to his hands. One looked bruised with a fresh scab that’d barely stopped bleeding. On instinct, I stepped toward him. “What happened to your hand?”

He grunted and backed up. “Doesn’t matter.” Stepping aside, he pointed at the open door. “Ladies first.”

Undiluted fear injected into my veins. “Where...where are you taking me?”

His forehead furrowed, and he shook his head as if his patience regarding me had run out. “You wanted sunlight. I’m giving you sunlight.”

I didn’t move. “You’re taking me to a bedroom upstairs?”

He swallowed, his throat moving with sinew and power. “No.”

“To the library?”

“No.”

“To the living room?”

“No.” Crossing his arms, his nostrils flared. “Move. We’re running out of time.”

Goosebumps prickled and stayed on high alert as his biceps bunched. He attempted to look unruffled and unaffected, but he’d forgotten I could read him well. And beneath his masked deception lurked the truth. The jumpy adrenaline. The twitchy need to get whatever this was over and done with.

He hasn’t asked for a sexual favor. He hasn’t given me the option to serve and survive another day.

More ice layered the frost already on my skin.

He’s finished with this.

With me.

How I knew, I didn’t fully understand. Was it in the torment in his eyes? Was it in the tension in his body? He’d changed, and there was no hint of the man who’d fed me, almost kissed me, and sometimes showed a heartbreakingly vulnerable pain buried deep within.

This man was locked and chained. His silvery scars seemed to shimmer in the light, bringing forth persecution instead of pleasure.

I backed against the wall. “On second thought, I’ll stay. Tomorrow, once you’ve gotten some sleep, perhaps—”

“Not tomorrow. Today.” He snapped his fingers. “Come.” Striding toward me, he bared his teeth. “You only have two choices. Walk out of here by your own free will or be dragged out by your hair.”

I froze. My eyes tangled with his, searching, seeking, desperately trying to understand where our little deal had gone wrong. “Did I do something to offend you?”

He chuckled blackly. “Of course. Your very presence offends me.”

I flinched. “Yet you came quite happily by my hand...and my mouth.”

His eyes turned dark; his brow lowered. “Two mistakes I’m about to rectify.”

“I’m not a mistake. I’m *real*. I’m human. I have a heartbeat. A home. A family!”

“And I used to have those things.” He shrugged. “Didn’t stop bad things from happening to me.” Reaching out, he grabbed my wrist.

I snatched it out of his hold. “Don’t *touch* me.”

“Then do as I say.” Stepping away, he pointed at the door again. “Move.” I moved.

If only to give myself time to figure out what the hell had happened.

Keep him talking.

As I stepped from the cell, my back crawled as he followed on my heels. Glancing over my shoulder, I asked, “Where did you go before? I was prepared to do what you asked. I ate the food you gave me and I’m grateful. I’m grateful enough that I would’ve pleased you—”

“Enough.” He winced and worked out his bruised and bleeding hand.

“What happened?”

He scowled. “I was reminded of something.”

“Of what?”

“Of why I like to live alone.”

“No one should live alone. I live alone, and it sucks.”

He looked up, catching my stare. “I should. I did. And I will again.”

My heart lurched. “What does that mean?”

He didn’t reply, waiting for me to scale the steps before pointing down the hallway to the kitchen. My knees quaked as I went where he directed. Common sense told me it’d only been a few days since I’d entered this house, but somehow, it felt as if a year had gone by. As if the kitchen was an old friend and the threshold was a hug from the last piece of safety I’d ever know.

“Get outside.” His anger pushed me forward.

As my socked feet stepped from inside to out and daisies crushed beneath my soles, the scrape of metal on stone ripped my head around.

Oh, shit.

“Hey...wait.” I held up my hands, backing away as fast as I could.

“Please. You said you wouldn’t. You agreed.”

He hefted the heavy shovel in his hands. “I agreed to a day-by-day basis. Yesterday, it pleased me to keep you alive. Today, it does not.” The tonelessness of his voice petrified me.

It was as if he'd buried every part of himself that made him care. He looked trapped. Utterly, horribly trapped and controlled by things he couldn't break free of.

Even now, even when faced with my murderer, I suffered a pang of sympathy.

I spread my arms as if to embrace him—cruelty and confusion and all. “You want to be alone again? Okay. Fine, I'll leave. Right now. You'll never have to see me or anyone else again.”

“You're determined. I'll give you that.” He squeezed his eyes closed as if my voice physically hurt him. “But you're not leaving. Not by your method, at least.” Opening his gaze, he pointed the shovel in my face. “Now, walk. Get away from my house.”

My heart tripped over itself in panic. “Please...whatever your name is. *Please*, don't do this.” God, why hadn't I pushed for his name? Why didn't I try harder to connect with him? He needed connection. He needed *something*.

He needs help.

“Walk.” Striding toward me, he pushed the edge of the shovel into my chest. “Enjoy the sun. Look upon my valley. Don't spend your last moments begging.”

Tears sprang to my eyes as he pushed my shoulder to spin me around, then shoved me forward.

I stumbled but didn't fall.

The blade of the shovel bit into my shoulder blades, marching me ahead.

I had no choice.

I let him push me to my death.

Think!

Don't let him do this!

I sniffed back tears and shoved away panic, embracing the clearheadedness of certainty. This time, I didn't doubt that he would kill me. Passion didn't direct this. Rage didn't conduct his actions.

This was him, drowning beneath madness, and I wouldn't be able to negotiate or plead. Sex wouldn't change his mind. Conversation would most likely make him snap.

It's over, Gem.

I balled my hands.

It's not over.

Not yet.

My mind whirled with options.

Self-defense classes shook off cobwebs and shot back into memory. I'd been good. I'd been strong. If I could tackle him and take him by surprise, I might earn enough time to run.

Looking past the swaying fields of grass, beyond the trees ringing the clearing of the house, I focused on the cliff face. The same cliff I'd stupidly descended into this nightmare.

If I can get to that, I can vanish.

I doubted he could climb, and even if he could, he wouldn't have the stamina that I'd built up over the years, nor the swiftness that came from training a body to have muscles where others only had weaknesses.

My index fingers could hold my entire body weight. My foot could anchor me on a precipice with just my toes. If it took every ounce of effort and every trick I could muster, I would commit because this was my life.

And I'm not willing to give it up.

The house grew smaller behind us. The river became louder the closer we went. Late afternoon sunshine beat down upon us, its heat welcome but also mocking. Sweat beaded on my spine and slicked between my breasts, my pulse whizzing with adrenaline.

This was my last chance. My boots were still in the bathroom from where he'd carried me after my shower. The borrowed sweater and slacks I wore were more suited for a decadent dinner instead of rock climbing away from a monster.

I had no supplies, no PLB, nothing but my eagerness to return home and get as far away from this valley as possible.

And that's enough.

It has to be.

Shadows fell over us as he pushed me into a thicket of trees. Deeper and deeper, the sounds of wildlife slowly faded the farther from sunlight we went.

Only once we reached a patch of earth where nothing grew—no trees, no flowers, not even a dandelion—did he drop the shovel from my shoulder blades and growl, "Stop."

I stopped.

I sucked in a breath.

I turned to face him.

Bracing myself, I let viciousness overcome me. I wasn't naturally a fighter. I didn't like arguments and preferred to swallow my opinions instead

of getting into a debate. However, this time, I would break every bone in his body if it meant he'd stop threatening me.

Tenacity made me try to appeal to him one last time. "Listen to me. *Know* me. I've told you once, and I'll tell you again. My name is Gemma Ashford. I have a baby brother who I adore, and we lost our father a few years ago. My mother doesn't understand me, and I struggle to find genuine friends. I live alone in a house I love, but I sometimes get so lonely I would rather get lost in a national park than sit by myself for another night. That's how I found you. I followed a ribboned track that looked aged and afraid and just as lonely as me."

"*Quiet.*" He pinched the bridge of his nose before tossing me the shovel and pointing at the ground. "Dig."

I caught it, wrapping shaking fingers around the wooden handle. "I get loneliness, you know. I know what it's like to create habits that don't work around others. I know how hard it is to let someone in because you think, once you do, that the loneliness will be a thousand times worse when they're gone."

"You don't know a goddamn thing about me!"

"You're right." I nodded, clinging to the shovel. "I don't. But I could...if you told me. If you stopped being such a bastard and saw that, despite how you've treated me, regardless of your abuse, I'm still open to understanding."

He marched into me, his hand swooping toward my throat.

I didn't let him get purchase. Not a third time. He would not be strangling me today. Dancing backward, I held up the shovel as a weapon. "Give me your name."

"I don't have a name." He crouched into a predator stance. A hunter ready to pounce. "I suggest you dig. Now."

I shoved back hair that'd swung forward and stuck to my cheek. "You expect me to dig my own grave?"

"I expect you to do what you're told."

"And if I don't?"

His lips spread into a thin grimace. "Then I guess I'll be the one digging."

I looked down at my feet. At the barren land and the aura of death. "Is that what this place is? A tomb for whoever used to live in that house with you?"

He stiffened. "You think me capable of killing everyone I come into contact with?"

“Absolutely.”

He cocked his head. “If you’re so sure of what I am, then why are you still trying to talk to me? Why are you still being *nice*?” He raked both hands through his hair, swiping the long wildness behind his ears. “You say you’re lonely. You try to use your own experiences to convince me to open up to you. But what you’re not following is, I have nothing to confess. I have nothing I want to share with you—mentally or physically. I *like* being alone. I like silence because silence is safe. And you?” He laughed icily, unable to hide the pain lying beneath. Pain that took my breath away. “You fuck all of that up. I have no silence. I have no safety. And I’m done.”

He sprung.

Instinct took over.

I parried to the side and raised the shovel.

Bowling into me, he tried to tackle me to the earth. If I hadn’t refreshed myself on self-defense moves, I would’ve fallen and been his before I hit the ground. Instead, I let muscle memory take over.

I rolled with him.

I kicked out my leg and struck his thigh, sending him collapsing onto his back. His hands reached for my throat, throwing his whole weight at me. My hands clutched the shovel. In a sharp twist, I wrapped my legs around his torso and spun upward instead of letting him pin me into the dirt.

He didn’t get my throat, but he did snatch my arms.

That connection sent shockwaves through both of us.

My legs spasmed around his waist.

Electricity struck us as if a lightning bolt had shot from the sun.

For a second, everything stopped.

Nothing else mattered.

Only shock and lust and pain.

So much fucking pain.

We were a collision.

A disturbed, confused, broken demolition of everything that we’d been before this.

This.

Oh, God.

What is this?

Shock widened his eyes, mirroring mine. We quaked as we paused in our fight. Our bodies trembled as if we hummed at the same bone-breaking

frequency. His heart pounded into mine, drilling its way into my chest, trying to understand what the *hell* was happening.

Black desire drenched him as his hands turned hot against my skin, digging into my biceps as the icy madness left his stare, unable to hide the complex depth he hid.

My core went wet.

My heart went wild.

I wanted him as much as I wanted to be free.

Apologies once again glowed in his dark gaze. Awe and fascination, interest and fear all morphed together and painted his face with the truth.

Each flicker of emotion sliced and diced me. It corrupted my mind from hurting him to helping him. Helping the man intending to kill me.

Gem!

Stop it!

His hips rocked up, sending more blood-scorching currents through me. I matched his rock, sitting heavier on him, disgusted with myself that I could fight him but not me.

A hoarse groan escaped him.

I sucked in a breath.

For a split second, his lips parted, and his hands came up to cup my face. His thumbs traced my cheekbones with the most exquisite reverence and care. His eyes dropped to my lips. His throat worked as he swallowed. The tightness in his body melted into need.

And it *affected* me.

Even in a grief-filled forest after being marched by my killer, my body reacted.

My breasts swelled, my heart kicked, and my traitorously wet core clenched with vicious hunger.

His hand swept from my cheeks to my nape. He pulled me down, down to his mouth.

I folded over him.

I licked my lips, every part of me tingling, thankful, hopeful that this was the moment where I saved both of us. Where he finally gave in to accepting *something* existed between us. Something neither of us was looking for nor wanted, but something that couldn't be denied.

I want him.

And that scrambled my mind because how, why, what was I *thinking*?

You're not.

You're in shock.

It's time to go, Gem.

Power siphoned down my arms. The handle of the shovel grew heavy, coaxing me to use it.

Do it.

Do it now.

This is your last chance!

His mouth grazed mine.

My heart lurched in a way it had never lurched before. Ripping free from arteries, kicking away veins as if they were ropes holding it within me, ready to commit treason by choosing him.

The horror that I could want someone who'd treated me so cruelly made common sense rush back like a tsunami.

No way!

Joshua. Home. Normalcy.

I have to go.

I can't do this.

I refused to be swayed by sex and stupidity.

His breath drugged me as his fingers tightened around the back of my neck, tugging me the final distance to kiss me deep.

And that was it.

If he wouldn't end this...

I will.

I would never be able to live with myself if I didn't.

He sighed as his eyes turned soft and trusting. Drunk on our proximity, his shields shattered, his pain nullified.

I'm sorry.

Wrenching backward, I broke his hold and swung my arms up. The metal of the shovel glinted, sharp and ready to strike.

My swiftness took him by surprise as desire fogged his reactions. He blinked as if he couldn't compute that the first moment of connection was the moment where all connections died.

“What—” He struggled to push himself up.

I had a precious second to choose him or me.

Live or die.

I choose me.

Swinging the shovel, I brought it down.
I whacked the blade against his head.
The clang vibrated through my arms. The heavy thud made my stomach
turn over with nausea.

And...it was over.

His body went instantly lax beneath mine. His arms splayed sideways, his
palms facing upward, his eyes drifting closed with a groan.

I scrambled off him and stood on shaking legs. My belly tried to retch as I
looked down.

Oh, God, what have I done?

Blood trickled from his forehead where I'd struck. His lips stayed parted,
still glistening from his tongue. His scruff and long hair made him seem
adopted by the wilderness. Leaves trying to blanket him, shadows doing their
best to claim him.

I stared and stared, waiting for some sign he was alive.

Nothing.

Throwing the shovel away, I ducked to cup his cheek.

Don't!

*Don't you dare be like those stupid girls in movies. You've just thrown
away your weapon. Do not waste this opportunity.*

Run!

I froze with indecision.

I'd wanted this. I'd waited for this exact moment. Yet now that it'd
arrived, I felt sick with guilt. Something had happened between us, no matter
how much I could argue. Something that shouldn't have happened between
two strangers who'd met when they shouldn't.

I didn't belong in his world, and there was no way in hell he would fit in
mine.

He was going to kill you, Gem!

My hands balled.

I nodded with determination.

It was him or me.

I did the right thing.

But if I left him here alone, he might die. *If he's not dead already.* I
might've caused brain damage. I would be sentencing him to an excruciating
end, lying alone in a forest unconscious.

He groaned, his legs twitching.

See, he's not dead.

He's coming to.

RUN!

His bruised hand opened and closed; his eyes squeezed together as he twitched.

He's fine, see? SEE?

Josh popped into my head. My adorable baby brother who would never forgive me for wasting this escape. I owed it to him to return. I owed it to my mother, to me, to the blessed luck I'd enjoyed all my life.

Time to go.

Drinking in one last look of the man who'd made my body sing all while he'd twisted my mind, I imprinted him.

The wild hair, the muscular chest, the thousands of silvery scars. The pain, the shame, the history that'd carved him from a boy into this hard-edged desperately lonely creature.

My heart broke for him.

My body wept for him.

My socked feet backed away.

And then, I turned and bolted.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I HALF RAN, HALF STUMBLED.

I saw double and crashed to my knees. Shaking my head, I snarled at my messed-up vision, demanding it to sort its shit out. Thankfully, the queasiness and vertigo faded a little, giving me a few precious moments to charge ahead, following the tracks of my prey.

When I touched my forehead, my fingertips came away streaked with blood.

She'd struck me.

She'd made me bleed.

She'd left me for dead.

She'll pay.

I ran faster.

I didn't know how much of a head start she had or how long I'd been out. The sun's location hadn't changed much by the time I'd blinked back the wash of achy blackness and come to. It couldn't have been that long. Then again, it'd been long enough to ensure her presence in my valley was gone. She'd left behind an emptiness, a cavern that threatened to keep expanding until it swallowed me whole.

That almost kiss.

It'd been...electrifying. Confounding.

The most dangerous and painful thing I'd ever done.
Ever *felt*.

And look how it ended.

Once again, violence had been wielded against me. Pain had been given when all I'd offered was pleasure.

They're all the same.

No one can be trusted.

Swaying, I caught a tree branch and kept running.

Anger gave me speed. Betrayal gave me power.

She couldn't escape.

That isn't how this story ends.

Shadows enveloped me as I reached the base of the cliff. Her tracks had been easy to follow. Her goal had been swiftness not sneakiness, leaving behind broken twigs, crushed grass, and a pathway that blazed with her direction.

Skidding to a halt, I spied something colorful and abandoned in the undergrowth. Kicking it with my bare foot, it rolled away, water oozing from a crack in the side. Was that hers? A water bottle that she'd left behind in her rush to escape, or had others been so close to my valley and I'd never noticed?

Pure fear shot down my spine.

The thought of others finding me. Of her telling society about me.

It can't happen.

I couldn't go back. I couldn't endure that again. I would rather die.

Find her!

Ignoring my pounding headache, I began to climb.

Grabbing a branch, I stepped onto a plant-spotted rock, taking the first step out of my valley for the first time since I'd been brought here.

My muscles seized, and I almost fell backward. The thought of leaving? Of willingly stepping out of this sanctuary? It made the lump on my forehead ache in time with my galloping heart.

You have to leave. You have to catch her.

Forcing myself to do what was necessary, I reached for another branch and hauled myself up. I focused on the task of climbing toward the dying sun. I didn't look at the canopy of leaves above me. I didn't look at the river down below. I kept my attention firmly on my next handhold, next foot placement,

and far away from the knowledge that men weren't supposed to scale mountains.

One false move and I'd fall.

I'd most likely break something.

If I survived the plummet, I probably wouldn't have the strength to gather enough supplies for the winter. I'd starve.

Focus.

Get her back and then worry about other things.

My breath came heavy as I climbed higher and higher. Occasionally, I'd see evidence of her path. A scuff on a rock. A crushed flower.

Birds suddenly squawked above me, spooking into a flock and circling something at the top of the cliff.

Her.

So her head start hadn't been that great, after all.

Clinging to a boulder, I skirted around it until I found a helpful tree. I was approximately halfway up, and she was already at the top. If she had the stamina to run, she could put some serious distance between us.

She's in socks. She's probably not used to running without shoes. You'll catch her easily.

Ignoring the fury unfurling inside me, I stayed focused and scaled the rest of the cliff. The closer I got to the top, the harder I found it to contain my anger.

She was the cause of all my problems, yet had she said she was sorry? Had she genuinely showed dismay at fucking up my world?

No.

She'd only been fearful of her own hide. Her apologies had been all about her. The way she'd looked at me in the forest when our lips had been so fucking close to touching, I'd believed...*I thought.*

Doesn't matter.

She was a liar and a thief. She'd snuck into my home, pretended to talk to me, then stolen the precious sanity I had left.

She was worse than all the guests I'd had to entertain combined.

The worst because she'd made me *feel*.

Made me hope.

For some reason, a lump existed in my chest as well as on my forehead. As if she'd struck my heart as well as my skull with the shovel.

I hate her.

My fingers burned with the need to wrap around her little throat and finish this.

Her attempt at running was selfish and ill-advised. She thought she could outrun me? She thought this was *over* between us?

Only I had the power to decide that. And she would understand precisely how over it was when I got my hands on her.

I grunted and climbed faster.

Up, up, up.

It took longer than I wanted, slipping on rocks and scaling gangly trees. The godforsaken cliff grew steeper, harder, and my head kept swimming from her well-aimed attack. The world tipped and swayed, making bile roil and my mouth clamp tight.

By the time I crawled over the ledge and dug my fingers into dirt instead of stone, sweat poured down my back.

I was thirsty and angry, and adrenaline turned my body into a shaking mess.

My head continued to throb with agony from her strike. The ground wobbled beneath me, whispering how good it would feel to lie down...just for a second. To let go of this chase, to close my eyes, and let all of it be swept away.

Hell no!

This wasn't the end.

This wasn't how she left me.

When I wiped my face free from sweat, my palm came away red. Blood still dripped down my forehead, tracing my nose, staining my lips. Smearing the crimson on my dirty slacks, I ensured I'd never wear them again. They'd been soiled enough.

Just like me.

Clouds gathered rapidly above my head as I followed her tracks, thick and oppressive. A few minutes later, a loud crack of thunder boxed my eardrums, a friendly warning before a deluge of water tipped over the world.

Rain splattered on everything and everywhere, drenching me within seconds.

Her trail!

The tiny hints of her path, the hidden clues of her presence—they would all be washed away.

Run!

Throwing myself forward, I ignored the storm, my sickness, and the everlasting seduction from when she'd been on top of me. When she'd rocked over me. When she'd looked just as intoxicated as me.

None of that mattered.

The only thing that did matter was killing her before she got free.

My run switched to a sprint.

Find her.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY STOLEN CLOTHES CLUNG to me as I skidded into the small clearing where my trusty Jeep waited. Its Sahara sand paint glittered with raindrops even in the darkness.

How many hours had it taken me to get here?

Four? Six? Ten?

I'd jogged the whole way, ignoring the stabbing debris against my socked feet. Pushing away the stitches in my side. I'd caught myself when I'd slipped in the mud and forced my tired muscles to keep going, just a little longer.

I'd reached the campsite where I'd slept that first night a few hours ago. I'd navigated the best I could until I'd found the faded ribbons that'd led me to this disaster, and then ran as fast as I possibly could.

I hadn't looked back.

I hadn't stopped to rest.

I'd used every second to put as much distance between myself and that ivy-covered palace as possible.

And now, I was almost free.

I'd found my Jeep. My ticket home.

My knees buckled.

My body demanded rest.

My fear was no longer enough to keep me standing.

Don't you dare. Keep going. You're not safe yet.

Tripping forward, I gulped down air and tried to calm my tattered heartbeat. Running for that amount of time was different than climbing. My strength was great, but my cardio needed work.

My temples ached with dehydration, tempting me to go to the back of the Jeep and raid my supplies for water instead of the front to escape.

Drink once you're far away from here.

Balling my hands, I trudged through the wet undergrowth. My soaking socks squelched in a tiny stream that'd appeared from the massive dumping of rain as I crossed the small clearing to my Jeep.

Another flash of lightning lit up the dark sky.

A cymbal crash followed shortly after, making me jump and look behind me.

Was he following me?

Had he woken before the storm?

Am I free?

You won't be safe until you get out of this damn national park.

Hurry.

My fingers slipped on the clips holding down the Jeep's hood. Circling the front grill, I popped the other clips and hoisted up the heavy metal. Bending forward, I reattached the battery cables, ensuring the engine looked untampered with and ready to race.

Shivering now I was no longer hot from running, I quickly resecured the clips before dashing to the tree where I'd buried my keys.

Where is it?

Rain continued to pummel me, getting heavier by the second. Each droplet was a grenade, bruising my arms and exploding with wetness upon my head.

Come on...where is it?

I squinted in the darkness, seeking the first ribbon tied in the undergrowth.

I can't see it.

I skirted around the clearing, waiting for lightning flashes to peer into dark bushes.

It took too long. Far too long. I began to second-guess myself. I began to doubt the past few days hadn't been a terrible dream brought on by sleep deprivation and food poisoning.

Surely, it couldn't be real.

Surely, there wasn't a man living alone out here...untamed and—

A-ha!

A bedraggled, soaking ribbon hung limply in the rain, pointing toward the ground and the small stone I'd nicked with my knife.

Pouncing on it, I dug with my bare hands, scooping away the dirt until my fingers closed triumphantly around metal teeth and a copper keyring of a climbing shoe, courtesy of my brother when I'd first hit online success.

Breathing hard, I pushed off from my knees.

I turned to rush to my Jeep.

Something huge and hard tackled me from the darkness.

Air was knocked out of my lungs; pain detonated from the impact as we fell together, splashing onto the rain-drenched ground.

In a sheet of white lightning, I froze as my captor pinned me to the mud and tried to once again wrap his hands around my throat.

His preferred method of murder.

His only focus to destroy me.

Our eyes clashed in the night. His long hair hung, dripping wet as he fought to keep me down. Instinct fought back. My hands tried to push him away. My hips surged up to knock him off. My skin once again sparked with unwanted electricity.

"You don't get to leave me. Not you too." He swatted away my hands, reaching for my throat.

I glanced at my Jeep, just waiting to carry me home.

I curled my fingers around my keys that were my ticket to safety.

And...I snapped.

I lost it.

He doesn't get to hurt me anymore!

With a bolt of power, I knocked one of his knees out from under him, sending him tipping sideways. I rolled with him, pinning him beneath me, reversing our position.

I didn't hesitate.

With my hands clutching deadly keys between my knuckles, I struck his face, his throat, his chest. "I curse you!"

Fresh blood bloomed where the metal bit into his skin, mixing red-black in the night with waterfalls of rain drowning us.

I added to his scars. His many, many scars. I would slice his damn throat if I could.

He grunted as I wounded him.

He raised his hands to protect his face as I slashed like a mad woman, no thought to my strikes just that I had to keep hurting him to hold him at bay.

“Stop!” he growled.

“Let me go!”

“Never.” His eyes blazed. “You’re mine to do whatever I want with.”

“How wrong you are!” I swiped harder, faster, driving his head into the mud.

“For the love of fucking God.” His hips shot upward, unbalancing me. “You little fool, you can’t win!” He tipped me.

It was my turn to roll sideways, moaning in pain as his heavy weight sandwiched me into the wet dirt.

Mud painted both of us.

Our hair was caked in it. Our eyelashes and cheeks, our throats and our souls. Every inch filthy and ruined.

Once again, our eyes locked in the raining gloom.

And once again, the world shifted.

A cosmic shift.

A transcendent punch that said he was more than just a bastard. He could be more to me than any other male, and how absolutely tragic that somewhere in his broken soul, some part of him spoke to some part of me, whispering that we could be perfect for each other.

That this blistering, bulldozing connection wasn’t fate but fucking lunacy.

“Get *off* me!” I turned mad. I fought like a feral wolf.

And his blood ran quicker from my keys.

His blood showed he was human. His anger revealed he was not. He was both monster and man, and suddenly, I wasn’t cold anymore.

I was hot and heavy and so full of rage, so pissed off at life and luck that I *screamed*. I screamed to expel the unfairness, the grotesqueness, the *rightness* even while we dueled to the death.

“Die!” I screamed the single word. The word he’d whispered to me as his fingers had suffocated my body when we’d first met. Back then, in his house of horrors, he’d won. Out here, in the rain of shame, I would.

“Fuck’s sake!” He arched away, ducking away from my keys, doing his best to subdue me. “Just stop!”

We rolled again. We fought faster, crueler.

“I’ll never stop because I won’t let you hurt me!”

“Your very presence crucifies me!”

“Too fucking bad!”

We both lost any rules and guidelines of how a man and woman were supposed to treat each other. He grunted as my knee landed in his ribs. I moaned as his hand pulled my hair. We groaned as we rolled and tumbled, kicked and bruised.

We panted and gasped, one winning, the other losing, the roles reversing with each breath.

Until finally, he played dirty.

He slapped me, making my head ring. Then, in a wave of power, he rolled me until I slammed onto my back. His legs clamped over my legs, bringing his hips hard against me. His arms shoved mine away, giving him a heartbeat’s chance to grab my throat.

The second his fingers wrapped around my neck, I lost something inside me.

Sanity?

Humanity?

The very core of who I was.

He wanted to take my life?

Well, I would take his pain with me.

My hands shot downward while his squeezed tight around me.

My fingers dived between us, unzipping his soaking trousers and slipping into the damp heat of him.

I wrapped both hands around his cock and balls. My right around his hard shaft, my left around the soft vulnerability of his testicles.

And I motherfucking *squeezed*.

I squeezed as hard as he squeezed my throat.

He buckled over me.

He strangled a cry.

His fingers loosened around my neck.

And then, as if all of this had been some twisted, tangled foreplay, raw, savage desire blackened his face.

There was no pause.

No thinking.

His mouth slammed against mine.

His tongue speared past my lips, bringing rain and pain, mud and darkness.

His fingers switched from strangling me to clutching me as if I was his savior and seducer all in one.

My mind blanked.

My fingers continued to torture him, but his kisses were a different kind of torment. He kissed me as if he was the one suffocating. He bit my lip and swept his tongue deep into me—tasting me, feeding me his need—as though kissing me was the only thing he lived for.

I choked on his lust.

I twisted his cock and fisted his balls.

I delivered agony to him.

And all he did in retaliation was *kiss* me.

He raked his fingers through my mud-soaked hair and opened his mouth so wide, he poured everything into me. Every inch of his tragedy. Every second of his trials.

He gave me all of him.

He tilted his head and stroked my unwilling tongue with his, but it wasn't until a warm droplet kissed my cheek instead of cold rain that whatever mania infected him infected me.

A tear.

A single tear from a murderer.

A man who I held by the balls. A man who I squeezed so damn hard he'd probably never have children. And instead of striking me. Instead of strangling me like he'd tried to do so often, he surrendered.

He gave me his pain.

He gave me his power.

He *kissed* me.

He clawed open my chest and crawled deep inside.

He broke me until we were shattered pieces together.

I couldn't do it.

I can't do this!

He groaned as I squeezed his cock and balls until my hands shook and my forearms threatened to pop with pressure. Then he kissed me deeper, harder,

fiercer than anyone. He kissed me as if he wanted me to end him. As if he was grateful to endure agony by my hand.

He kissed me as if he'd never known kindness. As if pain was the only thing to set him free.

I couldn't stand it.

Stop!

He gathered me closer, kissing me with violence and anarchy, war and famine.

I lost.

I kissed him back.

And.

That.

Was.

It.

The gun, the detonation, the very end of our existence.

We clawed at each other. We tried to crawl *inside* one another.

Our fight switched from one age-old grievance to another. From fighting to fucking.

Rolling onto his back, he dragged me with him, splaying me over his stomach as his hands dropped from my hair, his nails raked along my back, and his fingers jerked the sweater over my head.

The rain soaked everything, making the material slap lifeless beside us. He fought with my T-shirt next, yanking it up and throwing it into the slick mud.

The moment my breasts were bare, he cupped them both. His fingers rolled my nipples, pinching me, electrifying the sick craziness in my blood.

My hands switched from trying to wring his cock from his body to jerking him with pleasure. I stroked him viciously.

His breath caught, and his hips pulsed into my palm. "*Christ—*"

He smashed his mouth to mine. Our kiss tasting of rain and earth, blood and sweat.

Another layer of propriety fell away.

My nails dug into his cock. His back bowed as his mouth opened wider over mine. His tongue was slick and savage. His assault brutish as he kissed me so damn hard. We rolled again, fighting for dominance, our vehemence toward one another adding a ferocity to whatever this was.

This wasn't about forgiveness or apologies. This wasn't about the pent-up connection or spine-snapping desire.

This was about fire.

Fire that burned in both of us.

Fire that had incinerated us from the inside out and wouldn't stop until we were both cinders on the forest floor.

"I need you." His voice resembled every shade of black in the night.

"Fuck, I need you."

Not a question.

A command.

A matching demand within me.

I didn't think.

I clawed at his pants, shoving them down, allowing his blazing erection to pop free. It was swollen and red from my punishment. Crescent moon indents from my nails showed how much pain I'd given him.

He fell on me again, biting my throat, my jaw, my mouth. As his tongue hunted for mine, he rolled until I was pinned beneath him, his hands tearing at the fly of my borrowed, ruined slacks, ripping them off me as if they'd been doused in the very flames consuming us.

We were too far gone.

Far from human.

I'd never been so drunk.

So reckless.

Our mouths continued to slip and slide in a heady, monstrous kiss. Our tongues clashed in a dance downright cruel and perverse.

His dirt-covered hands painted my bare chest and hips as he angled me beneath him. Controlling me, manipulating me, spreading my legs with his knees.

I couldn't breathe.

Couldn't think.

All I could do was feel.

And fuck, he felt better than anything.

He was wild and vile all wrapped up in the totality of twisted tenderness.

And when he took me.

When his cock found my pussy, and he mounted me with all the violence and pain inside him, I screamed for the second time.

My legs snapped around his hips.

My back bowed as he sheathed himself within me.

I quaked as his body buried itself deep, deep, deep, linking us together.

For a heartbeat, we stilled.

My core pulsed around his hard invasion, and his cock pulsed with triumph at conquering me. We shared a stare. A glance that cracked open my ribs and let my treasonous heart free.

Beneath the evil lust in his eyes something else begged me to see. Something caged within him, trapped behind bars, chained up in metal, secrets and memories slowly poisoning him.

I gasped.

I saw.

And then, he moved.

He withdrew then thrust forward. Hard and sharp. Deep and possessing.

I cried out.

I scratched his back and grabbed his bare ass.

I dug my nails into his skin, pulling him deeper, deeper, *deeper*.

He snapped.

He thrust and thrust, grunting with each impalement, his face highlighted by lightning as thunder crashed around us.

Mud was my bed, and rain was my sheets as I lost whatever innocence I had left to a monster in the woods.

I spurred him on.

I begged for more.

I dug my heels into the back of his thighs and shoved my hips up to meet his, crushing our bodies together, rubbing my clit on the base of his cock so sparks and pinwheels of gunpowder ignited.

“Oh, *God*.” I moaned.

My body tightened. Quickened. Pressurized.

His mouth found my ear, biting my lobe all while his haggard breathing revealed how lost he was in me.

Gem no longer existed.

Just this creature he’d created. A creature who only existed for this manic kind of pleasure.

His fists landed by my ears, squelching into the mud as he rode me harder, deeper, brutal and unkind.

And that was my trigger.

The release of an orgasm that convulsed and cracked me. That didn't just clench my core but annihilated it. It poured gasoline in my womb and blazed with shooting stars down my pussy.

I came around his cock.

I came for a man who I didn't even know his name.

I came harder and more spectacularly than I'd ever come before.

His back tensed. His hips switched from fucking to rutting.

He chased my release. He howled as he buckled over me, crashing his mouth to mine, choking me with his tongue, feeding every inch he had into my body.

His spurts within me went on and on.

He well and truly claimed me in that storm, ensuring I had no other master, lover, or friend.

I was his.

Entirely and irrevocably.

For that night only.



CHAPTER TWENTY

HOW DID ONE EXPLAIN insanity?

Was it doing something again and again, expecting different results?

Was it believing in something completely false and refusing to see the truth?

Was it surviving hell and thinking you deserved happiness at the end of it?

Or maybe...it was this.

This madness smeared in mud. This woman who'd not only concussed me but also made me forget. Forget that sex had always meant shame and poison, molestation and abuse. There were places on my body I could no longer touch nor look at because the memories were always there, just lying in wait to drown me. Scars did their best to whisper what I'd done and been subjected to.

Yet...

Her.

She'd given me something no one else ever had.

She'd given me peace in her violence. Connection in her fight. She'd met my rage with her own, not just letting me fuck her but fucking me right back. Forcing me to take her harder. To snatch up every morsel she offered. To let myself *feel* for the first time in my sorry excuse of a life.

Feel wanted. Feel desired. Feel powerful when I'd been so successfully stripped of everything since I was a kid.

Wedged on my elbows, looking down at blond hair now caked with mud and a pretty face now streaked with rain and midnight, I struggled to stay with her.

To not let my past sweep me away from the most perfect, most wonderful moment I'd ever had.

She didn't move, even though most of my weight pinned her into the dirt. Her pussy continued to ripple around my cock, echoes of her pleasure.

Pleasure.

She'd found pleasure...*with me*.

She'd hurt me like they had. She'd left wounds on my body like them. But she'd given me so fucking much in return. She'd shared herself with me. We'd burned together. We *still* burned together—our skin pressed tight, our heartbeats quick, our bodies twitching with the aftermath.

And I didn't know how to deal with that.

Closing my eyes, I shook my pounding head. My temples felt as if poker knives stabbed inside me, drilling into my skull. My forehead had swollen, a throbbing bump thanks to her whack with the shovel.

She cleared her throat, wrenching my eyes open again.

Only this time, it wasn't the girl who'd trespassed in my valley. Not the woman brave enough to fight me—*truly* fight me. To meet me in the madness and battle for her life or mine.

It wasn't Gemma.

But Quell.

The girl who might've grown up to look like Gemma with her blond hair and hazel, flickering eyes. A girl who'd wiped away my tears after I'd been raped. A girl who I'd rocked as she'd sobbed in my arms. A girl who'd been utterly destroyed, like all of us.

And fuck, the *guilt*.

The motherfucking guilt...it crushed me, ravaged me.

I was supposed to keep her safe.

Instead, I'd fucked her in the dirt all because she'd dared stand up to me.

No!

Withdrawing from her wet heat with a wince, I swooped to my feet and almost tripped over my sodden pants still clinging to my ankles.

My heart rate exploded.

Trapped.

You're trapped.

A snarl crawled up my throat as I bent and tore my feet out of the slacks and threw them as hard as I could. They slapped against a tree, tangling in the branches in the rain. Needing to move, to assure myself I was free, I paced.

I stalked the clearing and dug hands into my hair. I massaged a head that was full of rocks and cotton. Sharp edges and foggy corners, memories and realities, heavens and hells.

Nyx's blood oath came and went. Wes's suffering. Jareth's conditioning. Elise's initiation. Zanik, Maliki, Sarez, and Neo. Every Fable kid entered my mind and reminded me why I was alone. Why people were dangerous. Why this woman, who'd successfully made me hope, was the most dangerous of them all.

Turning on her, I glowered as she stood gracefully from the mud. Streaks on her thighs and waist, dark blond curls between her legs as she kicked away her own soaking pants.

We stood there, naked and filthy, breathing hard with what we'd done and my mind switched again. What was I thinking? This woman wasn't sweet little Quell. This woman was too brash, too brave, too damn beautiful.

Too beautiful to be innocent.

With her hair darkened by water and her eyes shaded by night, she reminded me of another. A guest who'd taken great joy in breaking me before riding me. Who'd tied me up so I couldn't move, gagged me so I couldn't beg, and sucked me until I had no choice but to give her what she wanted.

Mrs. Dita had been devious in her debasement of me. She'd shared her bed and her meals. She'd touched me kindly until it pleased her to touch me cruelly.

That was the woman standing before me.

A viper who could never be trusted.

Not bothering to hide her body, Gemma dropped our heated stare and glanced at the ground. She moved away from me, back to the spot where I'd stalked and tackled her. Rain continued to splash on our skin as she ducked in the mud and grabbed a handful of gunk.

The second I saw the flash of metal in her hand, I charged forward and snatched them.

So *this* was her weapon. The slicing agony she'd rained upon my face.

“Hey!” She reached for my fist, her touch sending electricity through my blood even now. Even after what we’d done and the fact that I was sick to my stomach for enjoying something that only came with prostitution and persecution.

“Think you’re going somewhere?” I held up the keys to the rain, washing away as much mud as possible.

“Those are mine.” She planted both hands on her hips, bold in her nudity and scrambling my mind even more. Arching her chin at the beige 4WD, she added, “I’m done here. After what we just did, surely that will convince you that I mean you no harm.”

I chuckled blackly. “No harm?” Wiping my bleeding forehead and the numerous cuts she’d given me in our fight, I grinned thinly. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“You know what I mean. I need to go home. I need to see my mother and brother. I won’t tell anyone that you live out here. Your secrets are safe with me.”

I went still. “And what secrets are those exactly?”

She paused. Her hands slipped from her hips and crossed against her belly, subconsciously sheltering herself from me.

She didn’t answer.

Clutching her keys, I cocked my head. “Well? You think you know me now? Please...do tell. Tell me what my secrets are.”

Inhaling, her chest rose with indecision. Her eyes flickered from me to her car then back again. Clinging to courage, she tipped up her chin and said quietly, “I know you’ve been abused. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand you have some deep-seated issues. You’ve been hurt...far too many times. Your scars are external and internal. The fact that you won’t tell me your name says you have epic trust issues. The clue that you live in the middle of nowhere with technology decades outdated and no modern conveniences hints you would rather die alone than try to live with others.”

She sighed heavily. “And I get that. I do. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. But...” Taking a step toward me, she gave me a soft smile. A terrifying smile. A smile that arched its way through my ribs and pierced my rotten heart. “I’m not your enemy. What we just did—” She shrugged helplessly, looking exactly how I felt. “I’ve never experienced that before. Ever.”

“We were fighting. It was a messy overflow from one violent act to another.”

“Perhaps.” She nodded, brushing away wet hair. “But perhaps it’s more than that and we both don’t want to admit it. I know I don’t. The more minutes that pass, the more I’m struggling with it.” She swallowed and dropped her stare, her honesty harsh in her throat. “How can I ever justify sleeping with a man who hunted me with the single intention to kill me? How stupid could I be to let you come inside me with no protection, no discussion of birth control or disease—”

I coughed. I couldn’t help it.

The cough turned into a cold snicker which morphed into a snarl. “You have nothing to worry about from me. It’s been eleven years since I’ve been with someone and I can’t get you pregnant.”

She froze. Her forehead furrowed. “*Eleven years?*” Her eyes widened as her thoughts ran riot. “Wait...does that mean it’s been eleven years since you’ve seen anyone or just *been* with someone?” Not giving me time to reply, she rushed, “And how do you know you can’t get me pregnant?”

Normally, I would ignore her question. If we were back at Fables and she was safely imprisoned in my basement, I would toss her some food and lock the door between us. I would flee before her question had the chance to rip holes in my mind and allow memories to skulk into the light.

But...we were alone.

In a raindrop-drenched forest and, for once, I wanted to share the dreadfulness inside me. I wanted her to know, just a tiny fraction, of the fucking hell that I’d survived. “I know because they neutered me. Those balls you were squeezing as if they’d save your life? They’re utterly pointless. All Fable boys are sterilized. It’s the very first thing they do when we arrive.”

If stillness could ice over and solidify into stone in one breath, she did it. Her body went frigid, her eyes wild. “*What did you say?*”

I shrugged and raised the keys. “Backyard vasectomy. My first official memory of this place.” Pressing the unlock symbol on the remote, the clunk of the doors opening was faint in the fading storm.

I’d shared a piece of me.

It was time she shared a piece of her.

I stalked toward the vehicle.

“Oh no. No way.” She planted herself in my way. “We need to talk about what you just told me. I-I can’t comprehend...you can’t just say something

like that and then not elaborate.”

“No, we don’t need to talk. And yes, I can.” I shoved her to the side. “I’m far more interested in seeing what’s inside there.” Reaching the back of the vehicle, I swung the tailgate wide and shoved up the half window.

She rushed to my side, protective and possessive. “Don’t. Don’t touch anything.”

“What? Think I’m going to destroy everything?” I smiled icily. “I’ve already touched you.” I dropped my stare from her mouth to her breasts to her pussy. “And you’re still in one piece.”

“No, I’m not,” she whispered under her breath before elbowing me aside. “You’re getting everything wet. Close the door.” Reaching for the raised window, her breasts rose and I couldn’t stop myself.

Snatching her close, I bent and sucked on her nipple.

Cool and fresh like rain, earthy and gritty like dirt.

She bowed in my arms then shoved me away. “Stop We need to talk not —”

“I have nothing to say to you.” I let her go. I wasn’t lying that I was more interested in her possessions at this point than her body. I’d already had her body.

And she was right.

Neither of us was in one piece after what we’d done.

And I fucking hated it.

I needed something else to focus on before I lost my ever-loving mind.

My eyes scanned her bags and supplies, settling on water containers, blankets, cables, and rope.

Rope.

Instantly, self-preservation kicked back in. My head still swam. My skull still throbbed. My heart felt strange from being inside her and my mind was confused with the bizarre bond that’d sprung between us.

It all tried to soften me, cajole me, lie to me that whatever this was...it could be a new way of life. I could have this. Whatever *this* was. A companion. A confidant. *Friend.*

But it wasn’t real.

What was real was everything knotted inside my head. The scars full of evidence. The house full of screams.

I would never forget.

Never be *free* to forget—no matter how much I lied to myself.

Which meant I couldn't let down my guard, or trust, or hope, or allow her to trick me any worse than she already had.

Tossing the keys to the side, I grabbed a length of rope.

Soft teal cord speckled with highlighter pink threads. It glittered as I jerked enough from the coil before spinning around and grabbing my trespasser.

For a second, she scowled. She didn't see my threat, nor believe I was capable of returning to our prior dynamic before we'd broken each other. She treated me as if we were *normal*—as if our cursed beginning had somehow morphed into an average relationship.

That would never happen.

It can't.

She wasn't welcome here, yet she wasn't permitted to leave.

She was mine to fuck, kill, or betray.

She's still my enemy.

Her shock gave me enough time to grab her wrists, bind them together, and wrap the rope tight around her.

Her mouth fell open as she jerked back, doing her best to fight me off. "Seriously? You seriously just tied me up after what we just did?"

"Perhaps it's *because* of what we just did."

I'm hurting.

Give me time to figure this shit out.

"Argh! You don't give up, do you?"

I kept my voice flat and cold. "Not while you're still breathing, no."

She sucked in a worried breath. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I rolled out my shoulders. "It means, if you keep pushing me, I'll keep pushing back."

"If you let me go, then there's nothing to push against. We had sex. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Fuck, yes.

It's screwed me up and blown me apart and I'm barely fucking functioning.

Gritting my teeth, I checked the tightness of her knots, forcing myself to hiss, "No. It meant nothing."

Tearing her wrists away from my grasp, she snarled, "You're unhinged."

Tell me something I don't know.

"I don't particularly care what you think of me."

“Well, you should. If you got out of your head for just two seconds and let yourself *feel*, then you wouldn’t be able to do this.”

I laughed blackly. “Emotions are the reason I am the way I am.”

“Emotions you’ve suppressed and not dealt with.”

Our eyes met, fight to fight, anger to anger. “I don’t need psychiatric help from a girl who climbs rocks for a living.”

“Well, you need help from someone.”

“And that someone definitely isn’t you.”

She huffed. “You’ll regret this. If you kill me after what we just did, what we just *felt*, then you’re not just full of demons, you *are* one.”

“Who said anything about trying to kill you?” I cocked my head, my breath harsh.

She narrowed her gaze, searching for a trap. Raising her bound wrists, she sneered, “Why tie me up then?”

“To stop you trying to escape.” I pointed at the Jeep and rolled my eyes, wincing against my headache. “That *is* what you were trying to do, was it not?”

She dug her toes into the mud, rage planting her in place. “I need to go home. I have people who will be worried about me.”

“Not my problem.” Grabbing her wrists again, I tied another knot, just to be safe. I ensured the restraints were tight enough not to wriggle out of but not too tight to cut off circulation.

“I hate you,” she spat as I relinquished her hands.

“That makes two of us.” Turning, I grabbed her keys again and opened the pen knife dangling from the chain. Using the knife, I sliced off the rest of the rope, leaving a small leash to drag her by.

Glancing up, I made the mistake of looking at her face.

Fury didn’t begin to describe her. Disbelief definitely, hate certainly, but something else swam inside that made my heart fist with daggers.

She was hurt.

She’d been stupid enough to believe something had happened between us. Something good. Something that would protect her from her fate.

Then again, I’d known she was stupid from the first moment she’d offered herself to me. This was just further vindication.

Eventually, she’ll learn not to trust me.

Even I learned that lesson.

Her nostrils flared as she tried to get her temper under control, swaying in the rain, naked apart from the colorful rope tight around her wrists. “Why?”

A tiny, three-letter word but one that asked so much.

“Because I have no choice.” Looking down at the keys in my hand, I flinched. They had the power to take her away from me. They could give her back her life and take mine away all in one go.

She can never go back.

She knew too much now.

She could never be trusted.

And...I want to keep her.

I'd lost everything.

Everything I had ever cared about had been snatched from me.

This time will be different.

Her keys had to go. They had to fly far away from here so she could never find them.

She cleared her throat, shifting on the spot as if nervousness siphoned through her. “Don't...don't do what I think you're going to do.”

I looked up.

Her hazel eyes were deep brown to match the darkness around us. No green shone. No light. No sweetness. Once again, she could read me. How that was possible, I didn't know. But something had alerted her to the fact I hated her keys. I loathed her car. I wanted to shove both off the cliff and watch them burn.

Walking into me, she landed her bound hands on my naked chest. I'd ripped off my shirt halfway through the hunt. It was back on the trail somewhere, wet and abandoned.

“Please, whatever your name is. I beg you. If you're so concerned that I'll tell people about you, come with me. Stay locked by my side and censor every word that comes out of my mouth. Just...*please* let me go home. If you allow me to see my mother and brother, to give them peace of mind that I'm okay...I'll-I'll...” She gulped and forced herself onward. “I'll come back with you. We'll drive back here together. I'll come and stay with you for a while. Two lonely people living in one house instead of two.”

I sneered. “You honestly expect me to believe that once you're back in society you wouldn't turn on me in a second? That you wouldn't find some way to have me arrested?”

“You have my word.”

“Your word means nothing.”

Anger fired up her cheeks. “No, *your* word means nothing. You said I’d survive another day. That you wouldn’t try to kill me.” She glanced at the mud where we’d battled, where body indents scarred the earth, leaving behind a symbol of the sex we’d shared and the misery we’d caused. “That if I did what you asked, I’d live.”

Bending over her, I held her stare and murmured, “I’ll make you a new deal. You were right when you said sex with you felt different. It could’ve been the eleven years of celibacy that made it so fucking intense, or...it could’ve just been you.”

It was definitely you.

She winced as I ran my thumb over her bottom lip. “I won’t lie and say I don’t want more. I fucking loved being inside you. I loved how you fought me back. How you fought for more. How explosive it was between us.”

“You think I’d let you sleep with me again if you continue to hold me captive?”

I shrugged. “It’s not like you’ll have a choice, is it?”

“Fuck you.”

“They’ll be plenty of that, I promise. When we get home, you have my word that you will live. I won’t lay a hand on you in violence unless you deserve it. I won’t try to kill you unless you try to run. You can live.”

Her chest rose and fell with rage. “How very kind of you, you bastard. What a fucking joke! Are you that broken that you can’t be kind to anyone? I’m not just someone you can lock away and screw whenever you have the urge, you know! I have a life. A career. I can’t believe I let you inside—”

“Hush.” I cut off her tirade. “I’m sure, in time, I’ll get used to having a pet around the house. But from now on, you’re pulling your weight. You will help me gather and prepare. You will do what I do to ensure we survive winter together. You will open your damn legs whenever I command. You will get on your knees whenever I’m hard. And, who knows, maybe in a few years, when we’ve come to know everything there is to know about each other and we’ve built up something akin to friendship, our terms of agreement can change.”

“I will *never* be your friend.”

“You’ve been more friend to me than anyone in over a decade—hating me or not.”

She choked as if that meant something to her. As if that small confession affected her. Her body might be affected but her words were cruel. “You’re insane.”

“Perhaps.” I shrugged. “Or just damaged enough to be immune to whatever charms you’re trying to use against me. How am I supposed to know if sex between us wasn’t a lie? You acted as if you wanted my cock, you moaned as I thrust deep inside you, you kissed me back...but was it real? It could’ve all been an act. You could be lying—”

“I came in your arms, you monster. I’ve never felt anything like that with *anyone*—”

“Yet you’ve never fought for your life before.” Cupping her cheek with my empty hand, I bent and kissed her softly. “It could’ve just been the adrenaline talking.”

She ripped her face away, hissing, “It wasn’t and you know it! That’s why you’re so afraid of me. Why you don’t want me to go. Admit it. You can’t stomach the thought of saying goodbye!”

I stiffened. “Careful.”

“I’m done being careful. If you don’t have the balls to admit it, I will. I’ll confess it for both of us.” Her eyes shot pure fire. “What happens to you when I touch you, huh? Do you feel it? Does it burn in your blood? Does your stomach cramp and heart fist? Has that happened with anyone else?”

Christ yes, I burn. It hurts more than I can stand.

I bared my teeth. “From what I just told you, you should know the answer to that question.”

“Fine. You were abused. I get it. I won’t belittle what you’ve lived through because that isn’t who I am, even if you are using your past to terrorize my future. But I will do whatever’s necessary to wake you the hell up!”

I scowled. “I suggest you rein in your temper.”

“And I suggest you open your damn eyes. There’s something *more* between us. We both know it. We both don’t want it. We both wish it didn’t exist, and neither one of us understands how it happened, considering we would rather kill each other than be kind. You need to let me go. You need to admit the real reason you can’t is because you’re starting to *feel* something.” Her cheeks blazed, and her nipples pebbled as her skin puckered with goosebumps.

She acted as if she was about to put a curse on me. Another one. Curses upon curses, layering me in hexes and damnation.

Clamping a hand over her mouth, I growled, “Shut up. You’re just proving your stupidity. Proving that every word out of your mouth is wrong. I should gag you as well as bind. I don’t have to listen to—”

She bit my palm, tore her face away, and spat at my feet. “Gag me, and next time I attempt to kill you, I’ll succeed. Feelings or no feelings.”

I pressed against her, skin to skin, lust to lust.

That everlasting spark between us switched from a burn to a blaze. The forest became alight with it, the rain glittered with it, my blood hissed with need and want and *yearning*.

“Your mouth will get you hurt.”

She tried to step back, colliding with the door. “Your stubbornness will get you nothing.”

“I don’t want anything.” I looked deep into her eyes, hoping my words pierced true. “*Especially* not from you. Bodily gratification is all you’re good for.”

She sniffed and tipped up her chin. “We’ll see.”

“I guess we will.” Stepping away from her, I uncurled my fingers from around her keys.

Instantly, her defiance switched to cajoling. “Wait. Don’t—”

“I look forward to living with you, Gemma Ashford.”

“No—!”

In a whip fast move, I cocked my arm and hurled her keys into the forest. I threw them toward the drop-off where new waterfalls splashed over rocks and debris, falling from sky to valley.

They made no noise as they disappeared.

Not a single sound as they condemned her as mine for evermore.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I COULDN'T MOVE.

He threw them.

He actually threw my keys away!

Eerie emptiness filled me: the iciness of shock and the hollowness of defeat.

Going home was no longer attainable. Escaping this monster had become an unsurmountable problem. A problem that included days' worth of hiking to find populated areas of the national park. The logistical nightmare of not having enough rations, correct footwear, or emergency beacons to find my way out of this cave labyrinth was a disaster.

If I didn't die with him, I might very well die running from him.

Him.

God, HIM!

Something snapped back into place within me, blasting away my shock, filling me with scalding brimstone.

How *dare* he?!

Joshua, my mother, my work, my house. *God, my house.* My lovely, lavender house that'd been waiting empty and alone since I'd left. Who would water my plants? Who would tell my online fans that I would never

post another video, never hunt another climbing route, never be the girl I'd once been?

Rain fell harder, thunder rumbling in the distance, the storm regathering above us, almost as if it sensed me burning up, knowing that if it didn't extinguish my rage I would self-combust and annihilate everything within my path.

Him.

God, how could I hate someone so much and be so drawn to them at the same time? How could I vibrate with longing and loathing?

It was sick.

It was twisted.

I despise it!

It would be the greatest pleasure to throw him off the cliff after my keys. Yet if he touched me the way he had before, I would melt. I would fight. I would beg. I would come.

Argh!

Oblivious to my inner breakdown, he raised his face to the rainy sky and sighed. "We need to get back to Fables, but I'm done being wet." Pointing at my Jeep—my trusty, wonderful Jeep that he should never have known existed—he commanded, "Get inside. We'll wait it out."

And yeah...that was all I could handle.

Bound hands or not, he would pay for stealing my final chance at freedom.

"*You bastard!*" Throwing myself at him, I wedged my shoulder into his chest and bulldozed him to the muddy ground.

He crashed into the dirt, flat on his back, gasping as his lungs struggled to drink air.

I stood over him with rope-wrapped wrists.

The temptation to run while he was incapacitated came and went.

There would be no more running. He'd made sure of that. From now on, I had to stay. I was his, whether I liked it or not. But I wouldn't make it easy for him. I wouldn't let him keep barriers and shields between us.

He felt what I did when his cock was buried inside me.

I know he did.

He'd felt that punch to the heart, that utter destruction of everything inside, and until he admitted it, we were both as good as dead.

Raising my foot, I stomped directly over his demonic heart. Pressing my toes onto his rib cage, I added all my weight so he felt a fraction of the worry and wrongness that I did. I wanted to crush his heart. To stop its tattered beating until he was reborn a gentler, kinder version of himself.

I stomped harder.

Anger roared through me as the image of him tossing my keys into the darkness replayed over and over again.

“*God!*” I twisted my foot harder into his skin, needing to hurt him. Needing him to feel as wretched and as horrified as me.

In reflex, his hands latched around my ankle. His biceps bunched with the instinct to jerk and throw me off him. But...the second he touched me, the droplets ceased falling, the forest stopped splashing, and it was just us.

Us in terrifying silence.

Silence full of intimacy, sympathy, and worst of all...*need*.

His hands on me.

His fingers tightening around the paper-thin skin of my ankle.

I swayed as the chemicals in my blood made me useless and utterly incapable of being rational.

His hips rocked up, seeking. My belly clenched, answering.

Madness.

This is madness!

We were once again infected with *madness*.

The silence ended as quickly as it'd deafened us, returning to crashing rain and growling thunder. We shivered at the same time, leaving us at the mercy of lust.

His fingers glided up my calf, electricity sizzled from his skin to mine—lightning bolts between us instead of from the sky. My knees threatened to buckle beneath the desire to fight and fornicate.

His eyes turned heavy and hooded; his head shifting in the mud as his fingers crept higher.

A moan crawled up my throat as he traced around my knee.

His bare cock thickened, smeared in mud and rain, looking as if we'd both been animals of the woods for far longer than just a night.

Our gazes locked.

My breath caught.

And I was wrong when I'd thought there was *more* between us. More was such a lackluster word. More was a pittance to the truth.

What twined around us...what turned our heartbeats into battle songs and bodies into mindless desperation was pure necromancy. Magic that had the power to restore the dead, convene with past lives, and somehow stitch forgotten souls back together again.

His stomach flexed as he slowly sat up, guiding my foot down his chest until my dirty toes pressed against his cock instead of his heart.

His teeth bit into his lower lip as he rocked his hips against my sole, rubbing his hardness against me, uncaring of the filth, turned on by my hate, knowing as well as I did that our connection made no sense.

We couldn't explain why we embraced violence instead of understanding. Why sex was easier than words. Why a single stare shared agonizing secrets that our lips would never utter.

Sitting in the mud, his long legs spread in front of him, he followed the contours of my calf with his fingers, slipping up and up, tracing from my knee to the back of my thigh.

I shivered.

I showed a weakness.

With a soft groan, he slid higher, grabbing my ass before planting both hands on either side of my hips. His fingers bruised me. His tongue licked where his teeth had indented his bottom lip, and whatever messed-up power between us destroyed everything.

He paused for a second.

A single second when his black eyes turned liquid with passion and pain. A second when he had the power to make my entire womb clench for him.

And then, he yanked me forward.

He jerked me so hard, I fell against him.

My bound hands landed on the top of his head for balance. I struggled in his imprisonment. I fought him, but he just held me firm. He nuzzled into my belly, all while I pulled his hair. He nipped my skin as I reared back.

He grunted as his mouth found my core, and I screamed for the third time.

He wasn't gentle. He wasn't shy.

His tongue licked me, then fucked me. Spearing so deep, he hit my clit with his teeth, and his nose buried into my flesh.

I couldn't stand.

He held me up as I broke.

His arms shook as he held me right where he wanted, plundering my pussy, his head bobbing between my legs, his fingernails digging cruelly into my hips.

He ate me as if he'd been there before. As if he knew our height would match, my pussy would welcome, and that I would come for him even harder than before.

His tongue drove me toward an edge that appeared without warning.

It was sharp and jagged, dangerous and full of warning.

If I fell off it—if I let him push me over the edge—what would happen at the bottom? Would I ever be able to walk again? Would I ever trust myself or believe in my inner compass of right and wrong?

“*Christ, you taste good.*” His tongue dived deeper, possessing every dark part of me. His teeth nipped, and his noises of need and desire shoved me higher, *higher*. “You taste like earth and me and every other dirty, delicious thing.”

The fact that we were filthy.

That he'd come inside me and now licked me clean.

It was disgusting. It was mind-blowing. It obliterated every boundary that ought to be maintained.

“Come.” His tongue swiped over my clit. “You owe me another.”

The first spindle of an orgasm sparked.

His tongue swept back to my entrance and fucked me faster, his hips thrusting up from the mud.

Another spool, another ripple, the final crest of something excruciating.

No

No.

The crash of a horrendous wave, the rapid unfurling of bliss.

NO!

“Stop!” I fell backward.

I threw myself at gravity's mercy and tumbled out of his control.

He grunted as my body tore from his hands and his tongue slipped from my core. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the fall, quaking with the desperate need to come.

Mud splattered me, my teeth clacked together, and I winced as I landed ungracefully on my ass with my hands bound in front of me.

I opened my eyes.

He sat there, lips glistening, chest pumping, eyes glassy with lust.

In his unguarded surprise, he looked hurt. Hurt that I'd left him at the most critical point. Lost that I'd chosen to stop instead of allowing him to claim more of my pleasure. He looked eager and young, and hell, it would be so easy to crawl over to him.

To kiss him in apology.

To shove him onto his back.

To sit on his cock spearing so hard and hungry between his legs.

To say yes to whatever was between us.

But if I did that, it was all over.

I would be admitting that I was the biggest idiot alive.

That I believed I had feelings for this monster, this kidnapper, this would-be murderer.

No.

No way.

I'm not that girl.

Scrambling to my feet, I turned my back on him and sought solace in the only place I could. Ripping open the door of my Jeep, I crawled inside and slammed it in his face.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I RAIDED HER BELONGINGS.

How could I not?

I hadn't seen anything new in over a decade. I wasn't materialistic, but even I got bored with the same fucking mansion all the time. An hour passed while I sat on the tailgate of her vehicle and systemically went through all her belongings.

Fleece blankets that were so much softer than the woolen throws in the games room. Spare set of clothes similar to the ones she'd been wearing when she'd trespassed, and miniature solar panels with cables which I assumed were for charging all the technology tucked safely in a small backpack.

Occasionally, she'd twist in the front passenger seat and peer at me suspiciously. Her eyes would follow where my hands went, and her nostrils would flare when I touched things personal to her. Her stare made my skin prickle. Her judgment made my heart skip a beat, but I didn't stop.

I didn't stop invading her space because I was pissed.

Fucking pissed, actually.

If I didn't keep my mind occupied, I might show her just *how* pissed. Just how annoyed and angry I was. How deeply frustrated.

My cock was still hard, still wanting her, still ignoring me not to care. It twitched all over again as I relived what it'd felt like to feel her pussy clenching around my tongue. She'd been on the pinnacle of coming.

I knew that.

I'd felt the pressure building inside her.

Yet she'd rather fall on her ass than let me give her pleasure. Frankly, that left a bad taste in my mouth. A shameful kind of whisper that said maybe she didn't enjoy fucking me, after all. Maybe, when she'd come around my cock, it had been a lie—just like I'd accused her of.

It reminded me of all the guests who'd used me. Who'd grunted as I fucked them and moaned as I did what they commanded. They'd all pretended to care. But when it was over, they'd snapped their fingers to summon my master and have me dragged from their sides without a backward glance.

The similarities between her and the mistresses of my past were starting to slice me apart. In so many ways, she was utterly different. She reminded me of my Fable family. She had the spark of Elise and the bravery of Sarez, but in other ways, she was still my enemy.

It didn't matter what my stupid heart whispered.

Didn't matter how much I wanted her.

Didn't matter that I couldn't get her out of my goddamn head.

Nothing would change the fact that we were stuck with each other, and it wouldn't be a pleasant experience. We already hated each other. That hate would only fester deeper the longer we survived in each other's company.

The rain continued to fall but at a gentler flow than before. The soft pitter-patter on the vehicle's roof ought to have been soothing, but it only made my temper flare hotter.

I wanted to go home.

I felt...itchy out here.

Too far from the safety of my mansion; too much distance between me and the protection Fables now offered.

Once upon a time, Fables had been my prison. I'd dreamed of running far, far away. I didn't remember why I wanted to run, and wasn't brave enough to go digging, but now? Well, now it was my domain. I'd earned it. I'd exterminated the vermin, chased out the ghosts, and I knew that place better than anywhere.

There was also another reason.

A reason I couldn't recall right now, but it had something to do with protecting those I'd saved. Something...

"No way, Kas. I'll help. We go together or—"

I shook my head, my hands dripping with warm blood. "Leave, Wes. That wasn't a suggestion. Tonight is our only chance."

"But what about Storymaker? You won't win—"

"I will."

"You won't. You just killed my guard. He'll do far worse to you. He'll—"

"He won't lay another goddamn finger on me."

"Kas...please. Think of Quell. Nyx—"

"I am thinking about them. Tonight everything changes."

"But—"

"Fuck's sake, Wes!"

I didn't have time for this shit. Wes was lucky. Thanks to his torture-cabin out here in the woods, he was one step closer to freedom. The others were still in there. Hurting.

"Fucking go, Wes! Now! The others will find you."

I ran before he could throw other complications in my face.

Complications like how the hell he was going to go anywhere in his condition.

He couldn't walk unassisted for long.

Some bastard had gone too far in his blood play last month and not provided aftercare. The wounds on Wes's leg were infected. He was starting to smell bad. Even if he got out of this place, he would probably die.

I ran harder, smearing the guard's blood on my trousers. I'd have to wash away his death before reporting to serve. I had to hide what I'd done, for just a little longer.

Storymaker would never see me coming. Would never believe that his toy of almost nine years would break his conditioning.

His guests.

His empire.

They were all about to come crashing down, bled dry by my hand, slaughtered by a broken slave.

I choked and fell forward, snatching my hair with a groan.

Christ.

I could smell Wes's sickness. I could feel the slipperiness of blood. I could hear the screams as I—

Stop!

Rocking, I dropped my arms to wrap around myself. My fingers found roughed areas of dried mud, followed the silvery tracks of old scars, pressed hard muscles and strong bones that hinted I was still alive.

Still here even if I was alone.

But...I'm not alone.

Shit.

Wrenching my head up, I locked eyes with her.

She'd twisted in her seat, her lips parted, her face a picture of worry. We didn't say a word as I calmed my breathing, sat up tall, and acted as if I hadn't just been suffocated by shitty memories that refused to die.

Memories that had no business tormenting me while I was awake.

"Are...are you okay?" she whispered. "You sounded as if something skewered you."

Something did.

Lots of things, actually.

Toys and instruments. Knives and sadistic apparatus.

Glowering at her, I ignored her concern and shoved aside a bag full of female socks, underwear, and other toiletry items that I'd been rifling through before my minor relapse.

My hands trembled and sickness still swirled, but at least the walls in my head were back in place. Plus, I had an entire car-load of distraction to investigate.

Tearing my attention off her, hating that she'd seen me slip, I spied a clear plastic box full of colorful packets.

Is that—

I fell on the box.

It is!

The creak of a seat sounded as Gemma turned to kneel instead of twist, watching me far too closely as I popped the latches and dragged the stash toward me.

Food.

Packaged food.

Holy shit, chocolate!

Hunger hit me like a cannonball, and I dived my fingers into the treasure, pulling out Snickers bars, M&Ms, Dairy Milk, Caramello, and every other Cadbury confectionery there was.

Choosing a plain bar of Dairy Milk, I tore at the purple wrapper and moaned the instant cocoa and sugar hit my tongue.

Good God, how had I survived so many years without sweets?

I looked up after my third massive bite, catching her eyes as she watched me with disdain, annoyance, and a tiny shred of curiosity. “Those are my emergency rations you’re wolfing down.”

“And they taste fucking brilliant.”

She sniffed, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Oh, then by all means, please...help yourself.”

I narrowed my eyes, not liking her tone. “You ate my food. Fair’s fair.”

“Only difference is, my food has flavor.”

“Least my food comes straight from the ground. This is probably full of preservatives.”

“So stop eating it.”

I took another giant bite. “Can’t.”

Rolling her eyes, she let our little domestic fade before asking reluctantly, “I take it you haven’t had dessert in a while?” Her reluctance came from the same place my own questions did.

Asking me things meant she’d get to know me. She’d probably start to feel pity and sympathy. Already, snippets of compassion glowed beneath her anger at my entrapment.

Right now, she was justified in hating me.

I was the villain.

I liked that role. I’d *earned* that title.

So why did her reluctance to know me make my heart kick? Why could I read her as well as she seemed to read me?

Chewing slowly, I shoved those thoughts away. This girl was a trickster. A trespasser and I would not fall into whatever new trap she’d set.

“Well?” She huffed. “How long since you’ve had sugar?”

Finishing the chocolate, I swallowed before answering, “Not for seven years or so.”

Her forehead furrowed. “So, you’re telling the truth that you haven’t seen anyone in over a decade?”

I licked my lips and reached for a bottle of water, desperately thirsty now that I’d quenched a sugar-craving I hadn’t even known I had. Once I’d drunk my fill, I replied, “Eleven years or so. I don’t exactly remember.”

You can.

You just choose not to.

She flinched and wrapped her fingers around the headrest as if my answer almost knocked her over. She glanced at the rope I'd tied around her wrists, her face revealing the battle of learning me and cursing me.

Slowly, she exhaled, her shoulders dropping from around her ears. "That must've been incredibly hard."

Snatching a new chocolate bar, I unwrapped it and shrugged. "No harder than the eight years or so before that."

Her eyebrows shot high, disappearing into her tangled, filthy hair. Hesitation filled her, but she still asked the question I expected and didn't want. "What happened in those eight years or so before?"

I gave her the only answer that mattered. "We survived."

"We?"

I shook my head and bit into the chocolate.

That was enough for story time. Enough of straying too close to the edge of then and now. It was still dark outside. I'd already slipped. If I wasn't careful, I might share too much and encourage the sludge of nightmares to find me again.

In my current state, I remembered a little more than I cared to. The vagueness of knowing crimes had been committed against me, the uneasy notions of beatings, rapes, and punishments were losing their fussy forgetfulness.

Keep your walls. Forget. Ignore.

The past receded a little, feeling less like me and more like someone who I used to know—someone I didn't even like.

That helped. That distance kept memories devoid of emotion.

It kept my life less like the sum of who I was and more like a sad, poorly directed movie that I'd barely watched and didn't care at all about the main character.

If she continued to ask, to push me closer into remembering, those walls would crumble, the movie would absorb me, and I would be the main character screaming out his agony with no one around to care.

Stuffing the rest of the chocolate into my mouth, I threw away the wrapper and reached for another.

"You're having *another* one? A third and you'll turn diabetic."

I scowled. "There's plenty. For once in my life, I'm not having to conserve." I gave her a thin smile. "Thanks to your stash, I can be a glutton."

Her huff of annoyance was loud, followed by the faint rock of the vehicle as she spun in her seat, awkwardly opened the door with the rope still imprisoning her, and leaped out.

I exploded out of the tailgate, planting myself in front of her. “And where do you think you’re going?” Soft rain slicked us, gracing her nakedness with goosebumps.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re hard work?” Pushing me out of the way, she opened the passenger back door. “You’re eating my food, idiot. I’m starving. I’m not exactly going to let you have a car picnic without me.” Scrambling into the back, she crawled with her hands together, unashamedly with her ass in the air and flashes of her pussy making me rock fucking hard until she leaned against the opposite side of the Jeep.

The back seats had been laid flat, leaving the rear with more room for gear and possibly a sleeping space. Her boxes of supplies dotted like life-giving islands in a sea of scratchy carpeting.

Tilting her head at me, still standing in the rain with my cock standing to attention, she asked sickly sweet, “Enjoying your shower, dearest? You’ve had your dinner and now getting ready for bed?”

I gave her the finger, aware chocolate smeared my fingerprints. “Anyone ever tell *you* that you’re a pain in the ass?”

“Yes. Regularly.” She flashed a pained smile. “Joshua.”

Jealousy heaved through me. “And who the hell is Joshua? Boyfriend?” I searched her left hand even though I knew there was no ring there. I’d noticed when she’d been unconscious within a few minutes of meeting her.

She wasn’t bound to another, which made it scarily easy to bind her to me.

Wiping her arms free from the fine haze of rain, she sighed as if my temper grated on her nerves. “You’ve strangled me, hunted me, fucked me, and stolen my food, yet you haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, have you?” Her eyes shot up, locking me in place.

My forehead furrowed. My memory knocked to deliver things she’d told me in the past. Things that were now firmly locked behind a door I could not, would not open.

Something about a brother, perhaps?

Bracing myself, I shrugged as if I didn’t care and slammed the car door shut. Marching back to the tailgate, I hopped inside, shoved away the mess I’d made, and adopted her position.

Back against the vehicle, legs spread out in front.

Two naked, dirty people who despised each other, sharing a respite from the rain with chocolate.

The only lie in that sentence was I didn't think I despised her.

I fucking *hungered* for her.

Licking her lips, she reached for the box full of candy, managing to fend for herself despite her wrists roped together. Her breasts swelled to the side as she rummaged for a Snickers bar. Her nipples hard from the chill in the air, her hair sticking to her stunning skin.

And fuck, I suddenly no longer wanted chocolate.

My balls ached, and my cock twitched, demanding some sort of friction. Without thinking, I dropped my eyes to it, fisting my hands so they wouldn't get any ideas of touching it.

The usual faint marks from my past had been replaced with bright wounds from our fight. Indents of her nails and bruises forming at the bottom of my shaft blazed in the gloom.

It ought to have summoned my temper. To have me cursing her very presence.

Instead, it granted a strange kind of kinship. She might not wear anyone's ring. She might be tied in my rope. But in some sick way, I now belonged to her. She'd been the first in a decade to brand me. And, for the first time, seeing her punishment still embedded in my flesh filled me with lust instead of horror.

"I'm sorry...by the way."

Her soft voice wrenched my head up. Her hazel stare on my cock only made my belly clench harder.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, unwrapping her chosen meal and taking a huge bite.

Christ, yes, it hurts.

Hurts for you, goddammit.

"No," I snapped.

"To be fair, I wouldn't have had to hurt you if you didn't have such a fascination with wrapping your fingers around my throat."

"If you stopped being such a menace, perhaps I'd stop trying to kill you."

"I'm the menace?" She pointed at herself with the half-eaten Snickers. "I think if others were watching this twisted relationship of ours, they would disagree."

“If others were watching, I’d tear out their eyes for seeing you bare.” I dragged my gaze down her mud-filthy beauty. “I’m debating between torturing myself watching you eat that chocolate bar or demanding you get on your knees.”

She inhaled sharply. Her hands shook, wrapped around her chocolate.

The small space of the car switched from awareness into lust-laced senselessness. The air was tiny fireworks, the oxygen we breathed electricity, and the carbon dioxide we exhaled a drug slowly drowning us.

Ever so slowly, she took another bite.

Her tongue licked her lips, her teeth bit down, her throat worked as she chewed.

And I almost came.

I *throbbed*, wanting inside her mouth, wanting to be the chocolate bar as she swallowed and devoured.

Turned out, giving a woman to a sexually repressed, starving man was not a good idea.

Snatching the half-full water bottle I’d drank from, I leaped from the vehicle and into the rain.

“What are you—?” Her confused question halted as I tipped the bottle over my cock and gritted my teeth against the grotesque sensation of touching myself.

I performed a perfunctory cleaning. That was all. Wrapping my hand around my hardness, washing away the dirt and mud from rolling around in the storm.

A crest of sickness tried to push up through my guts, shoving aside cocoa and sugar, replacing good with bad, tainting everything with sordid reminders.

I tore my hand away, tipping the rest of the bottle over my length, letting droplets trail to my balls.

The second I was clean, I tossed the bottle to the side, crawled into the tailgate, and didn’t stop until I kneeled before her. Kneeled with trembling muscles and rapid heartbeats. Kneeled with desperation and a shitload of pain.

I kneeled before her.

Now, it’s her turn.

My voice had gotten lost in the darkness inside me, echoing through my chest as I growled, “Kneel.”

She froze. Her chocolate bar fell from her bound hands. “No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you.”

I merely shook my head. “You’re wrong. I’m already inside you.”

She gasped.

For the longest second, we stared at each other. I physically felt as if her eyes were chains, slinking around me, holding me immobile as locks snapped into place. Padlocks with no keys, chains with no weaknesses, a cage of knots and fastenings that would never be undone.

I couldn’t catch a breath as heat filled my heart.

A heat filled with knowing that she was right about our connection. That it burned bright, despite our war. That it was more powerful than the both of us.

The longer we stayed together, the harder it would be to undo. Even now, pieces of me were being erased—for good this time, not just behind a wall I hastily erected. It erased fragments of the cruelty inside me, the distrust, the violence, the heavily conditioned boy who knew death better than he knew living.

For a single heartbeat, everything felt *right*.

Easy.

Peaceful.

God...peace.

She gave me peace after a lifetime of distress.

She gave me the silence I sought every second that I was awake. I didn’t need to run around the valley. I didn’t need to absorb myself in a book. I didn’t need to hide from the mania inside my mind.

All I had to do was *look* at her.

Be with her.

Sink inside her.

A sudden pain struck me in the temples, making me wince. My vision blacked out for a second, the weird vertigo I’d suffered from her striking me with the shovel returning.

The worst headache I’d ever felt came then faded, leaving me swaying and turned upside down.

What...what had I been thinking about?

I’d been...happy.

Something had made happiness grow in my heart.

But it was fading.

Popping.

Turning black and cold.

“Hey...are you alright?” Her touch landed on my thigh. A hesitant, wary touch from someone who recognized the man in front of her wasn’t entirely sane. “You blacked out for a second—”

“You concussed me,” I bit out. “I’ve had a headache ever since you hit me.”

She stiffened and turned prickly. “I wouldn’t have had to hit you if—” Inhaling hard, she forced herself to stay kind, giving me things I didn’t deserve. “Maybe sit back down. Have another chocolate—”

“Quiet.”

There was magic in this woman. Viperish magic that’d somehow twined around me while we’d been sitting in this car. I didn’t know how she’d done it, but she’d made me soft, made me *vulnerable*.

Never again.

Never again would I be taken advantage of.

She needed to be reminded of that.

Immediately.

Shutting my heart down, embracing the man I’d become after losing everything, I snarled, “Are you deliberately disobeying me? I said, *kneel*.” Grabbing the rope around her wrists, I jerked her forward.

“What? Stop! I was trying to help you—”

“I don’t need your help. I need your body. I need you to *obey*.”

“I’ll never obey a madman.”

I chuckled as she tumbled to the side. “I’m not mad, Gemma Ashford.” I manhandled her hips, twisting her until she landed on all fours. “I’m just not available for others to use anymore.”

“I’m not using you, you monster. You’re the one using *me*!”

“And you’re even more delicious than chocolate.”

I drank in the sight of her, falling forward onto her elbows, wrists locked together, her bare ass beckoning me. Her pussy still glistened from when I’d eaten her in the rain. The orgasms she’d denied both of us would still be there, waiting for me to finish.

She would give that to me.

It’s mine.

I ran a fingertip down her spine.

She quivered, a pained groan spilling from her lips. “Please...”

Her plea did terrible things to me.

I’d never wanted anyone so badly.

It gave me a dose of the power I’d briefly tasted.

“Tell me what you want.”

She scoffed. “What I *want* is the right to say no.”

“Truly?” Gently, ever so gently, I ran my fingers down the crack in her ass.

She shot forward, trying to get away. “Yes, truly!”

“Why do you want to say no to something you yourself admitted is out of our control?” Down, down, I slid my touch to her pussy, rubbing the wetness around her folds, dipping lower to her clit. “Doesn’t it burn when I touch you? Doesn’t your belly cramp and body clench for more?”

“Don’t throw my words back at me,” she groaned. Her back bowed. Her head fell forward, pressing against the rough carpet of the car.

“Please...don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t admit that I can’t breathe without wanting to fuck you? Don’t confess that you’re doing things to me that I can’t seem to stop? Doesn’t that make you happy? Knowing that you’re not the only one screwed up by all of this?”

“God, you’re messing with my mind.”

“And you’re messing with mine.” I shook my head as the fog and unbalance from being struck in the skull returned. I felt strange. Loose. Burning up. “You’ve drawn my blood and bruised my bones, and you dare try to say no to me?”

“Fair’s fair.” She gasped as I swept my finger back to her entrance, dipping inside to my first knuckle. “Holy—”

“Fair’s fair?” I laughed coldly. “Nothing’s fair about this. You weren’t supposed to trespass on my fucking heart.”

Christ, what the hell?

The fog was crushing me, stealing control of my thoughts and mouth.

She shivered. “Is-is that true? Am I—”

“You’re mine. That’s all you need to know.”

“I belong to no one but me.”

“Yet here you are, bound, spread, dripping for my cock.”

“Don’t flatter—” she cried out as I pulsed my finger, teasing her “—yourself. My wetness doesn’t mean I want you.”

“Are you so sure about that?” I bent and licked my way around her hipbone, keeping my finger shallow in her pussy, making her crave, causing her inner muscles to flutter with greed.

“If you weren’t trapped, would you really kick me away? Knowing how good it feels when I fuck you? Knowing that I’ll pleasure you, worship you, make you come harder than you’ve ever come before?”

“This isn’t happening,” she moaned.

“I can assure you that it is.” I drove my finger in to the second knuckle, pulsing in her heat. “You’re soaking.”

“Oh, God.” Her entire body snapped up, then folded forward.

Her pussy clenched around my finger, the shockwave traveling through my hand, up my forearm, into my bloodstream, and directly to my cock.

I thickened to unbearable levels. Wetness oozed out the tip, starving for her.

Withdrawing my finger, I rubbed her clit again. “You want me.”

“You’re an asshole,” she moaned again, her words almost slurring.

“Asshole, huh?” Dipping my finger back into her pussy, this time, I didn’t stop at the first knuckle. I drove it inside her. Pushing, diving, feeding her the entire length.

Her reaction almost made me come.

Her hips shot backward, her knees slid wider, her back lowered until her ass jutted into the air. “Fuck you.” The curse came out more like a beseech.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.” My mouth watered, and my belly hungered. Concussion or not, this woman was my medicine and disease all in one.

“Tell me to mount you,” I grunted. “Tell me how much you want me to fill you.”

Her head snapped left and right, clinging to rationality all while the electricity in the vehicle incinerated it. “*Never.*”

“Say it.” I fucked her with my finger.

She couldn’t control her reaction. Her desire. “...*No.*”

She wanted me, didn’t she? She felt this too. Her trembles couldn’t be faked. Her wetness couldn’t be hidden.

Stop lying to me!

I need to believe in this. Believe in something.

“Tell me to fuck you.”

“I’m telling you no!”

My head swam. How could she deny us after the mutual destruction outside? She'd kissed me back. She'd come on me. She'd let me into places inside her that no one else ever had before.

I needed back in there.

I needed to feel that peace.

To hear it wasn't a lie even while I knew it was too good to be true.

Her continued denials clawed deep tracks through my heart. A heart that I'd done my best to patch up with glue for a decade. Scorn and hate combined made the perfect bandage against loss and loneliness.

The only problem was, she seemed to be a solvent that gave me nowhere to fucking hide.

Tearing out my finger, I joined two together and speared them into her.

"Tell me you need me as much as I need you."

"Holy *shit*—" She rocked on my penetration, her pussy greedy for more.

"Tell me!"

"I can't!"

"*Why?*"

"Because you're not just taking my body, you're taking my damn soul!"

I froze.

I broke.

I couldn't breathe. "It's just sex."

"It's not, and you know it!"

It's not.

I know it.

I fucking know it.

How had this happened in one night?

This had gone too far. This was pushing me toward an edge I couldn't survive.

The haze came again, thick and cloying, an eraser that I'd perfected over eleven years of selective amnesia.

Lies.

All lies.

Sex was just sex. Sex was power. Sex was pain.

Sex was a weapon.

The only weapon I know.

"It's just chemistry. Nothing more." I touched her again, tracing her slickness. "I'm not going to stop."

She groaned into the vehicle's carpet. "You're destroying both of us."

"Am I?" I used my thumb on her clit, rubbing in time to the thrusting of my fingers. "Is it really destruction when we both know you want me to shove my cock inside you and make you come all over me?"

Her whimper almost made me buckle. Almost made my walls shatter and throw me at the mercy of my mind. Almost made that softness, that *happiness*, that she'd conjured shine light on all my nightmarish pieces.

"Tell me your name," she whimpered. "Tell me, and maybe you can have me."

"My name doesn't matter."

"It matters." She moaned again as I continued to touch her, tease her.

My head pounded, the haziness returning like clouds in my valley. I felt wrong. I felt very wrong.

And she was the cure to all my wrongness.

I couldn't wait.

I needed this.

Need her to fix me.

"We have a new agreement, remember?" Withdrawing my fingers, I clamped both hands on her inner thighs, spread her legs, then rose behind her. "I won't try to kill you if you do what I command."

She trembled. "Don't you even dare—" she hissed, looking over her shoulder, her hair chaos and eyes brutal. "If you do this. If you take me while I can't fight you back, I'll-I'll—"

"Scream?" I mounted her.

I thrust deep, deep inside her. I let go of all the cages and prisons I'd erected and for a single breath, allowed myself to be free.

Free to feel her, feel myself, feel us, feel the blissful, rightful, fateful link that was conjured from nowhere.

It was heaven.

It was hell.

Her scream was a mixture of hate and heat. A female in need, torn apart by lust, naked in front of her own basic desires.

She was wrong that she couldn't fight me. That with her wrists tied and hips high, she had no way to wage war. She managed to fight me better than anyone as her ass soared back, forcing every last inch of me inside her.

She met my insanity with her own.

Her legs widened until her knees slipped to the sides, dragging me down with her. Flat on her belly, it gave her nowhere to go, no other way free but to buck against me, to scream and curse, to lose herself in the dementia we'd caused.

I fucked her.

She fucked me.

We turned as wild as we had in the storm.

Grasping her nape, I reared up and rutted into her.

The tension in my balls, the bruises she'd caused, and the wounds she'd imprinted all surged with speed and recklessness.

I wanted to come.

As fast as possible.

I needed out of this woman, away from this lust. I needed to remember how to *breathe*.

"I truly hate you," she groaned as she matched my manic pace.

"I feel"—thrust, thrust, fucking *thrust*—"the same way."

"*Liar!*" she hissed, rocking her hips into the coarse vehicle carpet, her moans tattered as I drove harder into her.

Liar?

Who was the liar?

Life itself?

Fate?

Hope?

Definitely hope.

I curled my fingers around the back of her neck and fucked with single-mindedness. I didn't think about her well-being—no one had ever thought of mine. I wrung out my pleasure from her body, not caring if she came with me or not.

Anger born from all the shit in my past washed over me.

It was hot and black and toxic.

I lost sight of the girl I was with. The girl called Gemma who had strength and safety in her veins, and instead saw every badness, sadness, and pain I'd endured.

Every woman and man who'd thought they'd owned me.

No.

Not anymore.

My anger switched to violence.

My pace switched from manic to murderous.

“God. Oh, *God*. Oh my...*shiiiiitt*.” The girl beneath me detonated.

Her pussy fisted me, milked me, rippled and stroked.

She shoved me out of the darkness and into the splintering light.

“Oh, *fuuuuck*—” My stomach tightened, my balls pulled up, and an orgasm gathered, full of reminders that every release since I was twelve had been blank and infertile. Courtesy of the Storymaker. My master. My hell.

On the cusp of bliss, memories tried to steal me.

My mind flickered with Fables, with my family, with the blood-soaked end that I’d reaped.

I was falling, losing, tumbling back into the past.

But then...just before I turned rogue and killed everything breathing around me, the girl who forgave me for things that should never be forgiven, moved.

Her head twisted to the side. Her lips kissed my fist that was planted on the floor by her cheek.

I had no idea why she’d kissed me. Why she’d dropped her guard. Why she’d done something so...*nice* when I was being so cruel.

Her gentleness, her sweetness, her wonderful, courageous forgiveness.

It broke me.

It shoved me over the edge into a splintering, shattering release.

I punched into her, over and over, jerking and grunting as pulses of heat shot up my cock and into her.

Again and again.

Eradicating some of the filth from me to her.

Christening her into my twisted world.

Ensuring what I said was true.

She was mine.

Not just for tonight.

Not just for tomorrow.

But for every single day of my sorry existence.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I HAD A DREAM.

A dream where soft fingers trailed through my hair, gentle kisses pressed on my temples, and a warm blanket cocooned my naked body.

I dreamed those soft fingers and gentle kisses gathered me close and held me tight, all while I slipped from aware to unaware.

Whispers invaded the night. Whispers that weren't just whispers. Whispers that had the power to conjure images in my head, paint a story I never wanted to see, and force me to endure a different kind of life to my blessed one.

There was a boy. Lots of boys. There was a girl. Lots of girls. They all lived in a gilded prison and were only allowed out to play when monsters paid for their company.

They slept with joined hands. They ate with bare fingers. Their tears and blood had blended so often, they were no longer just one but *all*.

Family.

Married by circumstance, adopted by survival, and forged with unbreakable bonds.

My dream swirled with blacks and grays, revealing a circle of children, waxy skinned and haunted eyed, clinging to each other as the door opened to

select another for playtime.

No.

I didn't want to see.

I didn't want to know.

This wasn't a dream but a nightmare.

"I'll go in your place," a boy murmured. A boy with long dark hair and darker eyes. "I'll protect you."

I thrashed. I tried to scream. Didn't the boy know not to offer? Not to sacrifice himself to the monster?

Don't!

The boy squeezed the other boy's hand, looking once at his family of broken members.

And then, he walked out the door.

Blood cascaded from the ceiling.

No, stop!

Children's screams filled my ears.

Stop!

I couldn't take the agony.

I threw myself against the wall of sleep.

"No!" I woke up gasping.

For a moment, I was lost.

My bearings were wrong; my location made no sense.

Then I recognized the ceiling of my trusty Jeep, the stain from an old owner on the door panel, the comforting scent of adventure and pine air freshener.

Shoving myself upright, a blanket tumbled from my shoulders as I switched from lying to sitting. Snatching the vibrant orange fleece that I packed for emergencies—that'd somehow ended up draped over my nakedness—I sucked in another breath.

My captor sat on the other side of the Jeep, his feet planted, knees up, elbows dangling with hands linked in the air. His position was exposing. I saw right between his legs. I studied his scarred cock, the soft sack of his useless testicles, the hair of a man who hadn't shaved in years.

For a horrible heartbeat, I forgot the past few days. My mind erased the imprisonment, the erotic servitude, the mind-bending sex in the rain. All I saw was a man hiding from a new dawn in my car. I saw him without prior

opinions and assessed him as a stranger instead of my enemy, and my arms *ached* to wrap around him.

I wanted to fill the hollowness in his eyes with happiness. I wanted to be the reason those stern lips smiled. I wanted to hear him laugh. To experience joy and peace because I honestly didn't think he'd ever been acquainted.

You kissed his hand last night.

You let him into more than just your body, Gem.

I flinched, recalling my moment of weakness. The overwhelming rightness of him inside me, smothering me with his body, driving into me as if I was the only thing that would save him.

Leaning forward, he narrowed his gaze, his attention falling to my exposed breasts.

Heat ignited between us. Familiar need and unfamiliar connection.

In my hazy state between sleep and awake, I gasped in shock.

He's the man I described on that stupid online dating profile.

Looking for: A man who's dominant and dangerous. A man who knows how to grant pleasure. A man who knows how to cook and clean. A man who...is a man. A man who will sweep me off my feet but allow me to fly free, all while he makes me come alive beneath his tongue.

Too bad he's ripped off my wings and stuffed me in a cage instead.

If our circumstances were different—if we'd met in normal ways—I suspected I would *never* have let him go. I would've fallen head over heels. I would've threaded my fortune and future with his without a backward glance.

Something inside me knew that.

It was terrifyingly black and white.

I didn't know why I knew but whenever I looked at him, everyone else paled. First, it'd been because he threatened my life. Now, it was because he threatened *everything*.

He was pain.

Pain in my heart, my soul, the very core of my common sense.

He stiffened as we stared at each other, waiting for someone to strike.

Distrust and unease laced between us, just as strong as our chemistry and desire.

Just because he rivalled any other male I'd met, didn't mean I willingly accepted the strangeness happening between us.

I still wanted to run.

I would still do everything in my power to be free.

“Did you sleep?” I tipped up my chin, my hands balled in the fleece. If our eyes weren’t locked, I would’ve missed the tightening of his shoulders. The flare of his nostrils. The flicker of fear in his soul.

In this instance, he wasn’t so easy to read. He was cryptic and coarse, throwing a question back instead of an answer. “Do you always wake so violently?”

I swallowed back my nightmare. He already knew too much about me. He didn’t need to know my mind had spun stories, inserting this scarred, angry man into the agonising role of a child beaten into servitude. “Only when I’m in the company of my jailer.”

His fingers linked tighter together between his legs. “I think I’m more than just your jailer at this point.” His gaze once again dipped down my body, his pupils hot with possession.

I was warm now the sun had risen, but in a flash of defiance, I lifted the blanket to cover my breasts. A cover I didn’t have when I first went to sleep. “You gave me a blanket. You wrapped me up.” I tilted my head. “You stroked my hair and kissed my—”

“You’re mistaken.” Unfolding his legs, he shoved away the empty chocolate wrappers that we’d devoured after he’d taken me on my belly and shot out the tailgate. Sun dappled his bare skin, dancing on silver scars, highlighting sinew and strength.

He was a beautiful man, even with his flaws.

He was rugged and untamed and far too similar to the bears and bobcats that prowled these parks. All he needed were claws and sharp teeth.

Stretching, he bent backward then dropped his hands to rake through his shaggy hair. Without looking back at me, he strode to the trees by the faded ribbon that’d survived the storm and snatched his damp pants from the branches.

Keeping his back to me, he went to put them on but swayed to the side. Stumbling, he tapped the side of his head with his palm as if trying to tune up a fuzzy frequency in his brain. Shaking his head, he tried again, slipping one leg then the other into the rain-wet clothing.

Hoisting them up, he turned and swayed again, his lips twisted and forehead furrowed.

Maybe he’s right that I concussed him.

Was that the reason he hadn’t slept beside me? Why I had the feeling he’d stayed watch all night, whispering to me, revealing pieces of himself

that he never would while I was awake?

Buttoning up the torn, filthy slacks, he returned to the tailgate and cleared his throat. "Get up. Time to go home."

"My home is hours away. It's in a quaint little suburb, and my front lawn needs a serious mow. If we're going there, I'll need those keys you threw away last night." I swiveled to sit on my knees, rolling my sore wrists still bound with my climbing rope. "Is that the home you speak of?"

"Let me rephrase." He gave me a mocking smirk. "Let's go back to *my* home. I need to get back."

"Why? Is someone missing you?"

"I have chores."

"Chores?" I laughed quietly. "I've seen how clean you keep that house, but surely, dust doesn't warrant you bolting back in a hurry."

He grimaced with annoyance. "I preferred you when you were sleeping."

"And I preferred you when you were being gentle. When you kissed my cheek and whispered to me, all while you *thought* I was sleeping."

"You *were* sleeping." He scowled. "You dreamed it all."

"If I dreamed everything, why do I have a blanket covering me?"

"You grabbed it yourself."

"And you know that how?"

He crossed his arms over his bare chest. "Unlike you, I didn't close my eyes. I didn't sleep."

I stilled. "Not even a cat nap? You must be exhausted." Come to think of it, shadows did etch under his eyes, darkening his skin and revealing fine lines.

"I'll sleep when we're home."

"Why don't you sleep now, before we start the long journey back?"

His jaw clenched as his temper spiked. "Is this you nagging me out of concern or just to piss me off?"

"Neither. I just want to know why you can't sleep."

"I *can* sleep."

"Then why didn't you?"

He dropped his arms and balled his hands. "Christ, if this is what it's going to be like living with you, I'm leaning toward the gag idea."

"Gag me, and you'll have a serious problem." Rage heated my blood. "If you won't tell me your name, at least tell me something. You've been inside

me twice. You've taken it upon yourself to own my freedom. Why can't you sleep—"

"I need the valley, alright? I need my dorm—" He choked and cut himself off. "Just get the hell out of bed. I want to go. *Now.*"

My back prickled at his anger. I should stop. I shouldn't push him. But something urged me to keep nettling him. To nudge and nudge until he snapped and revealed something I could use to my benefit. "I'm rather enjoying our little camp. Let's stay another day."

"No," he growled.

"Why?" I raised my eyebrows. "Think there's someone worse than you out here?"

He stiffened. His chest rose and fell. I expected him to scoff and slap my question away. To perhaps grab me from the Jeep and force me to walk where he commanded. Instead, his eyes went cold, and his voice turned almost dead. "There's *always* someone worse than me."

I sucked in a breath, aware I'd poked a predator who might not have sharp teeth or claws but could devour me all the same. I felt a small pang of guilt. I'd gleaned enough to know his past was not a pretty one. He'd survived something I couldn't begin to imagine. Yet his life was not my life, and my life was currently in jeopardy because of him.

Keeping eye contact, I let truth slip into my murmur, "Not from where I'm standing."

He flinched, then tossed me a savage sneer. "If you're so aware of what I can do to you, then perhaps you should do what I say." Throwing me the bag holding my spare clothes, he snarled, "Get dressed."

Clutching the bag, I didn't let it go. "What happened last night?"

"What?" His eyes jerked to mine. "I fucked you. Twice. You came. Twice. That's all—"

"Still determined not to acknowledge it, huh?" Standing on my knees, I let the blanket fall away, revealing every inch of me. Dried mud, pebbled nipples, and a stupid core that never seemed to stop wanting him.

He sucked in a breath as I crawled awkwardly through the remains of our Jeep picnic and swung my legs off the edge of the tailgate.

My heart raced as that undeniable attraction once again infected us with madness as I dropped to the ground and stood nude before him.

He hissed low in his chest as I looked down, locking onto his rapidly hardening cock.

Last night...*God, last night.*

I shivered as fragments of thunder, lightning, thrusting, and coming all rained down on me. When he'd taken me against my will, I should've been appalled. I should've vowed to end his life the moment I had the chance. Instead, I'd spread my legs like a hussy and let him take everything.

I'd barely been able to breathe after I'd come. Barely able to think. And then, he'd gone and scooped me up, positioned me gently against the side of the Jeep, placed a fresh water bottle in my hands, a new Snickers bar, and cupped my cheeks with his large calloused fingers.

And he'd just held me.

Held me as if I'd crushed his heart, smashed his world, and set fire to all the ruins.

We were silent.

Still.

Suffering.

His cock had been wet from my orgasm, his tip still oozing with his. The night had thickened until the entire world seemed to hold its breath. Waiting for...*something*. Waiting for our games to end and fate to set us free.

I'd waited for him to kiss me.

To tumble off the ledge he'd shoved me off and shatter at the bottom beside me.

I waited and wanted and wished harder than I had for anything.

But then, the moment was over, and he'd swallowed hard, pulling away as if it physically hurt him to sit in the dark, wordless and full of warning.

"Offering yourself to me again so soon, Gemma Ashford?" he murmured, stepping into me, grazing my nipples with his heated chest.

We shuddered in equal measure.

Fire sprung between us, tiny flames licking across our skin and slithering through our ribs to our messed-up hearts.

My eyes struggled to focus as I drowned in his dark stare. Even in the sunlight, I couldn't tell what color his gaze was. Not black, not brown, not dark blue or green. They were colorless in their shadows.

His hand came up and cupped my breast, rolling my nipple with talented fingers. "Get dressed before I string you to a tree and feast."

I did my best to hide how he affected me. "I can't dress." Raising my bound wrists, I smiled coldly. "Not unless you untie me."

He cocked his head, dropping his hand from my breast and taking a step back. “There won’t be a day in your future that you won’t be tethered to me. I suggest you get used to it.”

“Then I suggest you get used to waiting on me hand and foot, seeing as I won’t be able to do a single thing for myself.”

Plucking the dangling rope, he pulled the leash so I tripped into him. “If anyone is going to be the slave in this scenario, it’s you.” His eyes glittered with something unreadable. “And don’t worry. Tying your wrists is just a temporary measure. I have something far more suitable back home.”

Anger swelled within me. Anger at myself and him. I’d let sex cloud my mind. I’d allowed softness given in sleep and slivers of kindness in the dark to conveniently forget our dynamics had not changed.

He still intended on keeping me a prisoner.

I still intended to escape.

And no matter how skilled I thought I was at seduction, I hadn’t been successful at changing his mind.

With sudden swiftness, he pushed me to the side, grabbed the bag of spare clothes, and yanked out a pair of merlot-colored leggings. Bending, he grabbed my left foot and shoved them up my leg, then repeated with my right. He pulled them up matter-of-factly as if he’d dressed another once upon a time.

Not saying a word, he fumbled at the knot holding my hands together and unwound the rope just long enough to shove my arms into a T-shirt with my local climbing gym’s logo on the breasts, then drape me in a gray windbreaker.

I’d be too hot, but at least I was covered.

With biting fingers, he pulled my wrists back together, wrapped the rope, knotted my imprisonment, and pushed me away.

He didn’t even bother watching me to see if I’d stay put, too focused on leaving camp immediately. With hurried hands, he tipped out my backpack containing my backup laptop, extra video recorder, and spare hard drive.

“Hey!” I darted forward. “Be gentle with that.”

“You won’t be needing it.” Elbowing me away, he scooped up the rest of the chocolate, candy, packet pastas, and water bottles and stuffed them into the bag. With a glower, he hoisted the stash onto his bare shoulders, fisted the rope keeping me prisoner, then dragged me away from my Jeep.

Away from my freedom.

Away from any hope of seeing my family and house again.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WHAT THE FUCK HAD I been thinking?

Touching her while she was asleep?

Allowing myself to kiss her? Permitting that gooey, fluttery feeling to infect my chest?

The minute she'd fallen asleep, all my hate and hurting had vanished.

I'd frozen in disbelief that she'd willingly fallen unconscious in my presence.

Me?

The guy who'd trapped her, used her, and promised a lifetime of ownership.

Not even my Fable family had been so trusting with each other.

Her vulnerability carved giant holes inside my heart. I'd felt...protective toward her. My entire purpose on earth was no longer about me, but her. My job was to shelter her during the night, safeguard her from monsters, and ensure she remained safe, warm, and comforted.

Christ, could I be any more of an idiot!

Stalking ahead, I tugged the rope binding her to me.

For the past five hours, we hadn't said a word to one another. We'd trekked through the still damp forest, following the trail that we'd run the night before.

It seemed we were both content to ignore one another.

I didn't look back.

I couldn't look back.

If I looked at her again, I'd suffer the same agonizing sensation in my gut of spilling secrets she would never be worthy of.

I wanted her to ask more questions. I wanted—

You don't have a clue what you want.

You buried that part of yourself years ago.

The sun beat down on us, burning my bare chest and making her moan of heatstroke behind me. Occasionally, I'd stop and throw her a bottle of water and a chocolate bar, but apart from that interaction, I'd put a solid brick wall between us.

When we returned to Fables, she was going back to the basement.

She would be allowed out during the day to help me gather supplies for winter, but she would stay in the dark at night. She would learn her place.

She will accept that whatever happened between us last night was a mistake and one that will never be repeated.

When I took her again, it would be on my terms. My rules.

Sex only.

Nothing else.

I would not permit the cracks in my psyche to continue.

Another hour passed.

I kept my attention on the tracks we'd left behind last night, following the valley ridgeline that was so overgrown in places it looked just like part of the woods. Birds followed us as we stirred up insects. Animals scurried away from our footfalls.

Morning turned to afternoon, and my exhausted body and mind began to falter.

I'd told her the truth that I couldn't sleep anywhere but in my single bed in the dormitory. That lesson had been drilled into me until it was not only a quirk I'd adopted but a law I had to follow.

Each time I'd fallen asleep in a guest's bed, I'd woken to worst horrors than what'd been done to me while I'd been awake. I'd been sodomized in my sleep. Sliced in my dreams.

I'd woken with someone's lips on mine and hands pawing at places I couldn't think of.

Never again would I let myself be so vulnerable with someone.

Not even her.

Another hour passed, and my head continued to feel heavy and imbalanced. My vision played tricks, bouncing over leaves and refusing to focus. Trees blurred, their leaves turning into a rainbow kaleidoscope. Autumn gold with summer green, swirling and blending until the air danced with foliage filaments.

The swelling on my forehead from her shovel strike had receded a little, but the symptoms of a concussion still remained. I'd had a few concussions before from overzealous guests. I'd read, in one of the medical texts in the library, that too many concussions could be bad for the brain.

Perhaps, thanks to her, I'd reached my quota and this time, I wouldn't recover.

Maybe I was taking her back to be my doctor instead of my prisoner.

My jaw clenched.

The thought of any weakness around her made my stomach churn with acid.

That could never happen.

As we got closer to my valley, the faint ringing in my ears that'd been in the background since yesterday grew louder. It buzzed like angry wasps, making a wave of nausea crawl up my throat.

I needed sleep.

I needed safety.

I'll rest when we're home.

As I pushed the final mile, my knees almost buckled as the crisscrossed ceiling of my home came into view. From here, it was a carpet of colorful leaves, hiding the mansion that I had such a complicated relationship with.

I stopped.

I sucked in a breath.

For a second, I felt that strange kind of warmth from last night. It filled my heart with contentment. A faint version of happiness.

I was home.

I was keeping her.

I'm not alone any longer.

Turning, I braced myself to lock eyes with her.

To trip like I did each time I dared look at her.

To continue the inner destruction of my soul.

It was the last thing I remembered.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE THING ABOUT LIVING on the edge of safety and sin was...it made you do things you never thought possible. It pushed you into situations you never imagined. It opened up pieces of yourself you weren't acquainted with, revealing just how cutthroat you could be.

The man I'd slept with, fought with, and ultimately couldn't decide if I hated or hungered for stalked ahead of me.

His nude back rippled with power, his long legs striding confidently over tree roots. He was in his element out here. A wild creature that would rather take on a bear than drop his shields and be nice to me.

For most of the day, we didn't say a word. Not a single look. Not a second of connection.

I needed that distance.

I needed time away from his dangerous distractions.

But with time came clear headedness. Shame too. And utter disbelief in what I'd done.

I'd chosen to see the suffering buried within him instead of the malice glittering in his every stare.

I'd once again romanticized a hostage situation, and I was appalled with myself.

What would Josh say?

What would my online fans think if I shared this crazy part of my life?

They'd tell you to run.

As we trudged back to the valley, my mind raced.

He gave me too many hours of silence.

Too many moments to go over every interaction, every mistake, every triumph.

The things I'd done with him, the domination over my body, the softening of my heart, it all began to darken. A patina of mortification coated everything, leaving my mouth sour and mind full of scorn.

What was I *thinking*?

Had I honestly, willingly kissed him?

Had I truly come so hard, stars literally exploded behind my eyelids?

Stupid, *stupid* girl.

Whatever physical reaction I'd had to him would never negate the truth of the situation.

I'm his prisoner.

And I have an obligation to fight.

I couldn't permit someone—a man who fully expected me to keep my legs open and mouth closed for however long we lived together—to have such power over me.

It just wasn't doable. Not possible.

Regardless of the scant few moments of friendship. Regardless of the fire that burned whenever we touched. Thanks to our insidious connection, every moment in his company threatened to undermine my entire self-worth all because it made me want to protect what was left of his.

No.

I'd always been a caring person. I doted on my brother. I loved my mother even when she didn't particularly love me. I spoke to my dead father at the top of every boulder I scaled. And I'd be damned if I let that caring part of me be used as my bondage.

This man—*whoever the hell he is*—was in pain. I knew that. I wanted to help with that. It made me far more giving and kind than I would've been if he'd just been a bastard.

But.

And this was a big but.

I was in pain too.

I was being denied the chance to go home. To speak to my family. To tend to my career. He'd taken my future, and I couldn't allow that to go unpunished.

And so, I used our silent time wisely.

My wrists worked the rope. My fingers fumbled with the knot. My feet walked on autopilot as I dedicated my entire attention to being free.

That was the thing about climbers.

We knew rope, and we knew knots.

Unless a fellow climber had kidnapped and tied me up, I would find a way to loosen it. It was just a matter of time.

Time he'd given me.

Time that allowed space between us and for the erotic pleasure of last night to fade. Just because we were good in bed together didn't mean a damn thing. It didn't mean we were destined or betrothed. It just meant I'd let this go too far, and it was time I put a stop to it.

Thread by thread, the rope gave up its tightness. The knots loosened, the leash no longer binding me as his.

Occasionally, he'd throw me some water or one of my stolen chocolate bars, and I'd keep my wrists locked together, hoping he didn't have the foresight to check the knots were still tight.

He never did.

Either he believed in his own skills at trapping someone, or he'd forgotten my profession. Either way, it was his undoing.

Hours trickled into one chunk of time.

The sun walked from one side of the sky to the other. The path I'd taken once out of sheer dumb stubbornness and curiosity was now trudged with impatience and plotting.

The moment I'd dealt with him, I'd demand the backpack full of food, and backtrack to my Jeep. I wouldn't bother wasting time trying to find my keys. They were most likely covered in a foot of mud by now, but I would pack the rest of my clothes and blankets and begin the long trek back to the populated area of the national park.

It would take a full day, possibly two, by my estimate. I would be hungry and thirsty by the time I ventured out of the forest like some dirty heathen. But the moment I was in the company of park rangers, I could ask for food, transport, and a phone to ring my very worried mother and brother.

The rest of the journey back to the valley was occupied by going over my plan. Trying to see loopholes or dead ends. There was a faint possibility I could get turned around and completely lost. I might die of dehydration or be attacked by something bigger than me.

But then again, I had a second compass back in my Jeep. I knew how to follow the sun and stars. I had a better than good chance at being found before it was too late.

Squaring my shoulders, I prepared to put my plan into action. The closer we got to the valley and his home, the more my heart raced.

Okay, go over it one more time.

When we reach the drop-off, tackle him and wrap the rope around his hands.

I'd already made a lasso and quick draw knot out of the rope that no longer wrapped around my wrists but was ready to capture another.

The moment he's tied up, I'll attach the rest of the leash to a tree branch.

Steal the backpack.

Say goodbye if you must.

Triple, triple check your knots are undoable for at least a day.

And then...leave.

Eventually, he would use a rock or something sharp to saw at the rope or break the branch he was tied to. He was strong and seemed to know how to harness nature to benefit him.

Unlike when I'd hit him with the shovel, he'd be fine. He'd just rage, have a nap, get angry again, realize I was too far gone to bother following, and return to his valley.

Alone.

And this messy piece of my life will be forgotten.

I nodded, warming to my crusade.

He would never know where I'd gone, and I would never tell anyone where he lived. I would honor his secrets. We would forget this past week ever happened.

Up ahead, he slowed.

His bare footsteps became lighter as if he'd learned to sneak up on the mansion instead of announce his arrival. The foliage looked familiar as we approached the drop-off where I'd stopped for a drink and lost my water bottle over the edge.

Aha!

My backpack with all my gear, other food, recording equipment, and first-aid kit rested where I'd left it by a tree. How convenient that I'd left it up here instead of taking it down into the valley with me.

Okay, new plan.

He can keep the backpack with the chocolate and water—just in case it takes him longer than a day to get free. I'll take my usual rucksack full of everything I need.

I'd make sure to fill up my spare water bottle from some puddles along the way and use one of my purifying tablets to ensure it was drinkable.

Courage made me step forward with purpose.

This will work.

He didn't know it yet, but this was goodbye.

Drawing to a stop, he shook his head as if a concussion still plagued him. Glancing at my abandoned backpack by the tree marking the first rung of the natural ladder we'd have to climb down, he worked out the kinks in his neck and went to turn around.

To look at me.

I couldn't let him.

I honestly didn't know if I'd have the courage to go through with this if those unfathomable eyes of his captured mine.

Do it!

Do it now!

Dashing forward, I erased the small distance between us and collided with his back before he could fully twist to see me.

Adrenaline whipped down my limbs, turning me shaky as I snatched his left wrist and shoved it into my rope lasso.

His other one!

Get his other one!

“What the—” He spun on his heels, raising his arm as he did, tipping me off balance.

I swung with him, determined not to let him go.

Our eyes locked.

Fire to fire.

Our hearts kicked.

Soul to soul.

Betrayal blackened his face as he noticed the rope that once bound me now prepared to bind him.

His mouth opened to speak again. His gaze burning into me, making me
char with guilt, making me feel things he had no right to make me feel.

Don't you dare stop, Gem!

Crashing into him again, I reached for his other arm.

I tripped as he stumbled backward, moving toward the drop off, backing
away from me as if he forgot he could overpower me in a second. Undiluted
fear shone in his stare before being drowned out by fierce cruelty.

“Think you can switch roles with me?” he snarled, his arm still too high
for me to grab. “You’ll pay for this.” His chest pressed against mine. His
thigh wedged between my legs as I jumped like a five-year-old trying to get
candy from his fingers.

This was ridiculous.

My plan was crumbling before it’d even begun.

His other hand, with the rope dangling uselessly around his wrist, latched
around my bicep, digging his nails into my skin. “Christ, I’m going to have
fun reminding you of your place.” His cock hardened, tenting his slacks.
Long hair danced around his wild face.

And that cursed electricity hissed into being, pebbling my nipples,
making my body crave his.

No!

Gritting my teeth, I tried one last time.

Striking his hand off me, I gave it everything I had.

“I’m not going back down there!” Leaping upward, I managed to grab his
forearm, clinging with all my strength, desperate to drag his arm down so I
could wrap them tight together.

The only problem was.

He was too strong.

Too tall.

Too much.

It was demoralizing.

So, I let go.

He grinned, thinking he’d won. “You *are* going back down there. Or are
you forgetting you’re mine now?”

Try again.

My thighs bunched, ready to jump and tackle for a third time. “I’m mine.
Not yours.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” He smirked. “We’ll have plenty of time to discuss who owns who when we get home.”

“My home is in the opposite direction.” My eyes flew around the forest, assessing anchor points, galloping with new alternatives for my plan.

I needed to incapacitate him. It was the only way I could flee.

“Wrong.” His jaw worked, black possession etching his face. “Your home is with me now. *I’m* your home.”

My heart fluttered.

For a man as sheltered and as twisted as him, he knew how to use words as blades. Simple sentences had the power to stop me in my tracks, make me question everything, and somehow cajole me into agreeing with him.

What if he *was* my home?

What if we were destined to meet and—

Stop.

This was the crux of why I could never trust myself with him.

He wasn’t just dangerous to my body. He was dangerous to my entire existence.

My hands balled.

I crouched.

Last chance.

He chuckled coldly, watching me coil to pounce. “You don’t give up easily, do you?”

“When it’s my life on the line, never.”

His eyes tightened. “You forfeited your life when you—”

“Trespassed on your valley. Yes, I know.” I swallowed back fear and committed. “Consider this me fixing that mistake.”

I leaped.

His eyes shot wide in surprise.

I’m sorry.

My entire body weight crashed into him, knocking him off balance, sending him reeling, lurching...falling.

Falling!

“No!”

Who shouted that? Me or him?

His foot vanished off the edge of the cliff. His other ankle rolled, and his weight pulled him back.

It happened sickeningly slow.

Falling, tumbling...

“Fuck.” He said the word calmly, detachedly, almost as if he was already resigned to his death. Already lived it, seen it, become friendly with it. His eyes met mine as he continued to fall. Almost serene. Almost grateful.

“No...oh, God.” Instinct kicked in and I grabbed at the rope around his wrist. “I’ve got you.” I locked my fingers around the end just as he plunged off the edge.

I caught it.

I held it.

His weight snatched it out of my hands.

His stare caught mine one last time, full of lust, despair, and blistering connection.

And then...

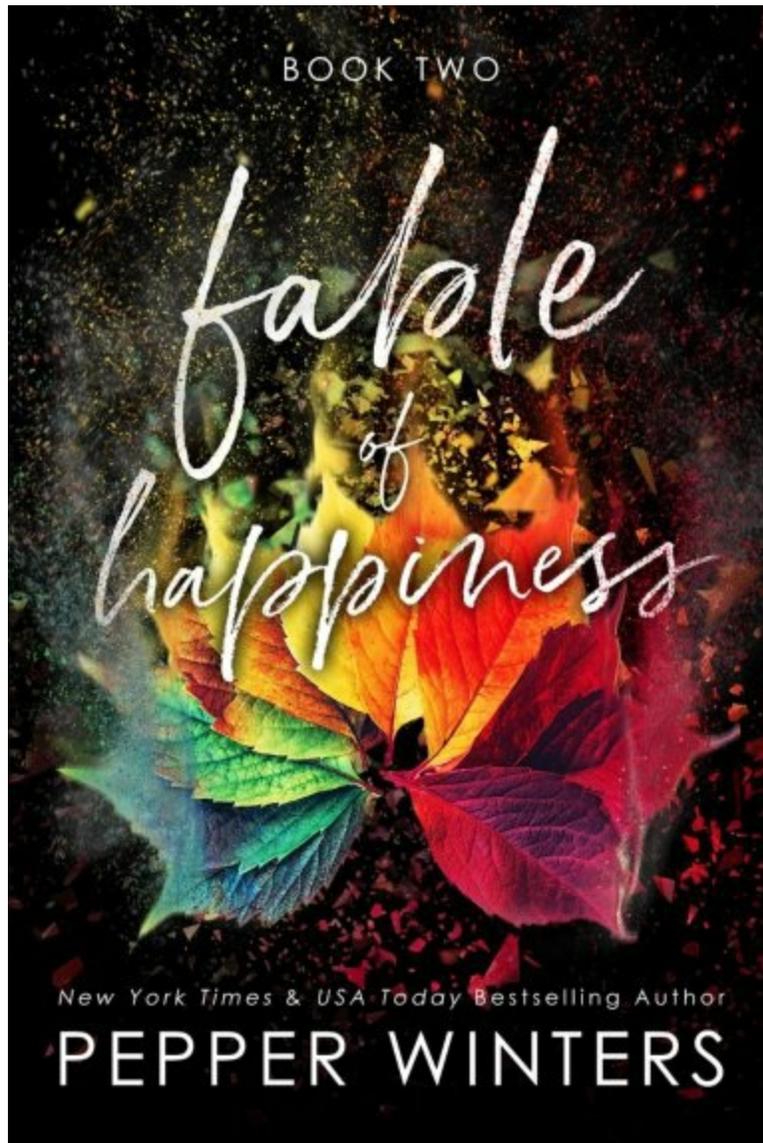
...he was gone.

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Pepper xx

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Pepper currently has over thirty books released in nine languages. She's hit best-seller lists (USA Today, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal) almost forty times. She dabbles in multiple genres, ranging from Dark Romance to Coming of Age. She lives on a small farm with six horses, one rabbit, and one very obliging husband.

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