

TIME TO GET EVEN.



Shards  
of  
Justice

DARK WOMEN'S FICTION

ELODIE CROWE

# Shards Of Justice

# BOOK THREE IN THE COVERED SERIES

By

Felicity Brandon writing as

Elodie Crowe

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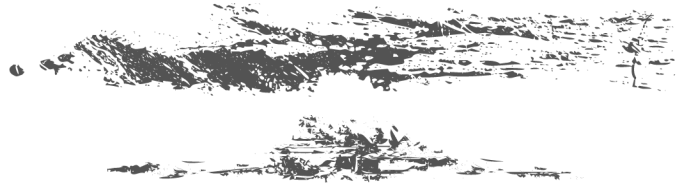
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# CHAPTER ONE

## TOM MCABEE



THE WORLD WAS UNRAVELING. That was all I could think when I glanced around the scene. My son's nursery should have been a calm sanctuary, and yet grown men crawled on their hands and knees while a collection of blue-dyes scrabbled around them.

"What the hell has happened here?" Voice booming around the room, I waited as every pair of eyes turned to me.

"Mr. President." One of the guards sprang to his feet. "It was my fault. I got too close to the pump and accidentally spilled the milk it had collected."

It was then I noticed what had happened, my gaze sliding from the rugs soaked with Richard's milk to the woman who'd provided it, and then back to the hapless guard.

"You did this." Fury spiked as I fixed him with my stare. "You spilled my son's milk!"

"Yes, I..." The terror in the guard's eyes was obvious, as well it might be. My impatience was fast becoming as legendary as my policies. "I apologize, Mr. President. I'll make sure the room is as good as new, and—"

He never finished his sentence, the back of my hand connecting with the side of his face so hard that the impact sent him flying

backward. He fell against the edge of the bed, smacking his head on the floor.

“Get up!” His weak performance only stoked my growing anger. “Get up and beg for forgiveness.”

Fumbling to his knees, his eyes glazed as blood trickled from his headwound.

“Beg for forgiveness for the sacred milk you have wasted,” I demanded. “Milk that belonged to *my* son!”

“Please, Mr. President.” The insolent fool’s voice quivered, his gaze flitting around as though one of the whores would save him. “Forgive me for my mistake. I meant no offense to you or your precious son, Richard.”

“Don’t speak his name.” It was no longer about the insignificant guard’s error or even the lost milk. The rage goading me was so suffocating, it clouded the reasons for its genesis, convincing me that all that mattered was avenging the mistake. I couldn’t allow it to stand. Couldn’t permit such carelessness. “Don’t you dare. Those who do not see the value of human milk are vermin.”

The guard’s eyes widened as I reached for my weapon and pointed it in his direction.

“Please, sir,” he begged, palms rising in conciliation. “I won’t ever make the same mistake.”

“That’s right.” An odd serenity fell over me as I squeezed the trigger, a sense of knowing that this was the right conclusion. “You won’t.”

He hit the ground, leaving a bloodied mess behind him.



“Oh, God.”

I turned at Ronnie’s throaty plea, the sight of her swollen eye stoking my fury. The man who’d given her that black eye would also pay for overstepping the line. It seemed increasingly that the utopia I’d created needed reform and management. The conception of our new age was only the beginning.

“Quiet.”

Lowering the weapon, I pointed to her, resisting the urge to soothe her frightened expression. Lately, my affection for the woman whose only purpose was to provide my son with milk had swollen to become unreasonably consuming. I shouldn’t care if she lived or died beyond her remit. Shouldn’t concern myself with the fear in her eyes, but I couldn’t bring myself to discard her.

“Get this place cleaned up.” I hollered the instruction to the remaining guards. “I want the blood out of the soft furnishings. Order new rugs if you have to!”

My attention fell on Ronnie again, our gazes locking briefly before I turned and stalked away. I needed to get out of there before I saw red again and ended more meaningless lives.

Striding out of the room, I blew out a breath, my fingers grazing my gun and ensuring the safety was on.

“Mr. President?”

Carson’s voice drew my focus from my simmering fury, and spinning on my heel, I saw him striding down the corridor toward me.

“Carson.” I forced a smile. “How’s your head after the frivolities last night?”

My old friend hadn't held back when I'd suggested we polish off another magnum of champagne. He was even happier than I'd been to celebrate this first glorious milestone of the new order.

"Good." His lips curled. "I'm used to it, Tom. You know that!"

"True. Got more good news for me this morning?"

"An invitation, actually." He chuckled, shoving one hand into his pocket. "From that young guy you were chatting to for most of the night."

"Jake?" I recalled the young man's enthusiasm, the thought warming me.

"If you say so." Carson shrugged. "He's your pet project, not mine."

"I'm off to have breakfast with him." I smiled at the prospect. "He's a good guy. Exactly the sort of man we need to take our plans forward."

"It sounds like you're in love!" Carson snorted. "Something I should know?"

"You sound envious, old man." I sniggered, choosing to ignore Carson's bait as he pressed his thin lips together. "Remembering the time you and I were the young guys, are you?"

"Something like that." His lips twitched. "But I think we're better off where we are, don't you?"

"Oh, absolutely." Patting him on the shoulder, I walked to his side, motioning for him to continue. "So, what have I been invited to?"

"His whore has an ultrasound later this morning." Carson glanced at his watch. "In a couple of hours. He wondered if you'd like to attend,

and well, it could be a good photo opportunity for the front pages tomorrow.”

“Do I have time?”

I enjoyed reveling in our successes as much as the next man, but the business of state required my attention however many whores our farming program knocked up.

“You can spare an hour,” he replied as we wandered the hall. “Plus, why shouldn’t you enjoy the spoils of your accomplishments? The warehouse has been renovated for the occasion especially, and the journalists are already invited. This is everything you wanted. Order, peace, and control for our country.”

“You’re right.”

Carson was exactly who I needed to speak to after the turmoil of the nursery. He’d been with me from the beginning and had always been loyal. “Let’s make an event of it. Invite the television cameras, and I’ll bring Richard.”

“Richard?” Carson’s brow furrowed. “Why bring a baby along?”

“Because he’s my son,” I reminded him wryly. “And he and whoever this new arrival is will represent the next generation of our revolution.”

“Okay.” He exhaled. “But having Richard there complicates things. We’ll need some red-dyes to take care of him, and what if he needs feeding?”

“Bring Ronnie along too.” My mood was brightening by the moment, an image of her bound and humbled in front of the nation’s

paparazzi emboldening me. “She can illustrate how important our milking program is.”

“I can’t believe you still have a hard-on for your ex.” He shook his head sardonically as he moved to walk on

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped, my heart racing as Carson turned back. “I’m the fucking President. I can do what I like.”

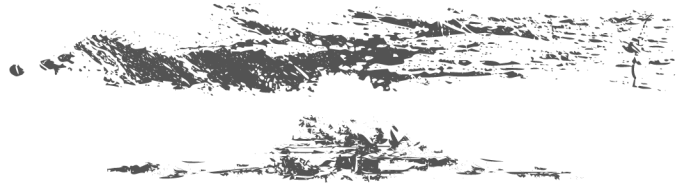
“Hey!” Carson’s tone elevated as he struggled for composure. “No offense. I’m just saying, you *are* the fucking President, and you can have any woman you like.”

“Yeah, well...” Tugging at my lapels, I inhaled. I hadn’t intended to be so prickly about Ronnie, but as ever, she appeared to be the thorn in my side I was unwilling to give up. “I like parading her around.”

“No problem.” He smirked. “Whatever you want, boss.”

“Make the arrangements, will you?” Lifting my wrist, I glimpsed the time. If I had Ronnie moved to my bedroom, I just had time for her to take the edge off before breakfast. “I have something I have to do first.”

## CHAPTER TWO RONNIE HUDSON



*“SOON... I PROMISE.”*

Pam’s words echoed around my head as I huddled in the footwell of the car at Tom’s feet, but her promise was becoming more difficult to believe in as the vehicle hurtled on at speed. What could she do to save us? What could any of us do? Tom’s cronies were everywhere, seeping into the psyche of our country. Every man we encountered seemed inclined to agree with his twisted perspective, and none of us women were left unattended for long.

“Well, isn’t this lovely?” Tom’s patronizing tone echoed around the back of the enormous vehicle.

*Lovely* was a matter of opinion. Wrists bound behind me, I was naked, save for the black cape he’d draped over my shoulders. The man on the seat before me was a murdering sadist, but he was also the best hope I had of surviving whatever came next. I no longer knew where to look for safety and protection.

“All three of us together.”

He signaled to the baby seat strapped onto the chair at his side, and following the gesture, my gaze settled on Gabriel’s sleeping form. Despite my burgeoning panic at our abrupt outing, my baby was at least unconcerned by the spontaneous trip.

“I thought you’d be happy.” Tom sniggered as he glanced down at me. “Wasn’t this the family you always envisaged?”

Exhaling through my nostrils, my shoulders fell. He knew as well as I did that I couldn’t answer him since he was the one who’d shoved the large plastic ball between my teeth once he’d emptied his balls down my throat and gone for breakfast.

“You’ll love this,” he sneered, lifting one hand and stroking the side of my face thoughtfully. I strained to remain still, not wanting to show how much his touch repulsed me. How much I longed to be free of his dark demands. “You can be center stage for once.”

Gaze lowering, I avoided his eyes and focused on his no doubt very expensive footwear. I didn’t know what Tom had in mind, but experience had taught me that his plans rarely ended well for me.

“Look at those wonderful tits.” Tom’s voice oozed enthusiasm as he leaned forward and groped one and then the other of my breasts. “So full and desperate to be milked.”

He was right about that at least. I hadn’t been able to feed Gabriel for hours, and I sensed the milk beading at my nipples and escaping at his provocation.

“Damn,” he muttered, licking his lips. “I’d love to have a drink myself, but I need to save some for Richard and the cameras.”

*Cameras?* That didn’t sound hopeful.

“Still,” he reasoned, beckoning me forward on my knees. “I guess I could take a little and save the remainder for my son.” The nefarious glint in his eyes confirmed he was serious as he tugged me up onto the seat, my thighs straddling the fabric of his trousers.

Steeling myself, I braced for the inevitable ordeal that would follow. Tom seemed to have developed a fetish for my milk and insisted on suckling from me at least once a day. However, after the carnal onslaught he'd ordered before we left, I was surprised he had the appetite.

"We're approaching the facility now, Mr. President."

I leapt at the sound of the driver's voice, glancing around at the darkened glass partition.

"Already?" Tom's voice was clipped as I turned back to see him speak into the intercom.

"Y-yes, sir."

I heard the hesitancy in the driver's tone. His fear was warranted. Tom had already blown out the brains of one man who'd displeased him today.

"Fuck." Releasing the intercom, his jaw tightened. "Looks like we'll have to wait, Ronnie." Snaking one arm around me, he tugged me closer. "But don't worry, I won't forget you."

Only inches from his face, I stared into his eyes. What the hell had happened to the guy I'd once thought I loved and considered settling down with? Had this monster always lurked inside of him and, somehow, I just hadn't been aware?

The questions ricocheted as his free hand reached for the strap holding the ball between my teeth and eased the gag away.

"I can't ever seem to forget you."

What was that in his voice? Longing? Regret?

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

In the end, I played it safe and opted not to respond to his edgy tone.

“I should have let you go by now.” Brow furrowing, he sighed as he gripped my waist tighter. “Should have sent you to the farms. I created the bloody things with you in mind.”

What was I supposed to say to that?

The idea that I could have been a muse for the misery and systematic subjugation that was happening across the country sickened me.

“But I can’t let you leave.” The crease in his brow deepened as the car slowed. “Still, it’s okay. I don’t ever need to, do I?” Leaning forward, the tip of his tongue grazed my chest as he slowly licked at my skin. “I can keep you for as long as I like and breed with you again if I choose.” His expression brightened. “I can do whatever I like.”

I tensed at the insidious reality, accepting grimly that it was true, but simultaneously praying that Pam would pull a rabbit from the hat. I couldn’t accept that this was my fate; forced to watch my son raised into Tom’s dreadful world of hate and prejudice.

“Hey.” His hand rose to my face, cradling my skin as if he gave a damn. “Don’t look so worried. We won’t be here long. It’s only a brief press opportunity and Richard will be safe.” His gaze traveled to my beautiful sleeping boy. “He’s the best-protected child in the country.”

For that, at least, I was thankful.

“What do I need to do, sir?”



Our gazes met fleetingly as he turned back to me.

“Same as always.” His brow rose as he leaned back in his comfortable leather seat. “Whatever the hell you’re told.”

My cheeks flamed at his callous tone, and sensing the embarrassment, my focus fell to his chest. I shouldn’t have been surprised. The man had me caged and bound at the so-called Presidential Palace for all his men to see. I couldn’t let the occasional murmured word sway me. Tom was still an arrogant monster, guilty of destroying my and millions of other women’s liberties. His apparent conflicted feelings for me were nothing more than a life raft I could cling to in a short storm. I certainly couldn’t rely on it. Tom would turn on me any time it suited him.

“Down now.”

As if he sought to prove the point, Tom dismissed me with a flick of his hand, pushing me back to the footwell just as the car door opened. Landing awkwardly, I dissolved to my knees, cowering at the blast of cold air. I waited as he climbed out, watching as he made small talk with the men assembled.

“My son is in the back of the car.”

Anxiety twisted at the echo of pride in his voice. Where was he going to take Gabriel?

“Bring him along and grab the whore who’s there as well.”

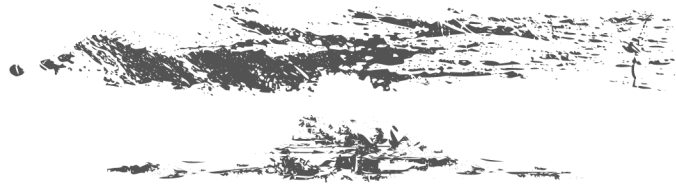
“Whore, Mr. President?”

I held my breath as another barrage of men in uniforms discussed my fate.

“Yes,” Tom answered, although his voice already sounded quieter.  
“She’s coming with me.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### PAMELA WOGAN



“WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO, whore?”

Heart racing, my feet paused as I spun to face the latest asshole in a uniform. Every man had become an adversary. “Back to my cleaning duties, sir.”

Eyeing the guard, I wanted to roll my eyes. He couldn’t have been more than twenty years old; another jumped-up little boy who’d been given a gun and fancy regalia. Where had all the good men gone? Had they been a fictional façade all along?

“From where?” Cocking an eyebrow at me, he folded his arms across his chest as if the gesture was supposed to intimidate me.

“I was told to help clean up the nursery...” I started, part bored and part dreading the explanation. Arriving at the alleged palace had been something of a reprieve compared to the training facility they’d held me in, but I was already fed up with having to justify my existence to every teenager with a weapon.

“The nursery?” His expression faltered, as though he too had heard what had happened there.

Tension twisted in my tummy as I fought to repress the memories threatening to rise and engulf me. Ronnie’s ex, Tom, had shot a guy dead at point-blank range. Even after everything I’d been through, I’d never seen anything so grotesque.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I have another role for you, whore.” Closing the distance between us, he beckoned me forward.

*Perfect.* I blew out a breath. Another carpet that needed scrubbing—how had my life come to this?

“The President wants a few of you blue-dyes for the cameras.”

*Cameras?* I turned my head to look at him as he grabbed my arm and dragged me back down the corridor. Struggling to keep up with his long strides, my pulse quickened as he steered me toward three of his hapless colleagues. The only thing more daunting about the buffoons than the size of their guns was the extent of their loyalty to Tom.

“Here’s another one,” he barked, flinging me in their direction.

“Bit old, ain’t she?” The largest of the three laughed as I managed to find my feet.

“The boss didn’t say anything about age,” the first one muttered. “Anyway, they’re blue-dyes, created to work and serve us. She ain’t got to look pretty.”

“Suppose so,” the big one grunted. “Put her in the van with the others. We have to get moving. The President is about to leave.”

My gaze darted between them as one of the others manhandled me away. Perhaps I should have been used to the disdainful treatment, but somehow, I never was. Didn’t want to be. I had to fight the urge to resist with a sudden right hook, keeping my balling hands by my sides as he shoved me forward.

“There,” he mumbled, pushing his weapon into the small of my back. “Past those double doors and into the van.”

Glancing up, I noticed the enormous doors had been opened ahead. Two more of the armed morons waited there, and behind them, I could make out the open doors of a transport vehicle. It reminded me of the kind they’d used when they’d brought us there in the first place—a dark and uninviting place—but this vehicle was much smaller.

“This is the final one.”

One of them spoke behind me, the guards on either side of the entrance nodding as I passed by.

With one final push, I stumbled toward the van, climbing into the back before another of them could *help* me. Glancing around quickly, I noticed another three women already in position. Dressed in the same scratchy gray uniform as me, I recognized one of them as Hayley, the woman I’d chatted to on the arduous journey to London. She had been one of the few who’d seemed to have an appetite for revenge, and her lips twitched in acknowledgment as I took the seat next to her.

“Okay, whores!”

Turning back the way I’d come, I watched as one of the guards closed the doors of the van, his voice booming through the remaining space as his face disappeared from view.

“You’ll stay seated. The journey won’t be long. Do not move and definitely do not grow a brain!”

Slamming the rear of the vehicle closed, he thrust us into darkness just as the engine started below us, but I no longer feared the loss of

light. The shadows had become my friends.

“Where are they taking us now?” I whispered in Hayley’s direction as the van pulled away.

It was risky to talk, but none of the uniforms had joined us in the back and I doubted the drivers would hear us over the vehicle noise.

“Fuck knows.” She breathed her reply, leaning toward me in the gloom.

“I heard one of them say something about the President and cameras,” I replied.

Battling the urge to allow my thoughts to slide into whatever twisted nightmare we were being taken to, I pulled in a shaky breath. What was I going to do? I’d promised Eloise and Ronnie that I’d get them away from Tom’s dastardly clutches, but how was I going to achieve that from wherever I was being carted off to? The weight of my predicament fell over me, forcing my gaze to my thighs in the darkness.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Hayley muttered.

“No,” I agreed. “It doesn’t.”

“Shhh,” hissed one of the other women. “You’ll get us all into trouble!”

“For fuck’s sake,” Hayley grumbled beside me, but she quieted, just as I did.

I didn’t agree with the woman’s fear, but I did understand it. Any one of us who had made it to the so-called Presidential Palace would

have witnessed enough to know the new regime was brutal. It rarely took prisoners unless it could use and exploit them in some way.

But I had news for the women who sat huddled opposite me. Change was coming whether they wanted to be part of it or not. I didn't know how I was going to pull off the escape of the century, but I was a woman of my word. I would make it back to my sisters-in-arms, and together, we would discover a way out of this hell.

An image of Ronnie and Gabriel burst into my mind, compelling my reluctant lips into a smile. They were the cause of my heroism, the reason I was prepared to go to war. I'd never had any desire to marry or have a child, but the time I'd had with that little boy had reminded me what the fight was for. Tom was determined to pulverize everything good about our world, denigrating every woman and child for his own perverse kicks, and damn him, he'd got away with it as well. It would be down to those he'd subjugated to rise up and take that power back—for the sake of Gabriel's generation.

I held onto the recollection of my friend's son as the van came to a halt. The doors burst open, and one by one, we were dragged out of the vehicle. I kept it close to my heart when we were lined up and commanded into yet another foreboding building. I would get through this—whatever *this* was. There was nothing Tom and his sick buddies could throw at me that I hadn't already seen and heard.

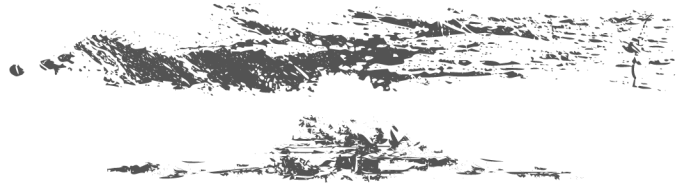
"The blue-dyes are here, sir."

The announcement floated back to the four of us, the voice of the man calling himself the president splintering the growing tension with his reply.

“Excellent. Bring them in.”



## CHAPTER FOUR ELOISE TURNER



TERROR CHURNED IN MY belly, forcing my eyes to close as my palm stroked my growing baby bump. Whatever I'd been expecting from the scan, it wasn't this. Pulling in a fresh breath, I compelled my gaze to open and take in the scene again.

Tied to a gurney with two leather straps, I was surrounded by lights, cameras, and unfamiliar men. Naked, just like always, I was more exposed and vulnerable than ever, yet none of them seemed to care. In fact, it was as though they couldn't even see me.

"Make sure you have the best possible shot."

The order came from a middle-aged guy with a clipboard.

"Of her or the screen?" queried the man behind one of the cameras.

I assumed the female he referred to in such a cold and clinical way was me. It was the first reference to me any of them had made, despite the fact the warehouse appeared to have been turned into an impromptu pregnancy clinic.

"I want shots of both," the clipboard guy told him. "That's why there are four or five of you in position."

Mumbles of acquiescence rumbled from the various camera operators situated around me.

“The rest of you, ensure you have shots of the lectern at the rear of the whore.”

I tensed at the insult, although I didn't know why. I'd heard much worse since I was captured by Jake's friends.

“The President will be arriving soon.

*The President?* Panic, already pinballing around my body, escalated at his foreboding words. It was bad enough that I'd had to be paraded around in front of that wanker last night, but to find out he was coming to the scan was beyond discouraging. But then, what hope did I have? When this foray was over, Jake would take me back to the prison of my captivity, feeding me until the baby came and... I shuddered to think about what came next for either me or the little one.

A single tear tracked its way down my cheek at the pulverizing thought, and I turned my head so clipboard guy couldn't see. I couldn't let anything happen to my baby, but how could I protect them?

*“Sit tight, Eloise. I'll come for you.”*

The words of the kind older woman I'd encountered last night flooded my mind, temporarily soothing my terror. I'd seen her that morning as well, her expression sympathetic as Jake had led me past her. I knew I shouldn't put much stock in her vow to save me. She was a stranger, and although she wasn't being used to breed, her hopes for the future were not much better than mine, but her intention had moved me. It was good to know that there were still some decent people left in the world.

“Ready?” Jake’s voice splintered my internal monologue, and glancing up, I found him grinning over my bound body.

“Yes, sir,” I replied obediently, no longer knowing if I wanted the ordeal to be over or whether I favored protracting it to delay the inevitable doom.

“We are so fortunate,” he enthused, pressing his cold palm against my belly. “Not only are you the first whore to be knocked up, but now we have the country’s media here to witness the life we’re creating.”

I pulled in a hesitant breath at his statement. Jake talked about life as if it was some expendable feature he could take or leave. Whatever happened, I couldn’t leave my baby in the hands of a man—or a land—like this one.

An abrupt round of applause drowned out my spiraling thoughts, and twisting behind me, I saw the ominous man in charge of the country approach me.

“Jake.” Thrusting a palm in Jake’s direction, the President offered him the type of smile I’d only seen on billboards. “So good to see you again.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jake practically beamed. “It’s an honor to have you here.”

“I have another surprise for you.” Grin widening, our depraved new leader motioned behind him. Heart racing, I watched as a baby was presented in a car seat.

“Is this your son, sir?” Jake’s feigned shock was almost worthy of an Academy award.

“It is.” The President took the child’s seat, lifting the boy and resting him on the edge of my gurney. “This is my beloved Richard. Gods willing, you shall have one of these yourself soon.”

My gaze settled on the innocent child, his big blue eyes searching mine for an explanation, but I had none to offer. Even if the threat of reprisals if I dared to speak were not waved regularly over my head, what could I say to such naivete? The boy had no idea that his father was a devil, let alone the vicious ramifications of that devil’s leadership.

“Where does the whore go, sir?”

The so-called President’s focus rose at the query, his free hand rising to usher its owner forward. “Bind her on the chair,” he replied. “And get the pumps ready.”

Immobilized with dread and disgust, I dared not move to see to whom he referred, but my imagination whirred into life, envisioning the latest humiliation one of us would have to endure for his entertainment.

“Mr. President.” Clipboard guy stepped forward. “Hi, Chase Cleverly. I’m your director for today.”

“Mr. Cleverly.” Our illustrious leader flashed him a well-practiced smile. “Let’s talk. Carson!” His attention focused on another man looming at my side. “Bring a red-dye to babysit.”

“They’re not here yet, sir.” The one called Carson mirrored the fake smile. “Let me take Richard while you two talk.”

I watched as the baby was passed over my head, handed from one tyrannical lunatic to another, unease knotting at my core. I didn’t

know Carson but could only assume that anyone willing to work for the President agreed wholeheartedly with his plans and policies.

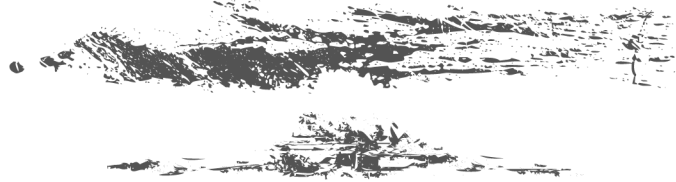
“Isn’t this wonderful?”

I didn’t think I’d ever seen Jake as happy as he was at that moment, his eyes alight with excitement as he watched the country’s most powerful men scatter.

“What an amazing break this has been for me, and it’s all thanks to you.” His gaze softened as his palm brushed over my tummy once more. “Oh, and you, of course.” Chuckling, his focus fell back on me. “Once the President is happy, we’ll get started, and finally, I can meet my baby.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RONNIE



IT WAS WORSE THAN I thought, and after everything I'd been through, that was saying something. Tethered to the uncomfortable chair, the fleeting protection of my cape was removed, and all four limbs were separated and secured. I supposed I should be used to the dehumanizing treatment, to the impersonal way my legs were fastened to stirrup-style binds that ensured my legs couldn't close, and my heavy, leaking breasts were manhandled into flanges. Nothing should have surprised me anymore, but equally, nothing prepared me for the continual demoralizing degradation either. Every time I thought I couldn't get any lower, Tom always found a way to remind me. *Yes, you can.*

Gabriel's soft whimper drew my attention from my misery, more milk escaping at his muted cries. Panic surfaced as Tom's old buddy, Colin Carson, carried him to the other side of the room. My every fiber yearned to go to my baby, to feed and console him, but of course, the binds made that impossible.

I hadn't had the chance to feed him properly myself for weeks. Tom had made it clear I was lucky to still even be around my son, and my frequent visits to Tom's bedroom had made sure I realized the price. I could stay, as long as I kept his father happy. Everything in this dark, twisted world revolved around our mighty leader's happiness.

Dragging my gaze from Gabriel, I took in the rest of the room as the industrial-sized breast pump I was strapped into started to whir. A woman I didn't recognize was tied down to a medical bed, and one glance at her midriff told me she was pregnant. Apprehension twisted at her plight. Pregnancy had once been such a beautiful thing; the miracle of bringing new life into the world, but Tom and his pals had tainted it, turning it into an instrument of torment. It was likely that this poor woman would have to bear labor and childbirth only to have to surrender her child to the state and men like Carson. Sniffing back appalled tears, I tried not to focus on my wallowing hatred for Tom or the man groping my other breast around the pump, despite the fact the equipment was already on and working. I had to focus on Gabriel and on somehow getting away, but heaven only knew how that would be possible. I hadn't even seen Pam since the morning's terrible ordeal, and being brought to this awful place meant that—

“You bitches can wait there!”

The gruff noise of another man's bark interrupted my thoughts and compelled my attention to where he was shouting. Gun in hand, he instructed a line of women into view, each of them like the blue-haired ones I'd seen at the so-called palace earlier. It was so strange to see a group of women with such stark indigo tresses. I still didn't understand what it was all about, but knowing Tom, it was sure to be some new way to denigrate, while—

Once more, my thoughts scattered, my breath catching as the final blue-haired woman of the four walked into view.

*“Pam!”*

I wasn't sure if I said her name aloud, but it exploded into my head so violently that I had no choice but to smile. As though she could read my mind, her gaze met mine immediately, her lips twitching as she was pushed into position on my left.

*Pam is here!*

I didn't know how or why, but it didn't matter. She brought light to the darkest pits, and there were few deeper than the one we found ourselves in. Dragged to the ominous place at Tom's instructions, we were yet to discover what the charade was even about.

"We're ready!"

Tom clapped his hands as he wandered past the girl on the gurney toward me, his presence sending the cretin fondling me scattering from my side. Reaching for the side of my breast, he trailed a finger over my skin before walking behind me and taking his place at the waiting lectern between Pam's group and my chair.

"Bring my son."

The room hushed as all eyes fixed on Gabriel, who'd been taken from his baby seat. Carson carried him to Tom, holding him aloft as if he were a trophy.

"There he is!" Tom beamed as he collected Gabriel, turning him to face the cameras. "Gentleman, get a picture of Richard McAbee—the future of my empire."

Pam's eyes fluttered closed at the terrible prophecy, my churning insides concurring with her dread as dozens of cameras flashed before us. While there was breath left in my body, I would never let



that happen. My son wasn't becoming the poster boy of the new fascist regime.

"Shall we begin, Mr. President?" Clipboard guy waved from the sidelines. "The doctor has arrived."

"Where is Taylor?" Lowering Gabriel in his arms, Tom nodded, obviously in his element. "Get in here."

The doctor who'd seen me the night before strode into view, a smirk stretched over his lips as he raised an arm to acknowledge the ripple of applause. "Good morning, Mr. President, and how is Richard?"

"As strong as an ox."

Both men stared at my son as though they were privy to information about him that nobody else knew. My fingers curled, pushing my nails into my palms as I watched their wretched insincerity. If anyone knew Gabriel, it was me; his mother. I'd been the one who'd delivered him and nursed him. The one he'd clung to when no one else but Pam had given a damn. Hatred surged at the posed scene, the rising cheers of the paparazzi only compounding my undignified frustration.

"Have you met the father-to-be?"

Tom brought the despicable display to a halt as he gestured to the man waiting by the gurney. Taylor turned to look as the younger guy strode forward to shake his outstretched hand. Fury simmered as they exchanged congratulations, the whole scene like some monstrous session of mutual verbal masturbation.

“Let’s begin then, gentlemen.” Clipboard guy’s irritation was starting to show as he ushered the press pack away and instructed his film cameras into position.

“Of course.” Tom’s brow rose, his tone amused as he passed my son to an unknown woman with red hair who appeared from the sidelines. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Cameras rolling.”

Clipboard guy moved into the center, glancing around as if it were a scene in a movie. No doubt that was what he told himself so he could sleep at night, but I had news for him—it wasn’t. I, and every other woman there, were being held against our will. This was graver than any piece of fiction.

“We roll in five, four...” Scuttling out of view, he numbered the remainder of the countdown with his fingers before pointing to Tom, who was still leering inanely. All the while, the pump purred on, encouraging milk from my nipples as the preposterous show started.

“Good morning, Britain.”

As though a light switch had been flicked on in his head, Tom stepped toward the lectern, his beaming persona slipping naturally into the professional one that had mesmerized the country into apathetic submission.

“I come to you live today with great news.” Motioning toward the gurney, Tom went on. “My own personal physician is about to perform an ultrasound on the very first pregnancy of our new policy.”

Right on cue, the lackeys assembled broke into rapturous rounds of applause as cameras panned past me to the helpless pregnant

woman.

“Thank you, Mr. President.” Taylor burst into life on demand, his disingenuous smile making me wonder if someone was paying him by the grin. “I am honored to be able to bring this moment to our people this morning.”

“Please.” Tom closed the distance to him, ignoring me completely as he passed by. “Go ahead, Doctor. This is a moment of hope for our whole country.”

*Hope?*

The word stuck in my head like a bad joke as Taylor squeezed gel onto the woman’s stomach and eased the scope over her belly. A hypnotized silence fell over the large space as everyone’s attention turned to the small screen attached to the scope, waiting impatiently for the first sign of life.

“Everything looks normal,” Taylor continued, as if scanning a bound woman was all part of the reason he trained to be a medical professional. “Let’s just find the baby’s heartbeat.”

As though he’d commanded the sound, the soft, rhythmic noise of the unborn child’s heart burst into the arena, initiating another raucous ovation.

“Silence, please!” insisted Taylor, shaking his head with a smile as the accolades died down. “I just have another couple of checks to conclude.”

“But everything looks good?” Tom smiled broadly as Taylor concluded, beckoning the younger man toward him. “And this is the man who created the child. Let’s hear it for Jake.”

I wanted to roll my eyes as yet another ear-piercing round of applause filled the air, drowning out whatever it was the doctor had been so keen to concentrate on.

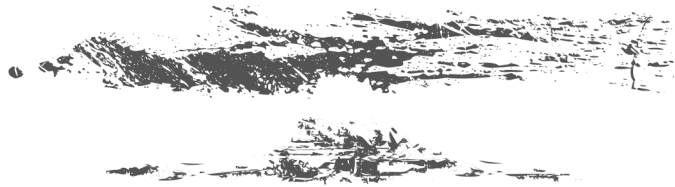
Glancing frantically at Pam, I wished I could mouth the words running around my mind but didn't dare. As if she sensed my thoughts, she nodded slowly, her gaze knowing.

*Hang in there, Ronnie. Our time is coming.*

Strapped down and publicly humiliated, I had few reasons to believe her, but for some preposterous reason, I did. Pam had achieved what no man ever had. She'd never let me down, and I knew she wouldn't start today.

## CHAPTER SIX

### PAM



THE PERVERSITY OF THE scene was disturbingly easy to disregard. It wasn't that I didn't see the way Eloise was bound to the gurney, or how Ronnie was held down to the chair, but rather that it failed to register anymore. Failed to move me the way it should have. They were women who Tom's administration had ruled as worthless—devoid of all goodness, and only useful for state-sanctioned procreation—and while I loathed each and every one of the spineless fuckers who'd expedited the hateful cause, I wouldn't allow that to cloud my focus.

Weeks in captivity and months on the run before then had taught me too much about that brave new world. There were far worse plights for women than bondage and denigration. Destinies I sought to avoid with whatever plan I could cobble together.

Fate, it seemed, had a scheme of her own. She had brought all of us together in a way I could never have foreseen or hoped to organize. Somehow, Ronnie, Gabriel, and Eloise were all there, trapped with me in this pointless façade, but it gifted us an opportunity I hadn't even envisioned.

Glancing at Hayley, I blew out a breath, eager for her to realize what a chance this was. She didn't know Ronnie or the others, but I knew we were like-minded in our dissent, and I was prepared to take her with us if she was willing to help connect the dots.

“And as one last and special surprise, I’d like to introduce the television cameras to my handsome son.”

The moron known as president beckoned the idiotic woman with the red hair forward, clutching Gabriel from her arms. My gaze slid to Ronnie, knowing how much she would loathe seeing her little boy paraded around by Tom and a bunch of hapless strangers.

“He is healthy and happy,” Tom prattled on, “and one day will inherit this incredible realm we’re curating!”

*Realm?* The jerk was setting himself up to be some kind of fucking king. The next thing you knew, he’d be declaring his God-given right to rule and we’d wake up to find ourselves back in the 1600s. In truth, there were women who’d enjoyed greater freedoms then than we did today.

A low growl escaped my throat as another incessant round of handclapping exploded from the many men who’d assembled to witness the shit show, fortunately audible only to Hayley beside me.

“What greater sign can I offer of our prosperity than the product of my strong seed?”

*Strong seed?* Jesus Christ. Forcing my gaze to the floor, I was conscious that I could no longer hide my disdain from the amassed media.

“We have much to celebrate,” the inane President continued. “So, while my son feeds, I am happy to accept questions from the journalists gathered.”

A rumble of eager chatter filled the room as the applause died down, and I watched as a new comfortable chair was brought forward

for the lunatic leader. Sitting to Ronnie's side, he signaled for the pump to be paused, and like a sycophantic puppy, one guy dressed in black rushed forward to empty the contents into a prepared baby bottle.

"Mr. President." One eager journalist thrust his hand into the air as the bottle filled with Ronnie's milk was passed to the mindless man in charge. "Who's providing the milk for your son?"

"I'm glad you asked." Tom angled the teat to Gabriel's lips. "This is Richard's personal cow."

Laughter reverberated at his hideous insult, and when my gaze slid to my friend, I saw the heat flaming in her face. Even now, the bastard could still distress her. Even now, he got his rocks off from her abject humiliation.

"You brought a woman from the farms for him, sir?" the newsperson continued.

"She is his mother." The so-called premier turned his attention to Ronnie. "The cow who birthed and continues to nurse him. It is only right that my son—heir to all of this—has his own milkmaid."

Another sickening round of sniggers bloomed as Gabriel happily took his bottle.

"Of course, Richard is being weaned as well." Tom beamed. "That's why he's so strong, but I still believe that breast is best."

"But you don't allow the cow to breastfeed him?" another reporter asked from over his voice recorder.

"Of course not!" Tom shook his head. "Cattle does not provide care, only food. Her purpose is functional. That's all."

Ronnie's gaze lowered, sliding to me. In the split second that she glanced my way, I could read the emotion in her eyes, the absolute hatred she bore for the father of her son, and her willingness to do anything to bring him down. I agreed completely.

"Interesting, sir, but let me ask you this..."

Another news reporter rattled off his question, but his voice was muted by the revulsion twisting inside me. I had to do something to help Ronnie. Something to maximize this chance meeting of everyone I sought to support. I'd learned long before that coincidences did not exist. The group of us had been brought together for a reason and it was down to me to act upon the providence.

Musing on the dilemma, I didn't stir at the first peculiar noise from above. Too enthralled by the possibilities, I chewed on my lip, straining to think of the solution to our plight, but as the sound of creaking metal grew louder, I realized something was wrong. Glancing up just in time, I acknowledged the steel erection that turned what looked like a warehouse into a television studio was loose, one errant piece of scaffolding hovering dangerously over the heads of the women who'd accompanied me on this parade.

"Look out!"

Motioning to Hayley, I yanked her back just in time. We stumbled to the floor, watching in horror as a large metal bar hurtled south, smacking the two women who'd accompanied us there on the head. They crumpled at the impact, my stomach turning at the terrible noise.

"Jesus!" Hayley turned to look at me, her wide eyes the only thing I could focus on, although all around us I was aware of movement.



Men frantically raced to the scene, shoving us even farther back as they yelled at one another. From somewhere on the periphery, I was aware of the alleged President's voice, my thoughts returning to the baby in his arms and the woman who'd brought him into the world.

Where was Gabriel? Was he okay? Was more scaffolding about to plummet down and end his short life? Ronnie was in no position to help him, and was, in fact, a sitting duck herself. I had to do something. It was now or never.

"Come on," I breathed, grabbing Hayley's wrist as we clambered out of the way of more incoming men.

Scuttling around the incident, I refused to look back. Couldn't absorb more of the dreadful scene that had played out right beside us. It was bad enough that I'd be haunted by the memory of what had already been witnessed. I didn't need more trauma to hang on to.

"Where are we going?" Hayley whispered, clinging to me as I rounded the lectern and came to an abrupt halt.

Complete chaos unraveled before our eyes, men in suits and uniforms fleeing in every direction. In the center of the foray, flanked by those with the largest weapons, I could just make out Tom.

"Pam!" Ronnie's desperate plea caught my attention, her eyes watering as I pulled Hayley toward her.

"Are you okay?" I blurted, spinning around to make sure no one had noticed our short journey.

It seemed in the midst of the panic, we'd been all but forgotten, our plight of no concern to anyone. A fight between two guards played out a few feet from us as they competed for an available exit. Hypnotized,

I watched as one knocked a weapon out of the other's hands. The gun careened across the floor in our direction.

"That's ours." Hayley broke free of my grip, staying low as she dashed for the weapon. Returning to me, her brow rose. "It could come in handy."

"Agreed." I nodded. "Just make sure the safety is on until we need it."

"Where's Gabriel?" Ronnie heaved in a breath, her gaze darting around the swarming mass of men. "I can't see him. Is he with Tom?"

Straightening, I looked harder into the teeming crowd, eyeing the man in charge as he was ushered out of the warehouse. For one brief moment, his team changed direction, forcing him to spin toward us and enabling me to see whether Gabriel was still in his arms. I couldn't decide if it was relief or terror that coursed as I decided Gabriel wasn't with him.

"No," I confirmed. "He doesn't have him."

"There!" Hayley pointed into the far corner of the room. "Isn't that your baby?"

Ronnie's gaze followed Hayley's finger to the woman with the red hair currently clutching Gabriel. "Yes!" Her tears fell free as she acknowledged her son was okay. "That's him."

Time protracted as another ominous noise reverberated from the metal above our heads, forcing me to focus. The whole house of cards was going to fall and destroy us all if we didn't move.

"I'll get him," I promised Ronnie, "but we need to get out of here. Hayley, can you get her out of this?" I asked, motioning to the evil-

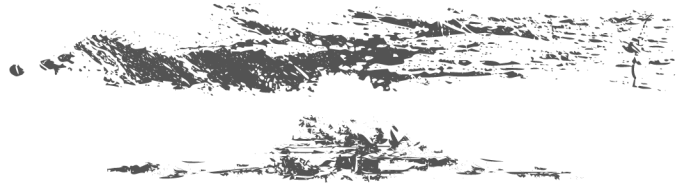
looking breast pump.

“I’ll try,” Hayley replied, stepping forward to loosen the straps at Ronnie’s wrist. “If I get you out of this, you can help.”

“Thank you.” Gratitude flashed in my friend’s gaze. “Now, go and get my son!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RONNIE



“ARE WE REALLY DOING this?” The stranger with the kind eyes and the blue hair panted as she released my right wrist before falling to my ankle. “Is this really happening?”

“I think so.” Urgency churned at my insides, my gaze flitting to Pam in the corner of the cascading chaos. She was arguing with the red-haired woman and trying to take Gabriel from her, but so far, to no avail. “It’s all going to hell.”

I wouldn’t rest until Gabriel was in my arms and we were far away from the awful nightmare. My ordeal was bad enough, but watching the place collapse around us was like something from a bad dream. Lifting my freed hand, I eased the flange from my tender nipple just as more metal crashed to the ground behind the assembled cameras. “We have to get out of here.”

“I know,” she agreed, already working on my left ankle as men dispersed in all directions.

I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised at how easily they fled and left us to our fates. Tom and his cronies had made no secret about how expendable we were to the new regime, but the effortless with which he’d been able to leave his son was breathtaking. Happy to parade Gabriel in front of the nation’s media, he’d run to save his own skin at the first sign of danger. That was a

low blow even for my slimy ex, but if he gifted me the opportunity to take back the baby he'd stolen, with Pam's help, perhaps we could find a way out of this hell.

Yanking my other breast free of the contraption, I eased the strap from my left wrist, rising from the chair and running at the woman clutching my son. It didn't concern me that I was naked or that the world Tom had constructed was falling down around us. All that mattered was Gabriel. If this was the end, then I would go protecting my son.

"Get the fuck away from him," I screeched, my voice barely audible over the sound of crashing metal. "He's mine."

"Yeah, bitch." Pam's new friend, Hayley, completed our circle around her, grabbing her hair and tugging her head back. "Give the lady her baby."

"She's no lady." Crumpled into a ball over my son, her vicious tone still managed to resonate. "None of you are."

"Fuck you!" Pam spat at her as she finally wrestled Gabriel from her arms. "You're a disgrace pandering to them the way you do."

"Is he okay?" My gaze landed on Gabriel's face. Even in the midst of the ongoing trauma, he was so wonderfully content. I almost envied him.

"Seems to be, which is more than I can say for this place."

Pam gestured behind me, and turning, I realized she was right. A mountain of scaffolding was sprawled in a precarious heap, blocking both the exit Tom had taken and the one we'd entered from. Dust rose

into the atmosphere, threatening to snatch away our air if we didn't act soon.

"Give him back," snapped the woman on her knees before us. "He belongs to the President, and I've been tasked with protecting him."

"Then you just failed, darling." Hayley shook her head in disgust, tightening her grip on the woman's long tresses as she waved the gun in the other hand.

"Here." Pam thrust Gabriel at me as she rounded on the woman. I took my son thankfully, thrilled to hold him and smell his delectable scent again. I'd missed him so damn much. "Get this off."

Pam tugged at the woman's black dress, signaling for her to comply.

"No way," she hissed from the floor. "I'm no fucking whore."

"Hold the fucking bitch!" Pam ordered, and with a smile, Hayley shifted out of the way just as Pam's right foot rose, connecting with the red-haired woman's face.

I turned Gabriel away from the violence and impending dust storm, fleeing to the farthest corner and holding him against me. "It's okay, little man," I soothed as the noise of another impact registered behind me. "Mama's here."

I didn't condone Pam's aggression, but neither would I condemn it. This was war. You were either with us, or you were against us, and the woman on her knees had made her choice the moment she'd complied with Tom's lunacy. Just because she had benefitted more overtly from his repulsive ideology didn't give her the right to throw the rest of her gender under the bus.

“I’ll ask again.” Pam’s voice oozed with disdain. “Take off the dress or I’ll break your fucking jaw.”

Risking a glance over my shoulder, I noticed the blood pouring from her nose, stifled only by the way Hayley held her back in an extreme arch.

“F-fuck you, whore!” she spluttered, trying to get to her feet as Pam’s fist landed on her cheek.

“Wrong answer.” Pam shook her head. “We don’t have fucking time for this.”

As though she sensed the weight of my stare, Pam peered back at me, our gazes locking before she turned and landed the final punch. The lights went out in the other woman’s head, and as Hayley allowed her body to crumple, Pam was already on her, spinning her around, unfastening the buttons, and ripping the dress from her unconscious body.

“Put this on.” She was out of breath as she threw the dark garment at my feet. “Let me take him.”

“You’re bleeding,” I signaled to her cut knuckles.

“Ronnie!” Exasperation rang out in her tone. “We’re going to die here if we don’t find a way out.”

“Okay, okay.”

Handing Gabriel over, I knew she was right. Losing him would be easier than ever if the rest of the structure imploded on top of us, but I didn’t like anything about the situation. Pam was the bravest woman I’d ever met, but the fire in her gaze as she took my baby was unnerving. I knew she wouldn’t harm him and would probably give her

life to save him, but the thought did little to assuage the rising nausea in my belly as I pulled the dress over my head. Too large for me, it reeked of the woman's blood and sweat, but I didn't argue with Pam's plan. I couldn't leave with no clothing. Not only would it mean exposure to the elements, but it would identify me as allegedly *unworthy* in a heartbeat, dooming me the first time some idiot guard found me.

"Is there anyone there?"

All of our attentions turned at the sound of a woman's cry, my brow furrowing as I gazed into the looming dust.

"Please. I can't breathe!"

"Who's there?" I asked, holding my breath as I hurried toward the voice.

There in the gloom was the woman I'd seen strapped to the gurney—the one whose ultrasound had brought this whole fiasco together. Coughing and spluttering for air, she squeezed her eyes closed as she fought to stay alive. Acting on instinct, I grabbed the edge of the medical bed and pulled it toward Pam.

"It's the pregnant woman," I explained, turning back to Hayley, Pam, and Gabriel as I wheeled the gurney out of the looming cloud.

"Oh, Lord." Pam lurched forward, thrusting Gabriel at me as she took over. "Hayley, help me get her off of this."

Cradling Gabriel to my chest, I watched as they helped the young woman from the gurney.

"Here." Hayley yanked the blanket from the bed she'd been tied to, spreading it over her shoulders. "That will have to do. We have to get



out of here.”

“Yes, but how?” The haze of oppressive dust inched closer by the minute, blocking our escape on all sides. From some distant place, the sound of sirens wailed—a noise once associated with comfort and relief, but that now heralded only more men in uniforms.

“We’re going to have to take a deep breath and run for it.” Pam addressed us all. “I don’t see any other choice.”

“And when we get out?” I asked, not wishing to be the voice of doom but needing to remind them all of what awaited us once we’d found our way out of the onslaught. “What then? I can’t lose him again, Pam.” Gesturing to Gabriel, I kissed the top of his soft, baby hair. “I won’t let that happen.”

“I know.” Stepping toward me, her brows knitted. “I won’t either.”

“You mean it?” Time slowed in that odd way it had tended to since the world had crumbled into shit, the cries and insidious fog muted as Pam’s gaze burned into me.

“Hayley.” Pam’s concentration shifted to the woman holding the gun. “How many bullets are there in that thing?”

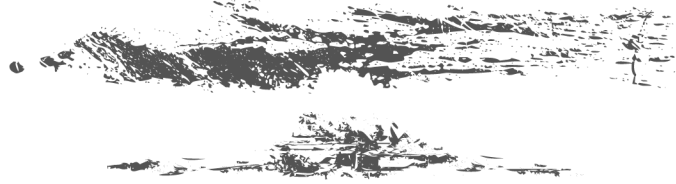
Hayley gazed down at the firearm. “I’m not an expert, but it looks like a full round to me.”

“If it comes to it, I’ll take care of us all.” Pam’s voice was somber. “None of us are going to end up at the beck and call of those bastards again.”

“Fuck that,” Hayley spat. “No offense, but I’m not contemplating suicide.” Glancing back to the growing mist, she rolled her shoulders back. “Let’s get the fuck out of here instead.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ELOISE



THE PANIC CLAWING AT my insides never subsided as I watched the women huddled in the corner. They had freed me from a miserable death but seemed blissfully unaware that the same fate awaited us all if we didn't at least try and get out of there.

"If it comes to it, I'll take care of us all." The woman who had vowed she'd return for me sounded deadly serious as she spoke to the one with the baby. "None of us are going to end up at the beck and call of those bastards again."

"Fuck that!" The woman I didn't know shook her head. "No offense, but I'm not contemplating suicide." Glancing back past me, she seemed to steel herself. "Let's get the fuck out of here instead."

"Exactly." The hand not clutching the blanket around me fell to my swollen belly. "If we don't go now, we die here regardless."

All three women eyed me, acceptance growing in their weary gazes.

"Then, let's do it." The one clutching her son—the same boy the moron President had called his—stepped toward me. "Think you'll be all right?"

"We don't have any choice." I motioned to the baby in my tummy. The only faint silver lining in this trial had been my scan. At least I knew that the little one was healthy—a minor miracle considering the

first few months of their existence. “We have other people to think about.”

“Right.” Holding her fussing baby closer to her body, she nodded. “We have to do this for them.”

“I suggest we stay low and keep to the wall.” Hayley signaled to the side of the warehouse. “We have to find an exit that way.”

“Good plan.” Pam managed an approving smile. “Hayley, you’re armed, so you should go first, then Eloise, Ronnie and Gabriel, and then me.”

“You’re Ronnie?”

It was an odd time for introductions, but somehow the humanity of identifying the woman with the baby helped ease some of my anxiety. We’d been thrust into this trauma by men, but that didn’t mean we had to subscribe to their cruelty. We were people and it was time we remembered that.

“Yes.” Her mouth twitched as her lips curled. “And you’re Eloise.”

“Lovely.” Hayley sighed impatiently as she flicked the safety off. “I hate to break up this moment of burgeoning intimacy, but it’s time to go.”

“You’re right.” Moving in behind the only one of us with a weapon, I waited as Ronnie and Pam got into position.

“Remember.” Hayley’s words echoed over my head as I lowered to a crouch, still holding my belly as though I needed a reason to get the hell out of there. “Stay as low as you can and try and hold your breath.”

“Hold onto the woman in front of you,” Pam suggested. “That way we stay together.”

Hayley nodded, offering me the back of her dress, which I accepted as I felt Ronnie tug at my blanket.

“Let’s do this!” I called out, resolved to discover a way to freedom.

I hadn’t felt this determined since I’d survived on the streets. My mission had failed then, but I couldn’t see the entire encounter as futile. Jake had been a sadistic asshole, but he’d fed and protected me from the other monsters at the facility and helped create the little person growing inside of me. I refused to be sorry for that. The world was a desolate place, but I couldn’t regret the promise of new life.

“Let’s go!” Pointing the weapon in front of her, Hayley moved forward into the gloom, and I heaved in a giant breath as I followed.

The area inside the debris of gloom was like deep space; desolate and eerie. Blinking and conscious of any sudden movement from the fog, I stayed low, moving behind Hayley as we edged along the wall. I didn’t know what awaited us at an exit but knew there had to be one—had to be some way to flee this nightmare.

We were halfway along the wall when a dim light burst into view; a door that had been flung open, bringing new light to the fog. Hayley halted, bringing us all to a sudden stop, and from over her shoulder, I watched as five or six large shadows burst through the door. Dressed in masks with powerful flashlights, they headed to our left, spreading out until only one remained in our line of sight, though the encroaching haze made it difficult to know for sure. Struggling for air, I lowered, gasping for breath as a pair of dark boots marched in our direction.

“What’s this?” At over six feet, he looked like a dark alien god as he sniggered. “Some free pussy for after the show?”

Apprehension tore at my tummy at his insidious tone as Hayley rose to her feet. “Wrong, asshole.”

Aiming in the half-light, she fired the gun toward him, sending the towering wall of muscle stumbling backward.

“Shit!” he cried, dropping his flashlight as he reached for where the bullet had struck. “I’ve been fucking shot! Repeat, some bitch has shot me. Request immediate back-up.”

“Go, go, go!” Pam’s voice hollered from behind me, and unthinkingly, I grabbed for Hayley, willing her to move forward.

“Where?” His radio crackled away to our left as we scurried forward toward the light. “I don’t see shit!”

“Use infrared!” the first one barked. “Find them. I’m bleeding!”

Fuzzy light offered hope as we approached, though the presence of male authority loomed as large as ever, the noise of heavy boots closing in from inside the warehouse.

“There!” another voice echoed from the gloom. “I see them by the exit.”

As if I needed any impetus, a giant shove from behind pushed Hayley and me straight out of the door. I stumbled forward, thankful for the fresh air and yet immediately wary of the new environment. Out there we were visible to any waiting foes, easy prey to be rounded up and punished for our impertinence.

“Whores!”

One guy from a small group of guards noticed our escape, fumbling for his weapon as we dashed out of the building. Somehow, against all odds, we were alive, but it would all be for nothing if one of those sons of bitches put bullets through us in the next sixty seconds.

“Go!” Hayley glanced back at me as she cried the instruction. “All of you go and stay together.”

“What about you?” I started as Ronnie steered me on along the tall brick wall of the outside building.

“Forget me!”

Hayley’s voice echoed, compelling me to take one final glance back. Pointing the gun, she ran toward the assembled men as she started to shoot. I only saw one of the men fall to the floor before I heeded her advice and fled. I had a baby to think about and nothing to defend myself with. I had no choice but to go.

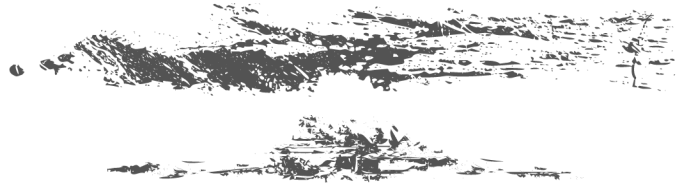
“Head for the trees!”

Ronnie’s voice guided me, but my feet pounded the concrete regardless, my gaze lowering as the ground morphed into grass, and still the gunshots rang out behind us. My blood ran cold at a woman’s cry—*Hayley’s cry*—but the hand at my shoulder urged me forward. Horror-stricken at what was happening, I yearned to do the right thing, to turn back and help the woman who’d helped me, but this dark world would not forgive such nobility.

There was little room for heroics. There was barely even enough for survival.

## CHAPTER NINE

### RONNIE



MY HEART RACED SO FAST that I might have passed out had it not been for my grim determination. I was going to make it, and so were Gabriel and Pam—that was the promise I made to myself, and I trusted in the energy of that promise. I had to. Failure was not an option.

A bullet flew past my head, so close it almost grazed my hair. The noise resonated in my head, leaving a buzzing in my ear as, instinctively, I fell to my knees.

“Oh, God!” Eloise turned, crouching down to look at me. Glancing up at her face, I realized that by some miracle the bullet had missed her as well.

“Fuck!” Pam shouted. “On the ground, both of you. We’ll have to make the final part of the journey on our bellies.”

“But I have Gabriel,” I reminded her, lowering to lie as flat on the grass as I could while I held him.

“Yeah, and I can’t exactly sprawl out on my tummy right now.” Eloise’s tone was sardonic.

“Newsflash, ladies,” Pam said as another bullet ripped through the sky. “It’s get down or die. I don’t know how many of those fuckers Hayley took out before they got her, but at least one of them still has a gun and he’s probably gaining on us.”

“Shit.” Panic swelled as I glanced back, taking in the overwhelming scene. Numerous men were sprawled on the ground behind us, writhing in agony, and at least two of them were still on the concrete, but one was indeed charging the path we’d escaped. “He’s coming!”

“Run!”

Pam’s command didn’t resonate as it should have done. I heard the word and saw the way her lips moved but couldn’t process its meaning.

“I’m not leaving you,” I whimpered, glancing desperately between Gabriel, Eloise, and the woman who’d saved me on more than one occasion. “I can’t!”

“You have to,” Eloise encouraged, ducking down to the grass as another bullet strayed far too near. “We have to save our children.”

“She’s right.” Pam’s jaw tightened. “We all have to do what we have to do, and that means—”

“Get your hands up, whores!”

She never finished her sentence, her words unceremoniously ended by the guard who was waving his pistol around only feet from where she kneeled.

Trembling, I laid Gabriel on the grass before my hands rose, and in my peripheral vision, I saw Eloise doing the same thing.

“And you, bitch!” Prodding the chamber of the gun to Pam’s head, he sneered. “Your fucking moment has come.”

“Please.” It wasn’t in my nature to beg, but perhaps the days with Tom had taken their toll. It was easier to plead than I recalled it being.



“Don’t hurt her.”

“Shut up, bitch.” His face twisted into an ugly grimace as his glare flitted to me. “You and your friend are next.”

“She’s got the President’s son.” Pam shifted on her knees, motioning toward Gabriel. “And the other one is pregnant. Just leave them alone.”

‘Shut the fuck up,’ he shouted, jabbing his weapon harder into her skull. “I’m in charge here. You don’t get to decide anything. Get it?”

“Y-yes, sir.” I gave him what I sensed his ego wanted, hoping it would buy us some time for a reprieve, but looking around, I couldn’t see how. We were on our own, and the longer we stayed, the more men would come running to support him.

“That’s more like it,” he leered, easing his gun from Pam’s head for a moment. “An obedient whore. Maybe I’ll kill this one and use your holes before ending you.” Grabbing Pam’s hair, he jerked her head back to his leg. “Yes, that’s a good plan. I think I’ll—”

I barely had time to register the sound of the gunshot before it hit its target, my heart threatening to burst into my throat as the bullet impacted. But it didn’t come from the man towering over Pam, nor any behind him, and thankfully it wasn’t Pam that lurched forward as the insides of her brain exploded from her skull. It was the menace who’d pressed the gun into her head.

“Oh, God!” Collecting Gabriel, who had started crying at the gunfire, I pressed him into my chest, glancing away from the sickening scene.

“What the fuck?” Stunned, Pam turned to see her potential assassin bleeding out on the grass beside her.

“That was the last bullet.”

We all peered up to acknowledge our savior, the ashen face of Hayley exhausted as she fell to her knees, letting the weapon slip from her hand. Holding her side, she drew in shaky breaths as Pam leapt to her feet and dashed to her.

“Hayley!” she called. “I thought you were dead.”

“I am.” Removing her hand, we all acknowledged the blood gushing from her side. “Those bastards aren’t good shots, but they got me in the end.”

“We can help you.” It was Eloise who rushed to Hayley’s side. “Get you some medical attention.”

“Look at me.” Hayley shook her head slowly. “It’s too late. I’m bleeding to death, but at least I could get you guys out of here.” Pressing one palm onto the grass, she groaned in obvious pain. “Please.” She pulled in what was clearly an agonizing breath. “Just go. Make all of this worth it and get away.”

“But Hayley,” Eloise went on. “It’s not too late. Come with us.”

“Listen to me,” Hayley snapped. “Every second you stay here is wasted. You need to. Get. Away. Now.”

“Thank you.” Rising to my feet, I wandered to her and kissed the top of her head. “We’ll never forget everything you’ve done.”

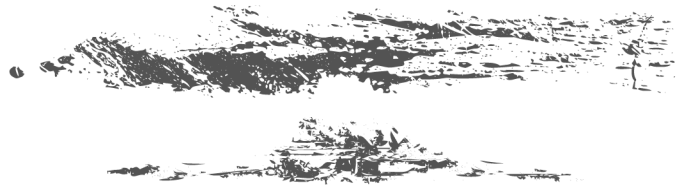
Meeting my eyes, Hayley managed a small smile. “Do me a favor.”

“Anything,” I replied.

“Shoot that bastard ex of yours in the fucking balls.”

## CHAPTER TEN

### PAM



COURAGE WAS NEVER A concept I'd given much thought to until Ronnie came crashing into my life. It certainly wasn't how I'd have described myself, although she had told me many times how my bravery had moved her. Standing over Hayley as she gasped for breath, the idea cemented. I wasn't brave at all—not the way she had been. I hadn't valiantly offered to give myself up so others could live, but witnessing her sacrifice meant those of us who remained had no choice—we *had* to be fearless. We had to survive.

"Come on," I urged, motioning for Eloise and Ronnie to head for cover. "Get to the trees."

"But what about Hayley?" Eloise was close to tears as I ushered her away. Maybe it was the pregnancy hormones that lubricated her emotional responses, or perhaps it was only me who was damn near impossible to affect. I never used to be this hard. Once upon a time, Ronnie had called me a free spirit, but only the shell of that woman remained. The heart of me had been ripped away. "We can't leave her."

"We have to."

"Y-yes," Hayley rasped. "Listen to Pam. You h-have to go."

Anxiety knotted in my stomach at her plea, but I noticed how even my apprehension was weary today. After everything I'd been through,

it took more than this torment to rile me. Survival insisted I cope and carry on.

“Run,” I whispered, watching as Ronnie guided Eloise on. “Head for cover.”

“What about you?” Concern danced in Ronnie’s eyes as she peered back at me.

“I’m coming,” I reassured, glancing back to check there weren’t more guards on our tail. The coast was clear, but I had no doubt more men with guns would follow. We had to be gone before they did.

Crouching, I squeezed Hayley’s cold hand. “Thank you for this.” It was a ridiculous thing to say to a dying woman, but it was all I had. “You’ve given us a chance.”

“It’s down to you now.” Her lips twitched as if there was something amusing about the statement. “You have to protect them.”

“I know.” I met her eyes, watching the pain as it glimmered there. “I will, and this...” Gesturing to her wound, I inhaled. “Will be over soon.”

“Sooner than you think.” Hayley managed a weak chuckle as she rested on the grass, looking up at the sky. “I’ll be gone before those fuckers come, and you’ll be gone too, won’t you?”

“Yes,” I promised, grasping her fingers one final time. “I will.”

Rising to my full height, I risked one final glance at Hayley before I turned and ran. The lingering thought as I chased to catch up with Ronnie and Eloise was how peaceful she looked, eyes fluttering closed as she welcomed her fate. It wasn’t the way any of us would have chosen before the new regime, but in the dark new world we

were forced to endure, slipping away under the sky was as good as it got. Hayley deserved that much.

“Is she okay?” Eloise’s gaze was frantic as it darted back to Hayley’s body.

“She’s gone.”

I hadn’t intended my voice to be so clipped, but deep down, I knew I was right. Hayley was another victim of Tom’s brutality, but we had no time to mourn her or the hundreds of thousands of others.

“Oh, God.” Eloise’s brow creased, her shoulders falling as she heaved in a breath.

“Come on,” Ronnie soothed. “She died so we could live. So, let’s live.”

“Good advice,” I agreed, steering Eloise over the roots jutting from the ground and into the comparative safety of the woods.

“We m-made it,” Eloise stammered, sniffing back her emotion. “Can we stop for a minute?”

“There’s no time.” I didn’t stop and look back to discover if more uniforms were after us. Either way, we had to keep going. “The trees give us cover, but they’re also the only place we could have gone to hide. They’ll be after us sooner rather than later.”

“Shit,” she muttered, but turned, accepting my verdict. “Where to, then?”

“I don’t know where we are,” I admitted, moving between the two women and steadying them as we ventured deeper into the forested area. “Do either of you know?”

“He didn’t say.” Ronnie sounded distant. “But the journey wasn’t far and we sure as hell don’t want to wander back into his clutches.”

“We need food and shelter.” I was speaking more to myself than either of them, my gaze moving past the trees to see what was on the horizon.

“Maybe they’ll just let us go?” Eloise’s voice was hopeful as she glanced at me. “Just accept we’ve gone and move on.”

“You don’t know Tom.” Ronnie snorted. “He’s a twisted and possessive son-of-a-bitch and I have his son. He’ll never let us go.”

“And you’re carrying the first baby of the so-called new order,” I reminded Eloise. “That’s what this whole charade was about, remember? Think they’re going to just forget about that? About your baby?”

Her brow furrowed deeper as her hand rose to her tummy. “Why has this happened?” A low sob caught in her throat. “Why are they treating us like this?”

“Because they can.” Ronnie sounded almost detached as she trudged on with Gabriel in her arms. We were making good pace but would have to keep moving if we wanted to avoid recapture, and since Hayley had used our only gun and bullets defending us, that was the only option still open to us. “Because we all ignored the red flags and now there’s no one left to stop them.”

“Hey, come on.” I glanced between them, eager to keep the conversation upbeat. “Let’s not focus on that right now. We have two babies to think about.”

“What’s going to happen to mine?” Eloise’s voice broke. “How can I give birth on the run?”

“Ronnie managed,” I told her flatly. “And you will as well.”

“You did?” Blinking away her tears, Eloise fired the question at my old friend.

“Yeah.” Ronnie sighed. “With a lot of help from Pam, I did, and remember, however shit it seems, at least you’ll get to keep your baby. They won’t be taken from you. That counts for a lot.”

“That’s right.”

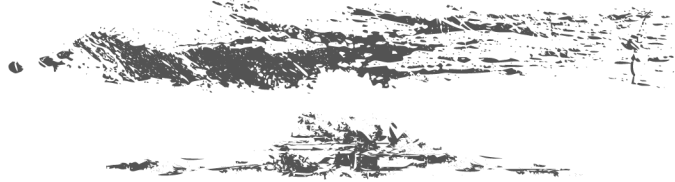
I glanced at Ronnie knowingly. I didn’t even know what she had been through since we’d been seized and separated, but I was smart enough to know little of it had been good. Yet still, she’d survived. She’d made it through for Gabriel, and now she had her snuggling baby to prove it. There was hope, and Gabriel proved it.

“That’s everything.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ELOISE



THE SOUND OF THE GUNFIRE was distant, but I tensed nonetheless, my gaze returning to Pam.

“I’ll be as fast as I can,” Ronnie murmured, stroking her baby’s hair as he dozed at her breast. “It’s just that he’s hungry.”

We were all hungry, but our appetites, like our fears, were things we were fast learning not to vocalize, as if saying the words aloud would somehow breathe them into life.

“It’s okay,” Pam soothed. “I know it’s been a while since he fed.”

“He’ll need more than only milk soon.” Ronnie’s brows knitted as though she hadn’t meant to admit what was obvious.

“Here.”

Reaching into one of her pockets, Pam thrust an apple at her. A few of the trees we’d passed had borne fruit, and one particularly generous shrub had lots of low-lying apples to offer.

“Share it with him as best you can.”

“I’m fine,” Ronnie lied, taking the apple from Pam’s hand. “But I’ll mush some for Gabriel.”

“Don’t be a martyr,” Pam warned. “We all need to eat. I’m just sorry that we couldn’t take more with us.”

With no backpack or other means to carry anything, the pockets of Pam's dress were our only form of transportation.

"Same goes for you." Closing the distance between us, Pam offered me another piece of fruit. "Your baby needs feeding too."

"What about you?" I asked as she walked away. "I didn't think we had any left."

"We'll find more." She didn't glance back to acknowledge me. "One of these trees will have more fruit. You'll see."

"Share it with me," I offered, gripping the blanket around me as I wandered toward her. "I don't need much and—"

"No." Spinning on her heel, she interrupted my sentence. "It's for you and Bump. You need it more."

"I've learned there's little point in arguing with her." Ronnie smiled before taking a bite of her apple. "Between you and me, she's usually right."

Pam's lips curled as she looked down at her friend. I didn't know how long the two had known each other, but watching from afar, Pam seemed more like a mother than a peer. If what Ronnie had told me was true—and I had no reason to suspect that she'd lie—then their alliance was stronger than any friendship I'd known. An unexpected beacon of light in the prevailing blanket of gloom.

"Okay." I was almost rueful to have broken the moment of quiet intimacy ballooning between them under the canopy of the old oak. "Thank you, Pam."

God knew we didn't have much. Neither Ronnie nor I had shoes, and I didn't even have any clothing, but standing there in the small

clearing, I was explicitly aware of everything we *did* have. Freedom from the clutches of the patriarchy that longed to control us, the chance to smile and laugh when we wanted to, and perhaps most critically of all... each other. I wasn't stupid enough to think I'd have survived without them. Hell, I'd probably be dead by now, still strapped to the damn gurney.

"You're welcome." Pam's eyes were kind as they met mine, her expression hardening as another round of gunfire broke the silence somewhere in the distance. "But eat quickly. We can't stay here for too much longer."

A few minutes later, Ronnie was back on her feet, having used leaves and foliage to clean Gabriel as best she could. The solutions we had available were far from perfect and we all knew our fates if we didn't discover shelter soon, but our sense of hopefulness was fervent regardless. We hadn't gone through all of this just to give up and die in the woods. We weren't going to be that easy to overcome.

The three of us walked until our bodies ached and dusk arrived to snatch away the light. Sometimes we chatted, but mostly we slogged on in silence. Each of us was filled with our own woes. Each of us had been subjected to far more than was right, but we all knew one thing for sure: we had to keep going.

"I think that's the end of the woods," Ronnie concluded as she stumbled over the roots of a large tree and gazed out to the horizon. "Maybe we should stay here until the morning."

"It's not safe here." Pam's answer perfectly mirrored my feelings, but then, where was safe when you were on the run from the fascist

state?

The grass was cold as I lurched past her. Despite the chill, I was grateful for the clear, starry night and the moon rising high in the sky. As my gaze swept across the horizon, I noticed something I hadn't seen before.

"Eloise," Pam chastised. "Don't go too far. We don't want to lose you."

"What's that?" My pulse quickened with the question, my eyes adjusting to try and discern the answer for myself.

"What?" Intrigued by my question, she and Ronnie walked toward me.

"That." I pointed to the place a large, dark shape sat on the near horizon. "It looks like a building of some sort."

"A building?" Ronnie's breathing accelerated as she strained to see the place I referred to. "She could be right. There is something there."

"Let's check it out." I was already moving, seeking the sanctuary of something other than the cold and wet earth.

"Careful," Pam warned, jogging to keep up with me. "It could be inhabited, or worse, used by Tom's guys."

"It looks like a farm building." Ronnie had taken the words right out of my mouth. "It's dark and I don't see anyone around."

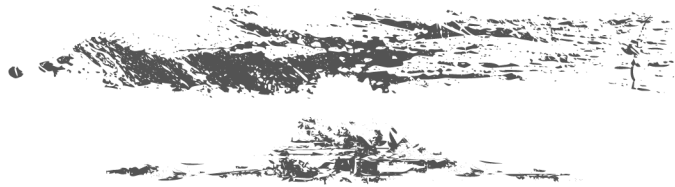
Her verdict lingered as I held my breath, standing on the precipice of something close to hope.

“Maybe it’s somewhere we can stay for the night?” In the end, it was Ronnie who vocalized what I suspected we were all thinking.

“Whatever happens, we can’t go on in the dark like this.” Stumbling forward, my focus fixed on the building looming ahead. “We have to find out.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### TOM



WATCHING NIGHT FALL from my window, anger furred inside me, making it difficult to think. Lifting the crystal glass to my lips, I swigged at the expensive Cognac, but it didn't help. Nothing did.

*Richard.*

His name bounded around my head, taunting me. My son was gone, abandoned by the very men who'd sworn to protect him, and despite my power, there seemed to be nothing I could do about it. At this most critical of junctures, I was impotent in the face of his loss.

Around me, men prattled on about security: the security of the structure that had fallen, of the event that had been set up to celebrate our success, even *my* security, but they all failed to see the point. My son was missing. He was maybe even dead, and all they could do was stand there and talk.

"Enough!" Slamming my fist into the glass, I turned to glare at them all. "Why hasn't the third team reported back? What's going on out there?"

I turned back to the darkening sky, my mind returning once again to my baby son. If he was caught under the debris, how long could he last without food, warmth, and water? The question tore at me like a serrated blade.

"Sir, the third team is in location. I am waiting for them to report."

My head of security, Adam Wesley, shuffled from side to side, clearly expecting my wrath. He had good reason for the paranoia, and as soon as I found Richard again, I would have his balls, plus those of any other man found culpable for my son's welfare. Wesley had been the one who'd ushered me out of the warehouse, handing Richard to some dumb little red-dye before refusing to go back on the grounds of structural integrity. My hands balled at the harrowing memory. I should have made the asshole go back and find him, should have insisted, but...

"There's every reason to suspect they'll find him safe and well." Bellamy smiled, presumably attempting to be reassuring but failing miserably.

That was increasingly the problem with Bellamy and Carson. They didn't have children. They didn't understand what it was like to invest so much in another human being. They could never understand the trepidation currently doing somersaults in my stomach.

"The first and second teams didn't find anything," I grumbled, although that wasn't strictly true.

They had found the corpse of the aforementioned red-dye, her body battered where a piece of the interior structure had landed on her, as well as various other nameless bodies. But they hadn't found my son, nor the woman who'd brought him into the world.

"I bet *she* has him."

I didn't intend to say the words out loud, but glancing up, I realized that I had, the expressions of all my closest advisors puzzled as they tried to decide how to respond.

“His whore mother, you mean?”

Inevitably, it was Bellamy who answered. He seemed to be one of the few prepared to speak as the hours passed. Carson was keeping a low profile, probably because my and Richard’s attendance had been his idea in the first place. If it hadn’t been for his smart idea, my son would still be tucked up in the nursery.

“Yes.” My jaw tightened at the confirmation. “She has him.”

“There’s no proof of that, Mr. President,” Wesley piped up, but one hard stare from me sent him withering back into the corner.

“There’s no sign of her body,” I countered, draining the rest of my liquor. “Or the other whores we brought there.”

“That’s right, isn’t it, Wesley?” Bellamy spun to my security man. “The whore strapped to the gurney hasn’t been found, and neither have the two blue-dyes who weren’t killed in the initial accident?”

“That’s correct, Mr. Bellamy.” Wesley nodded. “Confirmed dead inside the warehouse so far include one red-dye, two unidentified males thought to be camera operatives, and the man we believe to be Jake.”

“Jake.” I shook my head as an image of his face burst into my mind. “Why didn’t he get the hell out of there when we did?”

“Reports say he stayed with his baby.” Bellamy frowned. “By the time he ran, it was too late. He was caught under the structural failure by the exit we used.”

“Fuck.” My grip stiffened on the glass, threatening to smash it into pieces in my palm. “What a waste.”



A heavy silence swelled as my words lingered.

“But still the whore carrying his baby escaped?” My attention fixed first on Wesley and then Bellamy. “How?”

“W-we’re not sure, sir...” Wesley started.

“She was strapped to the damn bed.” My brow furrowed as I recalled her there. “She couldn’t have saved herself, so there’s only one logical conclusion to draw.”

Glancing around the very best minds in the country, I waited for one of them to finish the point for me, but nobody spoke. Hell, only Bellamy could even meet my gaze.

“Someone else rescued her.” Bellamy’s voice was ominous when he finally responded.

“Correct.” Smashing the glass back to the counter, I pulled in a breath. “And I think I know who.”

“You really think the whores would have been intelligent enough to have organized themselves, sir?” Puzzlement raged in Wesley’s gaze.

“The first team reported seeing movement in the building,” Bellamy reminded him. “And another team was found executed after we’d evacuated the area.”

“And the other body?” I prompted, trying to put all of the pieces together in my head. “Didn’t the second team report an unidentified female found dead nearby?”

“Affirmative, sir,” Wesley confirmed. “She had stolen a gun and had taken out multiple team members.”

“Let’s hitch a cab back to Real Street, guys.” Wandering to my chair, I slumped into the luxurious leather. “She shot the whole team, enabling my whore of an ex to get away with my son.”

“And for some reason, she chose to take the other women with her.” Bellamy’s grimace summed up how I felt about the whole damn disaster.

We should have done better, and just as soon as Richard was safe, people were going to pay for their recklessness.

“There can’t be more than three of them.” Bellamy stepped toward me. “Whores, I mean. We already have several teams out after them.” Reaching for my shoulder, he squeezed. “We’ll find them, Tom. We’ll find Richard and bring him home.”

Looking up, I met his determined gaze. “You’d better be right.”

“I *am* right.”

I didn’t want to mention the numerous concerns that were rattling through my head if his assertions were correct, like how were they coping in the plummeting temperatures, and what were they eating? Ronnie needed to eat to provide milk for Richard, and recently, he had started eating more whole food. What sustenance could he find in the middle of nowhere?

My focus shifted back to the dark window, fresh anxiety rippling through my body. Neither of them would survive out there for long, and even though I would never admit it to another living soul, the thought of losing Richard’s mother pained me almost as much as the idea of grieving for him. I’d come to rely on my sweet little human cow, the whore who delivered fresh milk for me and my son, plus took care of

my other needs. I wasn't sure I could contemplate a future without them both.

"Update from the third team, sir." Wesley's groveling tone disturbed my melancholy monologue.

"And?" I prompted, unsure whether I'd have preferred news of more dead bodies or not. It was better that they had a shot at survival, but I wasn't a fool. A naked woman and small child couldn't endure the cold and exposure for a long period. For all I knew, they were already dead, curled up in a field somewhere for some ignorant farmer to find.

"There's no new information, Mr. President." Wesley gulped as he read the verdict from his device. "No new bodies."

"So, she's out there somewhere." My heart thundered inside my chest as I processed the news. "She's out there with my fucking son."

"It would seem so, sir, yes."

"Get another three teams out there," I spat, scanning the room for any man who dared to defy me. "This is priority number one. My son and heir is missing, and I want him found and brought home to safety."

"On it, sir." Wesley nodded, dashing from the room to organize the plan, but somehow, the knowledge did little to quell my nagging paranoia.

"I should be out there looking for him." Rising, I walked back to the window, my palm resting against the cold glass. "Should have been out there hours ago."

"Don't be ridiculous." Bellamy laughed as he followed me. "We have good men for that. Experts at this sort of thing. They'll find him, Tom. He'll be okay."

“It’s Mr. Fucking President.” I rounded on him, bellowing the words so that everyone in the palace could hear them. “Is that so difficult to understand?”

I’d put up with Bellamy’s cavalier attitude to my title for far too long, but even he ought to have known that this wasn’t the night to try me.

“Of course not.” His palms rose in a gesture of conciliation as his gaze slid briefly to Carson. No doubt they were wondering about my mental stability, and at what point they’d be justified in relieving me of my duties, but I had news for them. This social revolution was mine. It had been my idea, my vision for the future, and I had worked too damn hard to allow fools to usurp me. “No problem, Mr. President.

“Get my car organized.” I didn’t direct the order at anyone in particular but assumed one of them would act on the command. “I’m going out there.”

“Now, sir?”

I stirred at Carson’s voice. It was the first time he’d spoken for hours. “Yes, now,” I reiterated, staring at him. “I want to be available to act as soon as one of the teams finds them, and you’re right, Bellamy. They *will* find them.”

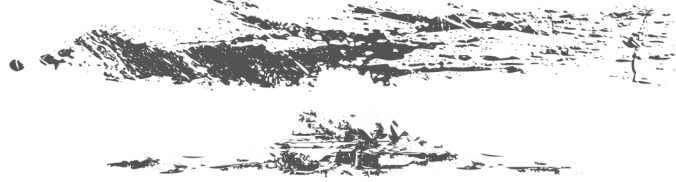
“No problem.” Nodding, Bellamy motioned for two other men to expedite my instruction. “Shall I come with you?”

My gaze flitted between him and Carson—two of my oldest friends and allies. There was no point in turning on them now. Depending on what I found out there in the English countryside, I was going to need them more than ever.

“You stay here,” I decided, meeting his eyes. “Carson can keep me company.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### RONNIE



HOLDING GABRIEL AGAINST my chest, I permitted my eyes to briefly close. The bale of hay wasn't the most comfortable bed I'd ever known, but it was a hell of a lot better than the cells I'd been held in for the last few months, and this sanctuary had one thing none of the others had—my baby. Breathing in the smell of his skin, I couldn't resist my smile. On some level, I recognized that the world outside the barn had gone to shit. I realized that we had very serious woes to contend with in the next few hours, but I refused to let those concerns oppress me. I had Gabriel back, and he was the center of my entire life. Nothing could be awful while we were together.

Turning my head toward the barn door, I recalled how we'd gained access to the outbuilding. It hadn't taken long to ascertain the place was empty, but still, Pam had reservations. What if it belonged to men in power, and as she so eloquently put it, what men didn't have power under the new rules? What if it was under surveillance? I couldn't argue with her shrewd logic, but in the end, fatigue had made our minds up for us. She hadn't eaten for hours, Eloise was exhausted, and I had my son to consider. We all needed to rest, and there were no other options available. It had to be the barn.

We'd snuck inside, fortunate that the door was only loosely chained closed. The interior was dark, lit only where the moonlight infiltrated through the wooden boards, but it was good enough. Good

enough to make out large bales we could collapse onto, and more protection than any of us had dared to dream of.

“Are you asleep?” Eloise’s voice stirred me, and shifting on the hay, I rolled in her direction.

“No,” I admitted. “But Gabriel is.”

“He’s lovely,” she replied. “You’re lucky.”

“Thank you. I know.” Stroking his soft hair, I whispered. “Are you okay? Beyond the obvious, of course.”

“I don’t know.” She paused as if considering the question. “I think so. I’m glad this little one is okay.”

“You’re going to be a great mother.”

It was a ridiculous thing to say of a woman I’d only just met, but I didn’t doubt it. After everything she had been through, Eloise knew what it took to put her baby first. I knew she would die before she saw any harm come to them.

“I hope so.” She hesitated, and I sensed that whatever came next was the crux of her dialogue. “What do you think will happen to us, Ronnie?”

“I have no idea.” A low shudder ran along my spine, my eyes fluttering shut as I processed the rising terror. “And that’s the truth. If I’ve learned anything, though, it’s just to enjoy this moment while we can. We’re alive. By some miracle, we’re unhurt and free. In troubled times, that’s all we can ask for.”

“You’re right.” Her voice rasped with her own sob. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” Reaching for her, my fingers grazed her arm, lowering to find her hand. “Don’t be sorry. We’ve been through things we should never have experienced. Seen things nobody should have to see...” My voice trailed away as I grappled with my own memories. “But tomorrow is never promised, so let’s just enjoy today.”

“Thanks.” She sniffed. “I needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome.” I managed a smile as I squeezed her hand. “Try and get some rest. It will help with whatever comes next.”

Leaning back on the bale, I waited until the sound of her breathing calmed, hoping she’d fallen asleep. How many other Eloises were there already? Women who’d been compelled into procreation and held against their will? Women like me.

I bit my lip at the terrible thought, wishing I could push the doom out of my mind, but contrary to my advice, it was increasingly difficult to achieve. Yes, I was beyond grateful to have Gabriel back, but what hope was there for his future while Tom grasped the reins of power? What hope was there for anyone?

*Don’t, I chastised myself. Don’t torment yourself. Tom and his idiots will happily do that for you. Don’t aid them in the process.*

It was time I practiced what I preached and cast the unease aside. The worries would all be there in the morning. Cuddling my sleeping baby closer, I focused on what was good, on what I had; two women who were as resolved as I was to survive and my son. Compared to many others, I was a rich woman.

Buoyed by the thought, I imagined a world without Tom and his poison. A place where men and women could be genuine equals. A



domain where respect and optimism trumped prejudice and bigotry. What would I do in a world like that? How would I celebrate our progress? Lips curling, I envisioned my son as he grew into a boy, eventually imagining the man he would become. Like every mother before me, his fulfillment and security was everything I craved. It was a story as infinite as time itself. Each generation wanted a better life for their children, a more hopeful and prosperous future, but had any ever needed it more than ours?

Stirring at a distant, nagging sound, I realized I had dozed off. Somehow, the impossible had happened and sleep had come for me, or maybe I was still dreaming and the peculiar noise was all part of the illusion. Flexing my fingers and stretching my legs, I acknowledged that Gabriel was still at my breast. The warming realization convinced me that this was real and whatever fleeting slumber I'd captured had already dissolved.

Listening harder, my brows knitted as the noise rumbled from somewhere outside the barn. Pulse quickening, I sat upright, trying to decipher what I had heard. A low, vague reverberation resounded, growing louder as though whatever created it was drawing in. I climbed to my feet, padding over loose hay as I edged closer to the door. I wasn't sure why, but something about the sound was ominous. The outbuilding wasn't close to any other residences, so there was no good reason for any disturbance, especially at night.

"What is it?" The edge in Pam's voice did nothing to quell my ballooning anxiety, and turning, I found her on her feet behind me.

"I don't know. But it doesn't sound good."

There was a strange strength in the confession, an acknowledgment that something was wrong and I wasn't alone.

"Here, take him."

Passing Gabriel to the only other person in the world I entrusted his care to, I inched back to the door, pressing myself against the gap. Initially, there wasn't much to see. Shades of black only visible when the moon slipped out of her cloudy hiding spot, but still the sinister clamor continued, the noise surrounding us until it finally became discernible.

Tensing, my blood ran cold as I understood what it was. *Boots*. The consistent drumming of heavy boots on the hard earth.

"Shit."

I wasn't even sure if I said the word out loud, but it resonated in my head until my panic was almost out of control.

"What?" Pam asked, her frantic tone drawing whimpers from Gabriel. "What can you see?"

"Not much," I admitted. "But I know what it is, Pam. It's the sound of men marching and it seems like they're everywhere."

"Men?" She hesitated, and I wondered if she was fighting as hard as I was to squash her rising dread.

"Yes." Crouching, I leaned farther out of the door in an attempt to see more clearly.

"But you can't see them?"

"No," I answered. "They could be coming from behind us or either side of the barn." Peering over my shoulder, I saw her rocking Gabriel.

“What are we going to do?”

*What can we do?* She didn't say the words aloud, but I swore I sensed them from her, and she was right. If my hunch was correct, there was nothing we could do. We were trapped in the only obvious place anyone could hide for miles. If Tom was looking for Gabriel and had given orders for a ground search, his men were certain to stop at the barn.

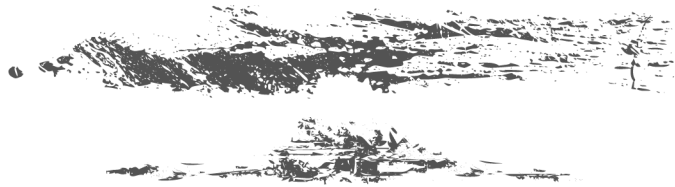
“We hide.” Confidence flared in her tone as she backed into the building. “Get away from the door and take your son. I'll wake up Eloise.”

“No need.” Eloise sounded terrified as she emerged from behind Pam, and rising from the door, I could just make out her somber expression in the half light. “I'm awake. I heard what you said.”

“You're right,” I replied, taking Gabriel and hushing his growing mewls. “If we have any chance, we're going to have to hide like we've never hidden before.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### TOM



MY MEN WERE EVERYWHERE, spread out and searching in every conceivable direction by the time I arrived at the impromptu headquarters. General Honniton had been put in charge of the woman-hunt, and meeting him, I was relieved to see how seriously he was taking the task.

“Rest assured, Mr. President,” he said, pacing the length of the marquee erected for his HQ. “We will leave no stone unturned. I have men headed in every possible bearing. If the prisoners are out there, we will find them.”

I smiled, reassured by the certainty in his voice and made a mental note to promote Honniton. I needed more capable men like him at the helm. “I’m pleased to hear that, General. Thank you, but I want to be out there with them.”

Honniton’s brow furrowed. “Out there, sir?”

“In the field, General. I want to be out there when my son is found; the first person who holds him when the whore who calls herself his mother is captured.”

“It’s much safer for you to stay here, Mr. President.” He gestured around the canvas perimeter. “Much easier for us to guarantee your safety.”

“I understand, but Mr. Carson and I have come to be helpful.” I signaled to my old friend, watching as the blood drained from his face. “We don’t want to just sit here and wait.”

“I-if you’re sure?” Honniton hesitated, as if I was about to interrupt and change my mind. Evidence, if any was needed, that however good the general was, he didn’t know me.

“I am,” I assured him. “Send Mr. Carson to one flank and me to the other. Perhaps you could head a third? No doubt your men will be emboldened to see their leaders taking charge.”

“As you wish, sir.” Honniton shook his head. “I’ll get motorbikes to take us all where we’re needed.”

He turned to walk away and had nearly made it to the exit before he paused, glancing back at me.

“General?” I asked, sensing there was a question headed my way.

“Can I assume I can give the shoot to kill order to my men, sir?”

“Shoot to kill?” I wandered toward him. “You do realize that my baby son is out there, don’t you?”

“Y-yes sir,” Honniton responded. “But the standard response to those who flee their responsibilities is immediate execution.”

“I know,” I replied. “Having written the legislation myself. But I cannot authorize live rounds around my son. I’m sure you understand. Give orders for the men to use tasers and, should I not be among the team to find them, instruct they bring them to me personally.”

“Yes, sir.” Honniton nodded as he offered me a salute. “Consider it done.”



LESS THAN FIFTEEN MINUTES later, I was on the back of a bike, powering off in pursuit of what was mine. Watching the rugged countryside slip past in the headlights of the powerful vehicle, I was glad to be there, doing the right thing. Too often I had delegated important tasks—it had been essential for the regime to grow—but for something as important as Richard’s welfare, there was no other choice. I’d listened to Wesley’s drivel for too long, and once my son was safe and well, there would be consequences for those men who’d let us down.

“We’re headed west, sir.” The driver’s voice sounded in from my earpiece. “We should join the others in around ten minutes.”

“Good,” I answered, unsure if he could even hear the reply. “The sooner, the better.”

Gripping onto the side of the bike, Richard filled my thoughts again. He was out there somewhere and it was down to me to rescue him.

I had let my desire for his mother cloud my judgment for long enough, allowing her venom to sully my plans. I was loathed to admit it, but my advisors had been right. I should have sent Ronnie to the farms long ago. I could still have visited her there if my appetite demanded it. Could even have knocked her up again, but I’d have cut her out of Richard’s life for good. Her milk could be expressed to him if need be, but the truth was, he was almost at an age where it wasn’t a requirement. He, like I, had to let the whore go.

Today was the final straw—the impetus I’d apparently needed to cut her off. After tonight, I’d ensure she was stowed away with the other cattle—out of sight and out of mind. Execution was too good for the fate that awaited Veronica Hudson.

Grinning at the welcome thought, I realized how eager I was to taste what the future had to offer. There were hordes of red-dyes to choose from. Bellamy and Carson had a never-ending supply. I’d send my net out further and cherry-pick the best of the bunch. Maybe it was time I took a wife of my own. A respectable woman who could pop out some siblings for Richard. That would look good on the billboards, and naturally, her presence would do nothing to limit my conquests. My new laws practically insisted men try fruit from every tree while ensuring it was illegal for red-dyes to stray. Finally, I was on the verge of having everything I’d ever dreamed about.

“Here we are, Mr. President.”

My heart leaped at the driver’s interruption, but as I looked around, I noticed he was right. A huge line of armed men spread out ahead of us, moving forward one step at a time. I waited as the bike slowed, jumping down as soon as it was safe and removing the helmet the general had insisted I wore.

“Mr. President.” A young soldier saluted as I approached. “I’m Second Lieutenant Wilson. So good to have you with us, sir.”

“Thanks.” Handing him my motorcycle helmet, I signaled to his men. “How’s your progress?”

“Moving, sir,” he replied, passing the helmet to a subordinate. “Nothing to report yet, but we’re not stopping until we find the

prisoners.”

“Good man.” Nodding, I breathed in the chilly fresh air. “They’re out there somewhere.”

“Yes sir.”

“Did you receive your updated orders, Second Lieutenant?”

He turned to me as we started to walk. “Which orders are those, sir?”

“To stand down on the shoot to kill order.” My hands balled, wondering if any of the other men in charge had been updated. “No live rounds. Tasers only. I want the prisoners alive.”

“Understood, sir.” Raising his radio to his mouth, he gave the new command.

“How far are we from the warehouse that collapsed?” I asked, glancing around the dark landscape.

“A little over ten miles, sir,” he answered. “We have men covering every possible course they could have taken.”

*Good.* It was only a matter of time before my son was back in my arms. I had to hang onto that thought. I couldn’t dwell on the numerous outcomes that might have happened to him in the hours since I last held him. I should never have allowed Wesley to take him. Should never have left him with the useless red-dye. Should never have—

“Second Lieutenant.”

I stilled at the sudden voice on his radio.

“This is Wilson,” he acknowledged. “Go ahead, soldier.”



“There’s a building ahead, sir,” the subordinate went on.

“Which direction, Private?” The second lieutenant glanced toward me, pre-empting my next query.

“Due west, sir. It’s approximately two-thirds of a mile away.”

“That’s them!” Excitement swelled in my chest as I struggled to see the building the private referred to. I had no way of knowing it was the right place, and yet every fiber of my being told me it was. “That’s where they’re hiding.”

“We’ll check it out, sir,” the second lieutenant promised. “But we need to make sure we cover every inch of ground. They might hear us and try to run.”

Swallowing, I realized he was right. We had to play it safe. I couldn’t risk losing Richard a second time.

“Attention.” His voice lowered. “Move ahead, but let’s keep the noise to a minimum. I want men flanking the building on all sides.”

The soldiers pressed on, spreading wider and preparing to surround the building, and as we neared, the location finally came into sight. It looked like an old barn, possibly abandoned, but certainly not inhabited. It was the ideal place for enemies of the state to hide from the law.

My pulse quickened as we moved closer, that sense of knowing burgeoning as the building loomed. “Handle this with care, Second Lieutenant.” Waves of trepidation rose in my stomach, goading me to speak. “My son’s in there.”

“Are we in position?” the second lieutenant whispered into the radio. “I want every inch of this place covered before we go in. A

reminder that the President's son could be inside the building.”

*Is inside.*

The correction echoed in my head, although I bit it back from escaping my lips.

Time stretched out around us as I waited for my men to be ready, long protracted seconds where my insides knotted and air was difficult to grasp. Why was I so anxious, for God's sake? I was the leader, the one in charge, the one with all the cards in the deck at my disposal. I had nothing to worry about, but I still couldn't dismiss my unease. Richard's life was at stake. The odds had never been higher.

“In position, sir.”

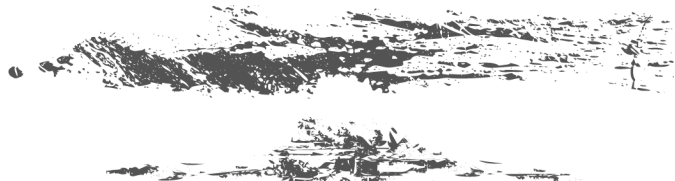
I exhaled at the confirmation, peering at the man managing the troops. Somehow, he didn't seem old enough to be in such a position of power, but then, I hadn't been old when I'd conceived the new order. I was wrong to judge the book by its cover.

“Ready, Mr. President?” He turned to me, his gaze expectant.

“Yes.” Steeling myself, I gave the order. “Send them in.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### RONNIE



“IN POSITION, SIR.”

The male’s voice resonated from behind the bundle of hay, chilling the already cold air. From my place crouching behind the wall of straw, I held my breath, bobbing Gabriel gently up and down in an effort to keep him calm.

*This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.*

The panic-stricken monologue rattled on in my head, but I accepted it was nonsense. It was absolutely happening, only a few feet from where we crouched. Pam was hunkered behind a collection of hay to my right, while Eloise huddled away to my left. We hoped we’d discovered the best possible places to shroud us, but in the virtual shadow of the barn, it was impossible to say.

Drawing Gabriel closer, I tried to hold my nerve. He was usually such a good boy, so content and easy to please, but they said babies sensed the moods of their mothers, and if there was any truth to that theory then he’d be picking up on my growing dread. The last thing we needed was him dissolving into tears at this of all moments. If Gabriel gave us away now, we were as good as dead.

“Shhh,” I soothed quietly, kissing him as I offered him a nipple.

There wasn’t much milk left for him to drain, but whatever I had was his. Perhaps the breast would assuage his anxiety until the ordeal

was over.

Straining to hear more of what was going on, I found myself in the most unenviable of dilemmas. Frantic to know if the assembled men were upon us, I would just as happily have delved head first into the straw and not known the answer to the conundrum. Reality had a nasty habit of biting, and I couldn't bear to have to witness more trauma.

"Are they there?"

Eloise's voice was barely audible as it floated past my ears, met by the same thick silence that threatened to engulf us. Neither Pam nor I were prepared to reply. We were too afraid of what the answer would bring.

As if the savages outside sought to bring clarity, an enormous thud drew my attention back to the other side of the barn. The noise of metal smacking against wood ballooned, sucking whatever air remained in the space as I attempted to stay calm. It was impossible, though. I sensed my heart pounding faster in my chest, my grip on Gabriel tightening as I stared into the darkness. Another huge bang followed, sounding as though the door was being smashed in, and to reinforce the point, the same heavy footsteps that had taunted me from my sleep burst into the barn.

*Oh, God.* Eyes closed, I rocked my son as our oppressors erupted into the limited sanctuary we'd found.

"Check every inch of this place!" A gruff order bounced from the walls, sending my insides clawing for composure. "If they're here, I want them brought to me."

Rumbles of affirmation resounded from the other side of the straw, harsh male tones that seemed intent on ripping my son from my bosom and plotting my downfall. I was in no doubt if Tom's men found me at this juncture, it was over. There would be no more second chances. He would never forgive what he'd view as the ultimate betrayal. Running from his will was already considered treason, but taking his son along for the ride was tantamount to suicide.

Spitting my nipple from his mouth, Gabriel mewled unhappily. Inevitably, my milk was no longer providing everything he needed, but he couldn't have chosen a worse time for the protest. Turning him around, I presented my other breast, hoping it would quell his agitation.

"Shhh." I scarcely said the word, all too aware of the impending doom. "It's okay."

"Anything?"

The same stern voice cut through the strained atmosphere as Gabriel latched on to my other nipple. I couldn't take another breath as powerful flashlights swept across the area, compelling my head even lower against the hay. Shifting as quietly as possible to relieve the tension at my knees, I prayed to anything holy left in the universe that they wouldn't find us. That they'd leave and let us be. I wasn't fool enough to think our troubles would be over if my prayers were answered. I knew well enough that we still had no water, food, or shelter, but I couldn't accept that the scene ahead of me was the end. Being wiped out at the back of some dirty barn while my son was taken back to his monstrous father couldn't be the conclusion of the story. It just couldn't be.

“Negative, sir.”

The replies sounded from various points around the building, the closest so loud it suggested its owner was only on the other side of my bale.

Alarm surged through me, my hands trembling as they rose to my mouth to prevent the bile that threatened to surface.

*Go away*, I urged in my head. *Just go away and leave us alone.*

“Nothing so far.” A fresh wave of light crept along the other side of the stack, its reach only a matter of inches from my hiding place.

“Keep searching,” the first voice bellowed. “We have orders direct from the President. He thinks his son is here and is prepared to reward any man who can bring the infant to him personally.”

*Personally?* The word echoed in my mind. *Who could bring Gabriel to him personally?* That suggested that Tom was close by, maybe even waiting outside for the search to happen, but that couldn’t be right, could it? Would a man who was prepared to leave his child to die in a collapsing building truly have trudged out in the night to search for him?

“Gentlemen!”

I couldn’t hold in the gasp that escaped as Tom’s voice boomed from the door, effectively answering my question. He was there, in the barn with us.

*Oh, God. He’s here...*

“Your commanding officer is correct. I am prepared to offer large financial incentives to anyone who can bring me the escaped whores,

and more importantly, my beautiful boy!”

I cradled Gabriel closer, trying frantically to think and yet all too aware of our chances slipping away by the second.

“We’ll keep searching, sir!”

The reply came from whichever jerk was standing close by, his excited tone twisting the ball of apprehension inside of me. What sort of a person would deliver innocent women and a baby to a madman like Tom? But then, what kind of a society would permit it?

“Good man!” Tom enthused, his voice louder, like he’d stepped into the center of the building. “I can promise a commission in London for the winner as well. Plus, as many whores as you can stick your cock into.”

Cheers rose at his sickening incentives, and head lowered, I was certain I would vomit. Once upon a time, I’d loved the man making those repulsive remarks. I’d considered spending the rest of my days with him, but I hadn’t contemplated those days could finish like this. Despite his vitriolic rhetoric, I’d never guessed at the predator lurking inside my lover until it was too late.

“Mama.”

My heart stopped as Gabriel’s soft plea met my ears. Releasing my nipple, he murmured what should have been the sweetest words I’d ever heard, but catching my breath, I struggled to believe his whimper was real. In all the time we’d been caught in Tom’s twisted web, I’d never heard him try to speak before.

“Shhh.”

Stroking the side of his head, I lifted him toward me, desperately yearning to praise his effort but petrified that the ogre on the other side of the hay might have heard him too.

“Mama.”

Gabriel’s tone was more confident this time, his smile just visible as another ray of light raced past us. My heart wanted to burst with joy as his small fingers reached for my hair, twirling the loose strands as I held him against me, but all the while the ominous threat remained. If the guard heard his request it would all be over. Gabriel would bring the whole house of cards crashing down on the four of us.

“Sir!” I froze at the urgency of his tone. “I think there’s something back here.”

*Shit, shit, shit. No!*

Glancing left and right, I tried to think of a way out, but no ideas were forthcoming. Huddling with my baby, there was nothing but straw around us. No weapons, no exits, and no hope.

“Where?” Another voice this time, and louder than the last.

“Behind there,” the first guy replied. “I thought I heard a baby.”

“Take this bale apart.”

The order I’d feared sucked any remaining oxygen from the space.

“I want to see whatever’s behind there.”

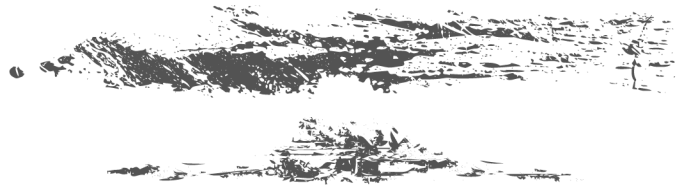
Time sped up as more boots strode toward us, the grunts and jeers of my enemy only inches away as they grappled with the only barrier protecting us from doom. All I could do was wait and hide, making Gabriel and me as tiny as I could, but ultimately, it could all be for



nothing. Tom's men might be brainwashed and filled with hate, but they weren't blind. Once the final part of our straw wall came tumbling down, so would our last hope of a happy future.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### PAM



WATCHING ON IN HORROR, I stooped, immobilized as the imbeciles loyal to Tom tore the haystack apart. Ronnie was crouched behind that straw, holding her infant son, and God only knew what would happen to them both when the clawing hands of the monsters reached them. Terror tore at me like an animal that was determined to free itself until I had no choice but to act. I had to do something to save them.

“Hey, asshole!”

Leaping from my hiding place, I pulled two wads of grass from the bundle and flung them at the man about to expose my friend. The risk of my audacity hardly even registered. It was an opportunity I had to take, and as he rounded on me, I realized this was what my existence had come down to—a warped game of chance where the deck was irrefutably stacked against me. I had to play, but I knew I couldn’t win.

“Is this who you’re looking for?”

My tone was defiant as he charged me, and the look of disgust on his face as he pawed the hay from his eyes was almost worth the hard slap he landed on my left cheek. As the sound of ringing chimed in my head and he dragged me from the bale, the knowledge that I’d distracted him merited the hurt. I could take the pain so Ronnie didn’t have to. That was my place in this cruel game of chess her ex insisted on playing. I was the sacrificed pawn.

“I found one of the bitches!” His voice rang out from every angle, or perhaps it was only the incessant drumming in my head from his slap.

“Bring her here.”

I knew without having to look that it was Tom’s voice that commanded the moron, my feet scrabbling to catch up with his long strides as he yanked me toward his boss.

“Stop what you’re doing and gather around, everyone. We have a winner!”

“Here, Mr. President.” Shoving me to the straw-littered floor, the henchman moved away. “This one was hiding.”

“A blue-dye?” Tom’s tone was thoughtful as he edged toward me. “Do I know you, whore?”

Pulling in a breath, I scanned his expensive shoes as I tried to think straight. Once upon a time, I had liked nice things as well. I’d supported local, bohemian boutiques and prided myself on my unique styling.

“Hey, whore!” The idiot with the gun was back, screaming the insult into the side of my face, and all around him, other guards with weapons formed a tight circle. “Answer the President.”

“Well?” Tom’s shoe tapped a few inches from where I knelt.

“I worked at the palace, sir.”

My tone was monotonic as I replied, revealing neither my loathing nor my panic. He didn’t need to know how much he affected me, just as he had to remain ignorant about my connection to Ronnie.

“Let me look at you.” Tom closed the distance between us, reaching for my chin and compelling my gaze north. For one dreadful moment, our eyes locked, and I stared into the abyss. “Maybe that’s what it is.” His brow creased as if he was second-guessing himself. “Yes, that must be it. You’re no one. A prisoner of the state who just blew the best chance she ever had.”

Laughter erupted around him as the men chortled at my misfortune.

“What should we do with her, sir?”

A soldier stepped forward, notable by his military uniform, and as my gaze darted around, I noticed how some of the others assembled also wore similar regalia. So, the military was involved in the search for us? Tom must have been fucking desperate.

“I’m sure my men would like a reward for their effort tonight.” The soldier’s expression darkened as he loomed over me. “Or I can send her to the farms?”

“No, Second Lieutenant.” Tom’s voice was somber as he released my chin and stepped away. “There’s no need for the inconvenience. I’ll ensure your men are recompensed once my son is safely in his bed. Until then, there’s only one sentence for a traitor like this.”

“Sir?” The soldier’s glance shifted between his boss and me, and heart pounding, I peered up at the odious man who held my life in the balance.

“She’s to be executed.” Staring down his nostrils at me, Tom’s lips curled. “Right here, right now.”



# RONNIE



I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. The events had unfolded so fast I was struggling to keep up. One moment, I was certain Gabriel and I were done for. The brute brandishing his weapon had only been inches from where I shrouded my son from the falling straw, and then the next, Pam had bounded from behind her bale and saved our bacon.

*Again.*

My head fell with guilt as, grimly, I processed just how many times she had saved me. First, when the net had started tightening and I'd fled pregnant into the unknown, then later, when her small acts of heroism had kept Gabriel and me alive. Pam was a fortress of strength, and even on her knees before the wanker who'd created this hell on earth, she was a beacon of hope. I couldn't let her take the fall for this. I couldn't sit there and watch her suffer for the mistakes I'd made.

Easing a sleeping Gabriel from my breast, I secured the dirty dress, and kissed the top of his head before laying him on the small bed of straw I'd created earlier. He would be all right there on his own for a few minutes. If I had any hope of helping Pam, I needed to pay attention to what was about to happen.

"I'm sure my men would like a reward for their effort tonight."

Rage furred at the sickening expression of the guy in uniform as he towered over Pam. I didn't even know who the cretin was, but

standing there, he symbolized every moment of female oppression we'd endured in the last few months. How had it come to this? How had the country I loved slid into such depravity?

"Or I can send her to the farms?"

Time stood still as everyone awaited Tom's verdict.

*He's loving this*, I mused, assessing the way his lips curled. This was the wet dream he'd dreamed about.

"No, Second Lieutenant." Releasing Pam's chin, the father of my baby stepped away. "There's no need for the inconvenience. I'll ensure your men are recompensed once my son is safely in his bed. Until then, there's only one sentence for a traitor like this."

My pulse quickened at Tom's tone. I'd heard that edge in his voice before and it never meant anything good.

"Sir?" The soldier turned to his boss, his eyes expectant.

"She's to be executed."

I swore I saw Tom smile as he announced his outrageous sentence.

"Right here, right now."

*No!* The word screamed in my head, bouncing around until it was deafening. No, they couldn't kill her. I couldn't let this happen. I'd spent my entire existence flung from one experience to the next, like a shell thrown around in the ocean, but not this time. For once in my damn life, I had to do something. I had to act.

Checking on Gabriel one final time, I pulled in a lungful of air, knowing what had to be done. With all the attention on Tom in the

center of the barn, there were no eyes on us anymore, and I had to use the chance to save Pam. Holding my breath, I tiptoed away from the bale that had concealed me, crouching behind what remained of the one Pam had hidden behind before creeping on past the others stacked in all directions.

“As you wish, sir.”

Warped laughter filled the air as the men assembled, delighted in yet another moment of apparent gratification.

“Would you like to do the honors?”

I tried not to think of Gabriel on his own, nor of my hammering heart as I moved, though I could hear it pounding in my head. My baby was fed and sleeping. He would be okay, but only if I could get us out of this scare, and somehow, that meant saving Pam. I couldn't focus on the disgusting exchange taking place, but I knew I had to act fast.

Sneaking around the edge of the foray, I was less than a few meters from my sadistic ex-lover, and critically, nowhere near my son. When I made my move, I didn't want to draw his vile followers to Gabriel. Eloise was still hidden by the place my baby slept, and should the worst happen, he still had a chance with her. My hand rose to my mouth as I registered the thought, my creasing brow refusing to accept it was a potential outcome. I would be okay because I had to be. Because Gabriel needed me. It was just that, at that critical moment, Pam needed me more.

“We could pull straws?” Tom suggested with a chuckle. “I mean, there is plenty of it around.”



“Very good, sir.” The inane soldier belly laughed at his superior’s jocularly as he glanced around his men. “Who’s in?”

Hands shot into the air as the twisted soldiers jostled for the so-called privilege of murdering my friend. Panting at the injustice, I crawled closer, leaning over the smaller bale they had presumably been demolishing when the search had ensued, and that was when I saw them. Not one, but two evil-looking black guns were sprawled out on the grass, only inches from where I waited.

Reaching for both guns, my gaze darted about to check I hadn’t been spotted, but all of their attention was focused on Pam’s fate. My heart was nearly in my throat as I scurried back, examining the weapons in my hands. I’d never held a gun before, and prior to Tom’s ensuing nightmare, had never even seen one, but that was an age ago. The dark world we lived in now was a different place; one that required violence for survival. Running my fingertip over the barrel, I realized I already knew how to check if the safety was on. I was practically a connoisseur.

A scuffling sound to my left stirred me, my pulse accelerating at the latest threat.

*Shit!*

Glancing around, I expected to see another of the uniforms marching toward me, signaling the end of my revolt, but to my relief, it was Eloise who came into view. Crouched and still huddled in her blanket, her tear-stained eyes were wide.

“What are you doing?” She mouthed the words, gesturing behind her. “I just passed Gabriel.”

“Is he okay?” I whispered, copying her choice of dialogue.

“Yes.” She nodded. “He’s sleeping.”

*Thank God.*

“Here.” Selecting the smaller of the weapons, I thrust it into her hands. “Take this, and please, if I don’t come back, guard him.”

“Of course, but...” Eloise’s brow’s knitted. “Ronnie, I’m scared.”

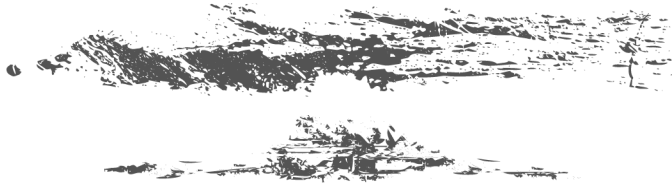
Reaching for her wrist, I squeezed. “Me too, but Pam doesn’t have much time.”

Tuning back into the men’s grotesque conversation, it was clear an executioner had been chosen.

“Cover me.” I couldn’t believe what I was saying. So much for being a pacifist. “Just point and shoot.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### PAM



*DEFEATED.* That was the word that ricocheted around my head as the brutes surrounding me contemplated who should be the one to put a bullet through my brain. After everything I'd survived, and all the years of happy living before Tom's reign of terror had started, I could never have imagined it would come to this, but there in the hay, I waited, my thoughts returning to Ronnie and Gabriel.

*At least they are safe.* I held on to that idea. Maybe, once the monsters had indulged their bloodlust with my murder, they would fuck off and leave them alone with Eloise. They would have a chance. A shot at something better than this.

"Okay, Hunt." Tom had the audacity to laugh and slap the designated executioner on the back as he was pulled from the circle. "You're up, my man. Ready for the job?"

"Yes, sir!"

Hunt didn't look older than about eighteen years of age, his mere presence a depressing indictment of the state of the country when young adults were sent to do a lunatic's dirty work.

"Good man." Tom patted his shoulder approvingly, turning him to face me. "Here's your target, soldier. Everyone else, create a wider perimeter."

I could hardly catch my breath as the men encircling us shuffled backward. They still surrounded me but created enough space for the show they so desperately wanted to see to begin. Anxiety knotted in my stomach as Hunt reached for his weapon. It was a smaller gun than I'd expected, but at point-blank range, I'd have no chance.

"When you're ready, soldier."

It was the alleged second lieutenant that gave the order, time lengthening as I watched the gun rising. Strange that the end should come like this. That after so much fighting, there was no opportunity to resist. Filling my chest with air, I slowly released the breath, conscious that it was my last.

I tensed at the sound of gunfire, curling into a ball and bracing for the excruciating pain that would follow. It took a few seconds for me to realize that not only was I still alive, but that the bullets were still spraying, men around me grunting and wailing as they fell to the floor. Petrified and uncertain what was going on, I recognized the noise of not one but two guns, but none of the fire seemed to be coming from the uniforms around me, most of which were sprawled out in agony.

"Get down, Mr. President."

The soldier who'd given the command for my death yanked at Tom, pulling the preposterous President to his knees just seconds before a bullet hit his neck. Crying with pain, his hands rose to the injury, but he couldn't halt the flow of his lifeblood which rained down over me. Scuttling away from the torrid shower, I crawled over one lifeless body before a pained voice stopped me.

"Shit!"

Another round of fire forced me to the floor, and turning back, I saw Tom drop to his knee and pull out his gun. Staring at his aggressor, his eyes slowly widened.

“You!”

Ignoring the agonized groans of his men, he stepped over bloodied bodies and out of the circle. For the first time, I lifted my head and acknowledged who he was talking to.

“You fucking bitch.”



# RONNIE



I would have liked to say I acted on impulse. That once the first bullet had done its job and I'd watched men fall at my behest, I continued only in self-defense and to protect the life of my friend—the woman curled in the middle of the madness. Maybe if this ever went to trial, that would be justification, but firing more bullets into the bodies of the uniforms, I doubted it was true. This would never go to court and I wasn't only saving Pam.

This was about me, about everything I'd been through and given up to make it this far. It was about getting even with the man who'd ravaged my happy life, and even though I acknowledged I shouldn't enjoy the sudden rush of power, I did.

I watched as the soldier who'd been happy to comply with Tom's disgusting plan pulled his illustrious leader to his knees and took the bullet I'd designed for his superior.

"Shit," I muttered, aware of one of the injured men reaching for his weapon.

Before I could follow my own advice and point and shoot, another round of bullets fired, finishing him and two others strewn around him.

"Got the bastard!" Eloise grinned as I glanced back to meet her eyes.

"Thanks." I wanted to hug her but wasn't fool enough to think there was time for the show of affection. "Now, save your bullets and look after the little ones."

Signaling to her belly, my thoughts returned to my own precious bundle. That little boy and I had been through so much already; more than enough. I didn't want him to be alone and afraid.

"Okay." Nodding, she pointed her gun at the enemy as she dashed to where Gabriel waited. "Come and join us soon."

"I will," I vowed, my attention shifting back to Tom. He was on his feet again, dragging his sorry ass over the dead bodies of his allies as our gazes met.

"You!" Fire raged in his eyes, but it was only a fraction of the loathing I'd reserved for him. "You fucking bitch."

"Time's up, darling!" I couldn't help the rush of triumph as he acknowledged me.

Seeing the weapon in his hands, I acted, not hesitating to put the merciless son-of-a-bitch out of his misery. It was time—time I brought this story to a close, and there could be no satisfactory ending while Tom still lived.

Stepping forward, I pumped bullets into his body. I didn't know how many the weapon in my hand held, but I watched as three hit his shoulder and chest, while a fourth grazed his neck.

"Fuck."

Falling to his knees, he waved his gun in the air as though it was supposed to intimidate me, but Tom was missing one vital component—he wasn't the only one armed. The tables he'd so elaborately dressed were turning; one woman's tiny revolution managing to take out the supreme leader in one fitful round of revenge.

“It’s over,” I muttered. “You’ll never have me again.” Inhaling at the satisfying thought, my eyes fluttered closed. “Never have any power over me again.”

“Ronnie, look out!”

Pam’s voice sliced through my contentment, my eyes only opening after the sound of fresh gunfire had broken the blissful silence. Time protracted as I acknowledged the danger, the young soldier who’d been volunteered to murder my friend waving his weapon in the air. That was when the pain registered, the intensity growing as I realized his bullets had punctured my side.

“Shit.”

Falling to the floor, I raised my weapon and fired. Pam was still unprotected, and not far behind me, so was my son. Heaving in an unbearable breath, I watched as the contents of his skull spilled onto the straw behind him. His threat was well and truly neutralized.

“Ronnie.” Pam ran to my side, crouching to examine my wounds. “You’re hurt.”

“Pam.” It was so good to see her face. “Are they all dead?” Using all my remaining energy, I motioned toward the heap of bodies.

“Yes.” She glanced to check. “None of them are moving.”

“Good.” Dropping the gun, I reached for my side. The pain was excruciating, and the warm, wet sensation seeping from me suggested I was losing a lot of blood fast. “I need you to be okay.”

“And I need you.” She blinked away tears as she reached for my face. “You’ll be okay.”



“No, Pam.” Suddenly, it was all clear. I wasn’t going to be okay. Neither Tom nor I would leave this shitty barn. “This is it for me.”

“Don’t say that,” she insisted, wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand. “Don’t you dare say that.”

But her expression told me a different story. She could see what a bad state I was in. If I didn’t die of blood loss, it would be an infection. There was no coming back.

“I’m right, though.” I forced a smile despite the hurt. “I’m done, but I need you to carry on for Gabriel.”

“Where is he?” Gasping, she glanced around.

“Safe,” I winced. “With Eloise. He needs you. They both do.”

“But I can’t do it without you.” Her voice wavered, and for the first time, I saw fear flicker in her wonderful eyes.

“Yes, you can.” I exhaled. “You *have* to.”

“Wh-why did you do this?” she sniffed, clearly exasperated. “Why give your future up for me?”

“Because you’re my best friend, silly.” I managed a small chuckle. “You’ve saved me so many fucking times. This time, I saved you.”

“Fuck, Ronnie.” Her silent tears fell hard and fast. “If I lose you, it’s all been for nothing.”

“No,” I contended. “You’re my hero, Pamela Wogan. You’ve shown me how to be brave. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Ronnie,” she rasped, leaning down and kissing my cheek. “I fucking love you.”

“I love you.” The world was becoming lighter, as though every fluid ounce I bled was lifting me higher, toward something better than this dirty, hellish nightmare.

“Ronnie? Pam?”

Eloise’s voice stirred me, but it was too painful to move as Pam turned to her.

“Oh, God. Are you okay?” Rushing to us, Eloise carried my son, who had somehow managed to sleep through the entire gun show.

“Is he okay?” I tried to reach for him but couldn’t find the strength.

“He’s fine,” Pam replied, taking him from Eloise. “I’ll make sure of that, and he’ll know all about his amazing mother.” She smiled through her emotion. “He’ll love you the way I do.”

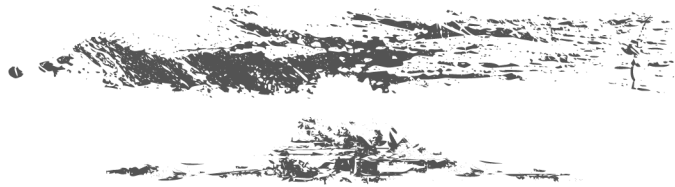
“Good.” Even swallowing was painful as my eyes slid closed. In the end, the pain was negligible and there was only warmth and an inevitability about what was to come. “Now, get my son out of here. More of them will come soon.”

From some distant place, I heard Pam’s voice. “I’ll get him out of here,” she promised. “Away from the eye of the storm.”

“Yes.” The word echoed around my head, although I wasn’t sure if I’d said it out loud. “Go and live.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### PAM



THE COUNTRY HAD REACHED breaking point. An unsustainable insanity where women were no longer allowed to live and thrive. It was hanging from a thread as precarious as our short lives could be. Superficially, things had never been bleaker.

Yet as we passed the border into Scotland, with Gabriel snuggling happily against me in the carrier we'd purloined, a dim sense of hope sparked within me.

Yes, we'd lost Ronnie. I knew the hole in my heart would never be whole again, and that one day I would have to explain his mother's death to her son. But despite all of the trauma, I was alive, Gabriel was alive, and so was the young woman walking beside me.

Meeting my gaze, she smiled. "Are you okay?"

"Of course."

Mirroring her smile, I took her outstretched hand. We were two strangers, women thrown together by unfortunate circumstance, but loss had made us strong. We'd got out of the south as soon as we could, stealing whatever we could get our hands on and surviving hand to mouth as the world around us burned.

The insane Tom was dead, and we'd heard rumors that the men closest to him had done the decent thing and fled. They weren't short of a penny or two, and no doubt had numerous slimy contacts on the

Continent who would protect them. It had thrown the capital into turmoil, though, turning whoever was left into opponents in an all-out civil war. I was certain that the safest place to raise Gabriel and the baby growing in Eloise's belly was north of the border. For one thing, the air was cleaner, and the people there were never as sold on the concept of gender-based slavery. Scotland had been kind to Ronnie, Gabriel, and me, and in my heart, I sensed that its compassion remained.

"I heard on the radio that things are easier here." She stared around the green countryside, her tone hopeful. "That the Scots are even letting women work again. Maybe we can get jobs and somewhere to stay."

"I'll look after you," I vowed, much like the promise I'd made to Ronnie. "The babies will be fine."

"I'm so thankful I met you." Her eyes watered as she squeezed my fingers. "I didn't want any of this, but I'd have been a goner without you and Ronnie."

"You'd have been fine," I assured her. "That idiot who knocked you up wouldn't have stood a chance."

"I don't even know what happened to him." She shrugged, pulling in a shaky breath.

"Do you care?"

"I guess not." Eloise's voice was quiet. "He was a swine, but he looked after me in his own way."

"He got what he deserved." There was no pity in my voice. "Just like that reptile Tom. It's just a shame we had to forfeit Ronnie as well."

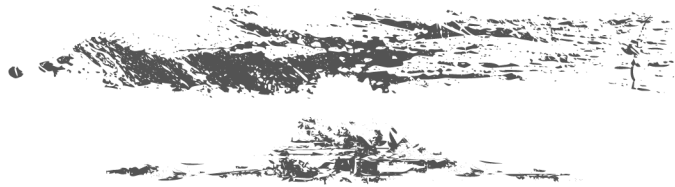
“She’s still with us.” Eloise smiled, lifting my hand to my heart. “In there.”

“You’re right.” Blinking away my tears, I stroked Gabriel’s hair. “She’ll always be there, and whatever small shard of justice we can take from that will see us through.”

The End.

## EPILOGUE

### PAM



SITTING ON THE SANDY bank, I tucked the loose strands of my hair behind my ear but didn't know why. The sea breeze eased it away immediately, sending my tresses flying past my face. Chuckling, I shook my head and rose to my feet to watch the children.

Two small boys were playing on the beach. No scene had ever been more perfect.

"Are they okay?" Eloise's voice was almost lost on the wind as she slid down the bank to join me.

"They're great," I replied, smiling at the simplicity of the answer.

The boys *were* great, and even though Gabriel had lost both of his parents and Timmy would never know his father, they were safe and happy.

"It's so beautiful here." Tugging her shawl around her shoulders, Eloise's gaze scanned the rugged inlet. "So damn peaceful."

"It's exactly what we need." I signaled toward the children. "What *they* need."

We stood in silence for a moment, each of us lost in our own twisted memories.

It had been four years since Ronnie had died. Time where we'd fled as far north as we could and hidden while the apparatus of Tom's distorted state dissolved. Life up there was easier than in England, the

space and fresh air only adding to our rural life, and news from the capital was sketchy at best.

The last I'd heard, the party Tom had breathed life into had fallen apart, leaving a vacuum of power that newer, populist parties threatened to fill. *Same shit, different day.* I wasn't sure where women's rights stood anymore and whether the grotesque warehouses full of captives had been disbanded. A niggling part of me insisted I should care more, but in order to thrive, I'd let most of the baggage go. The past was buried.

Declared independent from the rest of the United Kingdom some six months after we'd fled across the border, Scotland had become our home, and Eloise, the boys, and I had officially become citizens a little over a year later. That knowledge afforded a peace of mind that Ronnie had only dreamed about; the sanctity of a country that valued *all* of its people and swore to protect their rights.

"We should head back soon." Eloise pointed to the horizon, past the mountainous terrain of the south to the darkening sky. "It looks like there's a storm coming."

"Yeah." Glancing around, I wrapped my cardigan tighter around me. "I think you're right. I'll grab the boys. Can you pack up here?"

"Sure," she answered, already crouching to collect up their impromptu picnic.

That was the beauty of life there. With so much natural wonder, we could enjoy a meal by the water any time we liked.

"Gabriel! Timmy!" I called out as I jogged toward the shore. "It's time to go."

Both boys turned with a smile as I approached.

“So soon?” Gabriel’s brow crumpled. “But Timmy and me haven’t finished our castles.”

“We’ll come back soon,” I promised, resisting the urge to laugh at his adorable pouty little face. “It’s going to rain.”

At almost five, Gabriel was growing into the spitting image of his mother, which was a constant source of both joy and sadness for me. I answered all of his questions about Ronnie whenever they appeared in his inquiring mind, wanting to hold nothing back. His mother had been the most inspiring woman I’d ever met, and with her last breaths, she’d gifted me the most incredible honor of raising her son. For a woman who’d chosen to be single for the majority of my life, I’d resigned myself to never experiencing the privilege of motherhood. It only made Gabriel all the more precious.

“Rain!” Timmy jumped up and down, pointing at the sky. “I love rain!”

“I know, sweetheart.”

Smiling, I offered him my hand. I hardly knew his mother when Timmy was conceived, but over the last few years, we’d become inseparable, living, working, and playing together. Timmy was as much mine as Gabriel was Eloise’s. We were a family.

“Bring your buckets and spades before Mr. Raincloud comes to get us!” Lifting my hands into claws, I pretended to be the conniving cloud creeping toward them, causing both boys to squeal as they collected their toys. “Quick!” I reiterated, cheering as Timmy raced past me toward his mum. “Before the raincloud gets you.”



“Do we really have to go, Auntie Pam?” Gabriel’s lower lip quivered as he contemplated such an awful fate as leaving his sandcastles unfinished.

“I’m afraid so,” I soothed, lowering to kiss his temple. “If we get caught in the rain, we might get poorly, and we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“S’pose not.” He shrugged. “But I don’t wanna leave.”

“I understand.” Taking his cold hand, I drew him into a hug. “And I promise we can come back soon and rebuild your empire.”

“Okay.” Glancing behind him, his large blue eyes took in his crumbling territory. “I wish we could stay, but okay.”

“Thanks for being a brave boy,” I praised, ruffling his dark hair. “You’re such a good big brother.”

“Is Timmy my brother?” Puzzlement flashed in Gabriel’s gaze. “I mean, we have different mummies, after all.”

“Yes,” I assured him, rising to my full height as I lifted him from the ground. “Different mummies or not, you are definitely brothers.”

“Hey!” he shouted playfully. “Put me down!”

“Never!” I cried, pretending to kidnap him as I chased Timmy along the damp sand. “You’re mine now.”

“No!” he shrieked, laughing as he bounced his plastic bucket over my shoulder. “Help me, Auntie E!”

Laughing at his little face, I slowed, lowering him to his feet. In my heart, I knew I’d do anything for him and his brother, just as I’d sacrificed for his mother. Watching him flee to his Auntie Eloise, I

peered back at the sky, praying that in all their lives, the only thing they ever needed to fear was the incoming weather.

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