

Desire is the shadow of death.

HIDDEN by DESIRE

Wild Iris series

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FELICITY
BRANDON

Hidden By Desire

WILD IRIS SERIES

Book Two

By

Felicity Brandon

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PROLOGUE

Bereft

Iris

The dream came again, as it always did. Night after night, the grasping mists came for me, dragging me out into the gloom. I seemed doomed to repeat the same journey. Fated to trudge up the hill in the darkness, searching—always searching—for the brick house that appeared to be my sanctuary but would become my prison.

I knew it was a never-ending nightmare and not reality. The rational part of my brain accepted the difference between the dream and consciousness, but there was an inevitability about it, like a wave I couldn't fight, and soon enough, I was completely immersed in the reverie.

Climbing the stairs, I turned the corner toward his room. I knew he'd be there, recalled his strong jawline and piercing blue eyes. I just couldn't remember why I was bound to this hapless destiny, forever walking the moors when I should be there with him. In his bed. By his side.

Aidan.

His name reverberated in my head as my fingers gripped the handle of the door of the room where he slept. Aidan was behind that door—the man who'd saved me, mastered me, and held me captive.

Brows knitting at the revelation, I pushed the door open and crept inside. Why was I his captive? Wasn't I happy to be there with him? Didn't I find his dark, enigmatic charisma alluring? Holding my breath, I entered the room, but glancing down, I noticed my chest neither rose nor fell, and my breath wasn't visible in the cold air.

“Master?” My voice was quiet as I tried the word, knowing it was what he'd expect. “Aidan.”

Walking further into the room, my gaze fell to the bed, lit by the ethereal illumination of the moon, but the sleeping form didn't stir. The sound of his rhythmic breathing was the only distraction from my ballooning panic. Why wasn't he waking up? Why couldn't he hear me?

"Sir."

My voice was louder and forceful enough to rouse some movement in the bed. Moving closer, I watched as he rolled to one side, eyes groggy as he peered out from the covers.

"Master."

Exasperation surged, threatening to drown out the rising sense of alarm. This was ridiculous. He clearly heard me and must be able to see me. Why wasn't he responding? Had I upset him in some way?

"Master, it's me. It's Iris."

Blowing out a breath, Aidan eased back the cover to reveal his strong, muscular shoulders. Hours of manual work on the moors had honed his physique into something that wouldn't have been out of place on the covers of *Men's Health*. He pulled himself upright, staring blankly around the room as though he looked right through me.

"For God's sake, Aidan! What's wrong with you?" I snapped. "Don't ignore me!"

"I should have left the fire burning," he muttered, glancing toward the dying embers of the grate. "It is cold in here."

"It's always cold," I agreed, wrapping my arms around myself. "Let me into bed. You can warm me up, Master."

"Always so infernally cold."

He closed his eyes, drawing in a breath as if he hadn't heard me, but I was right there, looming over him. There was no possible way he hadn't.

"This is crazy." Deciding I'd had enough of his posturing and ignorance, I rounded the bed toward the side where I slept.

"I'm coming in."

“If only I still had my beautiful Iris.” He shuddered, his voice choking with emotion. “You always kept my blood boiling.”

“What?” I halted at his odd declaration, staring at him across the bed. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m here.”

“I should not have done it.” His jaw tightened as his face turned to the moonlit window. If I didn’t know better, tears stained his eyes, though I’d never known him to cry. “Should not have chosen that road again.”

“Aidan.” Confusion flickered in my head, mingling with my burgeoning frustrated fear. What on Earth was going on?

“What did you do?”

I didn’t understand this part of the dream, never did. It was impossible to engage him, however close I got or how hard I tried, as if an invisible force strove to keep us apart. Why he couldn’t see me or hear my voice, I didn’t know, but his visible distress perturbed me the most.

“Oh, Iris.” He exhaled, one large palm rising to his temple. “I miss you. I am sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” I demanded, turning back to him.

“What’s happened?”

“It was not supposed to be this way,” he went on, as though I wasn’t there. “You were not meant to end up like her.”

“Who?”

Marching back to his side, I considered swatting his forearm but thought better of it. Aidan had always cut an intimidating physical form, and despite the anger swirling inside me, I didn’t want to rile the beast.

“Who?” I tried again.

This was insane. How dare he treat me like this? If I’d offended him, the mature thing to do would be to talk to me about it, not behave like a child with this toxic silent treatment.

“Like Desiree.” He answered at last, though I still had the feeling he wasn’t responding to my insistent tone—only talking aloud to himself. “She did not deserve it, either.”

“Desiree?” I shook my head. “Is she who the cottage is named after?”

I’d always presumed the place was named after someone since it was such a bizarre designation for the isolated dwelling.

“I miss her.” His head fell as he swung his legs from the bed and rose to his full height. “I miss you both.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

I couldn’t comprehend any of this. Why wasn’t he correcting me? Normally, Aidan took great pleasure in ensuring I addressed him properly. My ass had the bruises to prove it, but the thought dissolved as he choked back a low sob. I watched as he strode to the window, his tempting well-built body on display with each pace.

“I really messed things up.”

“It’s okay.” I couldn’t reconcile his strange grief, and even though I didn’t appreciate his behavior, his obvious pain tugged at my heartstrings. “I’m here now. We’ll work it out.”

“And now it’s too late.”

“It’s not,” I persisted, moving to join him. “I’m here. It’s not too late. We can—”

“No, Iris.”

I heard the words, but oddly, they didn’t come from his mouth. Reaching for him, I pushed past the invisible resistance as the words came again, his voice echoing past me, although his lips never moved.

“No, Iris.”

“What do you mean, no?”

A sense of dread clawed at me, reminding me something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

“No, Iris!” Aidan’s voice was louder, which was bizarre, as the image of him in front of me seemed to fade right before my eyes. “Not again. Wake up!”

“What?” My eyelids fluttered, recognizing the urgency in his tone.

“Wake up!”

Gasping, my gaze flew open as his two enormous palms shook me gently.

“What’s going on? Where am I?” Peering around, I answered my own question. I was there in his bedroom, by the window where the Aidan of my dream had been standing, my hands grasping the latch.

“Iris.” My name was a resigned sigh on his lips. “Thank God you’re awake.”

“W-Was I sleepwalking again, Master?” My brow creased as I tried to remember, but the fragments of the peculiar nightmare were already slipping away, as they did every night.

“Yes,” he breathed, sliding his strong arms around my waist and drawing me back against his hard body. “This time, you made it to the window. When I woke up, it looked as though you were trying to jump out.”

“Oh God.” Bewilderment resounded in my voice, pounding in my head until I wanted to throw up. “I don’t understand.”

“Come back to bed,” he soothed, guiding me in the right direction. “The way things are going, I shall have to start binding you to it.”

I half-smiled at his thinly veiled threat. Aidan’s bondage was usually reserved for punishment, but if these unnerving dreams didn’t stop, his solution might become necessary.

I couldn’t go on like this.

CHAPTER ONE

Beckoned

Iris

Trembling, I fought to forget the dream, but over and over it played in my head. For the first time, it returned to me outside my sleep, plaguing like an incessant drum that insisted on being beaten.

“Still awake?” He reached for me in the darkness, rolling in my direction as he cajoled.

“Yes, I...” I pulled in a gasp as I pictured the opening wooded scene in my head. I could see it so clearly, as if it was somewhere I knew personally, each contorted branch imagined easily in my mind.

“What is wrong, little girl?” His voice was like a melodic sigh.

“I can’t get past this dream, Sir.”

“Master,” he corrected me, although his tone still soothed as he tugged me closer.

“It’s there every time I close my eyes.”

“Then do not close them.” Aidan’s voice was wry. “I am sure we can find ways to stay awake.”

I smiled at his playful tone, realizing it was precisely what I needed, something lighter and more pleasurable than my recurring nightmare.

“I enjoy you holding me, Si— Master,” I corrected myself quickly. I wasn’t keen on the upgraded address, but if I sought the solace, only he could offer, then I would use it. Offending him now wouldn’t help.

“I can do that.” His arms closed around me like a warm prison.

Like the prison of Desiree Cottage.

My brow furrowed in the darkness at the unwelcome comparison, but I fought to keep my jarring paranoia at bay.

“Have I told you how much I adore having you in my bed?”
Kissing the top of my head, his hands ran down the length of my body.

“I don’t think so,” I murmured, relishing the feel of those enormous palms on my skin.

I didn’t like them when they crashed down on my backside, or at least that’s what I told him, but they felt wonderful as they cupped and cradled my goosing flesh, pausing at my tender ass to massage the orbs.

“Well, I do.” His voice had shifted to a deeper octave, awakening the primal animal who lay dormant in me until summoned. “I might go so far as to say I love it.” His hard length swelled at my hip, confirming the point.

“That must be why you keep me around, Master.”

I couldn’t help my teasing tone, matching his flirtatious mood and thankful for the distraction. I didn’t want to think about the dream anymore, the clawing twigs or my endless pursuit to this house. For once, I would enjoy the present.

“That is one of the reasons.”

He moved with deft agility, rolling me onto my back at the same moment he climbed on top of me. His muscular thighs straddled me in the gloom, his breath warm as he pressed his weight over me.

“And the others?” I squeaked, in awe of his speed and power. They hadn’t always served me well, but I could learn to love the attributes when they worked in my favor.

“How lovely it is to have a companion.” His lips lowered to my neck, nuzzling me as his erection pressed into my belly. “I have missed a woman’s touch.”

Not knowing if he meant around the house or in his bed, I trailed a fingertip over his bicep. “Like this, Master?”

“Mmmm.” I heard the smile in his voice, even though his handsome face wasn’t visible since the moonlight had slipped behind the clouds. “Exactly.”

“Anything else?”

Shifting his weight, his knees rested inside of my thighs, nudging my legs open as he went on. “Your phenomenal holes.” His growl resonated through me, reaching my clit and ordering it to grind against his hard body. I duly complied, mewling at the sweet friction he offered. “I like filling them all, little girl.”

Catching my lip between my teeth, I remembered the way he’d done just that many times the evening before. Chauvinistic and strong-willed Aidan may be, but he was the most skilled lover I had ever known. His tongue alone could send me flying higher than the stratosphere.

“I like that, too, Master.” I couldn’t believe my brazenness. The Iris who’d left Phil would never have been so forward, but then she wasn’t nearly as satisfied.

“I know.”

His conceit should have riled, but his tone barely registered as his lips found mine in the darkness. Ceding to his will, my mouth parted, reveling in his punishing caress. Grasping his forearm, I held on as his tongue possessed me, the teasing gesture eliciting excited groans when he drew away.

“Master.”

The word hardly rankled now that I was sprawled on the brink of what I wanted, and with my legs splayed and chest panting, there was little doubt—I *did* want him. I needed his predatory diversion, required an injection of his mastery. The morning would come and bring another host of frustrations and complications, but in the shadows of the night, let there be this passion, this irrefutable desire for pleasure.

“Hands above your head,” he commanded breathlessly.

Buoyed by how much I affected him, I complied, leaving the girth of his arm and sliding both palms behind me.

“Good,” he purred. “So, you *can* be well behaved.”

“Sometimes,” I admitted, panting as his hands found my wrists, pinning them to the bed.

“I want you.” His lips caressed my skin, planting a trail of kisses along my jaw. “I always want you.”

“Oh God,” I moaned, pushing my hips up to meet his excitement. “I want you, too.”

“Where?” he demanded, his mouth skimming mine as his crown grazed my swollen lips.

“Here, Master.” Grinding my eager sex below him, I grinned at his dark chuckle.

“You are a naughty girl,” he told me, though I sensed it was meant as praise. “That is another reason why I love you.”

“You love me?” I gasped, my lips parting as he slid slowly inside.

“Oh, yes,” he replied, his fingers finding mine before entwining with them in the gloom. “I love you more than life itself.”

CHAPTER TWO

Bewildered

Iris

“Good morning.”

Aidan’s gravelly tone penetrated the thick canvass of slumber that had fallen over me.

“Morning?”

Was the day still so young? My head throbbed as my broken sleep came back to haunt me, but there, in the midst of the pain, were recollections of something better. The intimacy we’d shared, including the powerful climaxes both of us had reached, and there, unfolding like a flower ready to bloom, was the memory of Aidan telling me that he loved me.

My eyes opened, then widened. *He loved me*, but I hadn’t been ready to say it back. Maybe I never would. Was it possible to love a man who refused to let you leave? My heart raced at the quandary, my gaze landing on his broad, tempting chest. His tenderness had been a reminder of why I had endured so much denigration at his hands, but once his pleasure had eased him into slumber, it had taken an age before sleep had come for me again. The moments in the darkness were long, imprisoned by his warm embrace. Too long to stay sprawled beside him.

Too long to think.

He loved me, but he treated me like his possession.

I adored his possession but needed a life of my own.

The square was impossible to circle.

“Yes.” His deep chuckle danced along my body. “It is time I rose. We need more firewood.”

Not more firewood. Every day on the moors seemed to revolve around the collection of either wood or meat. I understood both were essential for his survival, but still didn’t comprehend why he chose not to use the generator instead.

Why live such a rustic life with no modern conveniences? But then, why hold me captive? There were many questions about Aidan's motives and no forthcoming answers.

"I..." I hesitated, knowing already where the plea would get me but compelled to say it, nonetheless. "I can't go on like this." I didn't like to taint the mood after our passion, but what choice did I have? Aidan was content to depart each day and leave me shackled as his prisoner. It was intolerable.

"What was that?" His arms tightened around me as his tone deepened.

"How do you refer to me, little girl?"

My pulse quickened at his warning tone. "S-Sir?"

"No." He shifted, tipping me forward as one hand spanked my right ass cheek.

"Oww!" I yelped, struggling to be free of his grasp, but I didn't know why. Between his strong hands and his ropes, I hadn't been free of Aidan for a long time. The truth was, I wasn't even certain how long I'd been there, trapped in his house.

"Wrong answer," he growled. "Try again."

"Why must I call you Master?" I mewled, reaching to rub my sore backside. My bottom was always tender since I started residing with Aidan. Spanking appeared to be his answer to almost every problem.

"Because I told you to." He breathed the words into my neck, cocooning me with his hot, hard body. "Because I *am* your master."

It had been a few days since Aidan had demanded I start referring to him that way, and of course, I'd resisted. Calling him sir was bad enough, but *master* was just plain ludicrous. He wasn't my master. No one was.

"I didn't agree to this." I tensed, knowing I sounded like a petulant child and yet unable to stop myself. "I didn't agree to stay with you and live like this."

“Not this again,” he sighed, the heat of his breath tickling my shoulder as he pulled us both back onto the pillow. “You are mine now, little girl. There is no point in your constant protests.”

“There is *every* point!” I insisted, grappling to break free. “I have a life beyond these walls, a job and people who care about me.” My mind flitted to Clare and Michael. I didn’t even know if help had arrived for them the day I’d become lost and wound up in Aidan’s possession, and without my phone or the ability to leave, I might never know.

“They can surely survive your absence.” He chuckled, making light of my woe. “Whereas I cannot.”

His hand slid past my thigh, his thumb brushing over my labia until a desperate whimper escaped my throat. The muscles between my legs clenched in response, longing for more of his touch. Aidan was an incredible lover, and his sexual dominance dissolved me into a wet and wanton woman I didn’t recognize. Sex had never been important to me before, but playing his thrall had introduced me to new, disconcerting feelings I was struggling to control.

That was why I’d wanted to stay that first night—that and the storm howling across the moors that had driven me to his door—but since then, his stern governance had never relented. He sought authority over every aspect of my life, including never allowing me to leave without his strict supervision. I adored his heated touch, but the domineering accompaniment was wearing thin. It was worse than being a child!

“Now, address me properly, or you know what the consequences will be.” Skimming my throat, his fingers stiffened.

“You mean you’ll spank me again?” My breath accelerated as his fingers stroked my neck. It should concern me more that he treated me like his property, but somehow his mastery only turned me on.

“You’ll spank me again, what, little girl?” he commanded.

Damn him. Damn his brick house and his seventeenth century misogyny. Damn the man who'd once played my savior, but had since turned into my jailer, and damn me for my weakness and indecision.

I had to give him what he wanted, if for no other reason than I couldn't tolerate another round of spanking before breakfast. Aidan's punishments were either deliciously tempting, leaving me in a tormented state of arousal that he refused to satisfy, or relentless rounds of penance I couldn't bear. This morning I had the will for neither.

His palms shifted, fingers tightening at my neck and pussy at the same time, and acting on instinct, my digits rose to claw at his hands.

"Stop," he ordered. "You know I won't hurt you."

I knew no such thing. Aidan had blistered my backside most days since I'd strayed into his path.

"Why are you trying my patience, little girl?" He inhaled as if steeling himself. "You know what I require."

Time protracted as I battled his will, my hands still pawing at his fingers despite the chastisement. Swelling moments of silence where neither of us spoke and panic ballooned in my mind.

I don't want to call him Master... I don't want to call him Master...

It wasn't the word itself but what it represented—Aidan could make demands on me at any time, and I had no right to refuse. It didn't help that I found most of his commands insanely hot or that his strapping muscular body was primed for the acts he bestowed upon me.

"Master."

Ultimately, I spat out the word, loathing us both in equal measure. He never should have made the demand, and I should have been stronger from the start.

"Better," he snarled into my ear. "But you should watch your tone, young lady." The hand at my neck relaxed, brushing

south to hold my left breast. “Hands by your sides.”

I moved them with a resigned sigh.

“You are mine, and I *am* your Master. The sooner you accept and succumb, the better it will be for us both.”

My brows knitted as tears threatened. I had vowed not to show him my frustration, but I sensed it in my body, my muscles tensing as I fought for composure.

“I do not seek to fight you.” His thumb circled my clit lazily. “Only seduce you.”

“You want to keep me, *Master*,” I hissed the final word under duress.

“I *am* keeping you,” he corrected, pinching my vulnerable nipple until I cried out. “You are mine to do with as I please.”

“But I’m not,” I countered, unable to suppress the sob in my voice. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

“Hush,” he soothed, planting a chaste kiss on the side of my neck. “You serve no one when you are overcome with emotion.”

“My feelings are valid, Master.” I shook my head, turning away from his face. “I am allowed to feel.” He might control my body, might be able to say where I went and what I did, but he couldn’t condition me into feeling on command. That was crazy.

“Yes, you are,” he agreed, wrapping his arms around my middle.

I swallowed as his hand grazed my labia, leaving me wanting. It had become an all-too-common theme of my captivity.

“But I should prefer we begin the day with something more positive.”

That was one thing we both agreed on. Wiping my eyes with the heel of my hand, I pulled in a shaky breath. I wanted to tell him how I really felt, how I adored his attention but couldn’t stomach the stipulations, but he moved so fast, I scarcely had

time to catch my breath before he was on me, pinning me down.

“What is wrong with you this morning?” His blue gaze seared me. “Where did I tell you to put your hands?”

Oh God. He’d told me to leave them by my side. I’d completely forgotten.

“I f-forgot.” I flustered, turning side to side to acknowledge his enormous palms as they held me in place. “I’m sorry.”

His gaze darkened, reminding me of the words I had once again overlooked.

“Master.” I was breathless as I added the word, the cantankerousness I’d felt extinguished under the intensity of his uncompromising scrutiny.

“You will do better.”

His voice inferred an unspoken caution, a warning not to push him, and fleetingly, I wondered if there was more to fear from Aidan than only the cruelty of his palm.

“Okay.” I nodded, trying to calm my ragged breath. “I’ll do better.” I couldn’t put my finger on what drove me to capitulate, but for once it wasn’t desire. There was something else, a cold glimmer I’d rarely seen before, a sudden sense that my safety depended upon compliance.

“Good.” His expression softened a fraction, his mouth lowering to graze over mine. “I will appreciate that.”

Loosening his grip, he rolled away and paced toward the grate, collecting the remaining wood. Sprawled on the bed, I watched him, one thought crystalizing in my head.

Aidan was a dangerous enigma.

I’d never experienced such soul-shattering sex before in my life, but the price I paid for the untold pleasure was my liberty.

The cost was too high.

CHAPTER THREE

Boundless

Kade

Stalking the moors, it was difficult not to think about Iris. I had gone out of my way for her, walking many miles farther than was necessary, but clutching the special acquisitions I had bartered, I was not sorry for the effort. She was worth it.

She looked so damn fine bound to my fireplace, her allure only exaggerated because I knew she loathed the treatment. I understood her reticence, of course, was not immune to her pleas, but I had survived alone by subscribing to discipline and control, and my little lady would learn to do the same.

The real irony was Iris craved freedom the way I craved the rugged landscape of the heath. Something had happened to her in the past, something related to the ex she had spoken about, and it had scarred her. By her own account, she had come north to my lands seeking autonomy, but by a cruel twist of fate had landed in my unyielding embrace.

Turning to face the wind, my lips curled. I was sympathetic to her plight but believed we would iron out the creases in our dynamic. I only had her best interests at heart, wanted nothing but her happiness and pleasure. In time, she would come to see things my way. Life would be easier then, and I would not need to tether her every time I left the house. I could learn to trust.

You are deluding yourself.

My hands balled at the snide remark. The derisory voice had quieted since Iris' arrival, but out on the moors, my mind was free to run, inviting its crude commentary.

“You know nothing,” I muttered, vexed to even be acknowledging its judgment.

I know everything.

Lifting my face to the waning sun, my jaw tightened. I would not listen to its tirade, could ill afford to succumb to this nonsense again. I had Iris now. I was responsible for her.

Responsible? You?

Its forbidding laughter rung out in my head.

“Yes, me,” I growled, though much of the sound was lost to the breeze.

You were responsible for Desiree...

Heaving in a breath, I ignored the thinly veiled accusation, deciding to head for home. Iris would soothe the demons in my mind. Even when she was angry with me, her presence was consolation.

And look what happened to Desiree.

“Silence!” I hissed, aware that I was chastising the voice in my own head. “Crazy.” I sighed, disappointed with myself. “I am going crazy.”

You have always been crazy.

Gritting my teeth, I strode on, resolved to disregard the poisonous ramblings.

Crazy enough to kill. Crazy enough to let another wildflower into your house.

Glancing up, I noticed dark clouds rolling in from the east. A storm was coming.

What did you think was going to happen when you relented, Aidan?

Swallowing hard, I increased my pace.

“Nothing will happen.” Damn it, I had given in and answered the incessant critic. Now its tedious discord would never cease.

You know what will happen. There can be no happy ending for this twisted love story.

“What do you know?” I spat, unable to stand the judicious monologue anymore. I would not stand for this disparagement.

We have been through that. Its tone was dry, mocking me. I know you, Aidan Brock. I know what you do, what you are capable of doing. I know who you are.

“I have changed.”

My hand rose to my head, trying to rub the voice away, but it was futile. Its plaguing tone haunted me as though it came from Desiree herself.

People do not change, especially people who live solitary lives on the moors. Where is the impetus to grow, Aidan? To learn? To do better?

“For God’s sake,” I whispered, coming to a standstill on the hillside. “Stop.”

Like you did?

It carried on regardless, pecking away at my esteem the way the birds collected seed.

The way you stopped when your hands were wrapped around Desiree’s pretty neck?

“That was a mistake!” I shouted to the moors, as if the voice belonged to another soul who stood there condemning me. A pair of disgruntled birds flew away at my sudden protest. “A moment of temporary madness.”

Temporary, you say? The grim chuckle came again. I see nothing temporary about your behavior, Aidan. We know if there has been any change at all, it is only that your soul has hardened since you put Desiree in the ground.

“I never meant to hurt her.” Surprised at the how potent the surge of emotion was, I fell to my knees, momentarily winded. “I loved her.”

The way you love Iris?

“I love her more.” Blinking away despondent tears, I rose on shaky legs. There was nothing to be gained by opening up this wound again. Desiree was dead. I had done that, and it was I who had to live with it, but I would never fall foul of the madness again. “Iris is safe with me.”

Iris is tethered to your fucking grate!

Wiping my eyes, I inhaled. I had endured about enough of this shit.

“I know what is best for her.” There was conviction in my voice. “Not you.”

What is it like?

I hesitated, the peculiar query throwing me off guard. “What do you mean?”

I just wondered...

Its irritating tone trailed away, which I would usually have been appreciated, but now I sought to know what game it played. I knew I had been baited, yet still, I failed to rise above the provocation.

“What did you wonder?”

What it was like to be so in denial. Insidious laughter erupted between my ears. To believe you are so righteous when you are so wrong.

“Fuck you.”

I loathed the critic, yet acknowledged I detested a part of myself more. I had not only succumbed to its pandering but was the source of its censure in the first place.

It was all me.

Not me. Not us. We shall be okay, Aidan. We survive, but what about Iris?

The question hung in the air.

Why not do the right thing for once?

“I do not want to talk about this anymore,” I murmured, pressing forward through the grass.

Oh, I know you do not, but we must. We must address the real issue, and she waits at the house for you.

“No.” Why was I still giving this discussion credence?

No?

“No, I am not doing it,” I insisted.

I have demanded nothing from you.

“But you will,” I breathed, increasing the pace of my long strides. “You want me to give her up.”

I want you to do the right thing. The right thing for you and for her. Doesn't she deserve better than this, better than you?

“But I love her.”

I realized how pathetic it sounded, but deep down, I accepted it was true. I had not known warmth like that which radiated from my little girl and had never known desire like it. Even Desiree could not compare. I did love Iris. She had captured a part of my soul, and I never wanted her to relinquish it.

And what of her?

A violent gust of wind whipped past me, almost knocking me from my feet.

Must she suffer and be compromised because you love her?

“Is that not enough?” I wished this enemy was there in the flesh. Then I could confront them, could swing my fist at their face, and let them know how their prudence affected me.

No. The answer resounded, almost as overwhelming as the wind. *It is not enough. She deserves better and you know it.*

“So, what would you have me do?” I cried, my gaze darting around as if the foe would suddenly appear. “Cut her loose and let her go?”

Yes. Let her go.

I pulled in a painful breath.

It is better not to trust, not to let her love you. It is better that she leaves.

“I can't believe this.” Yet I could. I had known it all along. I had a proven track record in this game. Extinguishing Desiree had made me a connoisseur.

“Oh God.”

The voice was right. I should let her go. If I loved her, I should release her and end this disgracefully cavalier approach to her future. But I could not or, to be more specific, I would not.

It did not matter what was right or what was wrong anymore, and it certainly did not matter what my inner monologue thought. All that mattered was *us*—Iris and me—the connection we shared and the future we had. I would keep my devils chained to facilitate this visceral chemistry, and I would never let her go.

Iris was mine.

Bound

Iris

I was still alive but had started to wonder why. What was the purpose of my existence if all I did was stay tied to Aidan's property? It was all so demoralizing.

It's because that's how he sees me.

I writhed on the rug at the unwelcome thought, my ass tender from his most recent ministrations.

As his property. His to fuck, his to tie to the grate.

"For God's sake," I hissed, considering kicking the damn grille, but concluding otherwise. Frustration furred inside me as I tugged the blanket tighter around me.

How had it come to this? My life wasn't magnificent before Aidan, but it had been transitioning into something better. I'd been enjoying my own company for the first time, enjoying my work and spending time with new friends. It had promise, hope for a brighter future, but what prospects were tethered to my alleged master's fireplace? My instinct to leave was growing, burgeoning into what could become an uncontrollable monster. I just had to figure out two things first. How to slip away from my obstinate captor, and perhaps more importantly, how to walk away from a desire so primal, it had consumed me.

My head ached from the dilemma, my heart rate accelerating as the noise of his heavy footsteps sounded from outside. I held my breath as the front door opened, tensing as he strode into the room.

"Iris."

Arms full of whatever bounty he'd accumulated for the day, he nodded in my direction as if I were nothing but a dog.

"Master."

At first glance, he looked the same—same domineering expression as he walked into the room, same dictatorial tone when he spoke to me—yet the gleam in his eyes told me something was different.

“I shall prepare food for us.”

His gravelly tone washed over me, yet still I noted the way he peered back, as if he was checking I was still there and not an illusion.

“How have you been, little girl?”

“Bored, Master.”

It was not a lie. Although he left me food and a rug, there was nothing to do except ruminate on my captivity, and the fact it was entirely my doing. I shouldn't be there, should never have ceded to the passion. I should have never consented to any of this.

“I shall find ways to entertain you.”

His tone promised more erotic punishment, and my head fell as I processed what that meant. Another night of humiliation and intensity, leading to another morning of shame and a long day of loneliness. Much more of this world would topple me.

“What can I do to help, Master?” A change of tack was clearly my best option.

“Nothing,” he murmured, busying himself at the pot over the fire. “In this way, *I* shall serve you.”

What did he want? Gratitude? I fought to resist the snort that threatened to doom me. If he insisted on ensnaring me, the least he could do was give me something to engage me.

“But Master, I've been here all day doing nothing.” I wanted to roll my eyes. “Please let me do something.”

“You look lovely as you are.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment? Jesus, I couldn't take much more of this.

“Well, thank you, but...” I exhaled. “I would like to *do* something.”

“I want to make you happy, Iris.” He glanced my way, that glimmer in his gaze resurfacing.

“You could untie me?” I suggested, knowing it was an unlikely outcome but worth a try.

“Soon.” He laughed, shaking his head. “You shall be free for our meal and evening activities.”

“Has something happened, Master?”

I tilted my head, unsure what it was but sure something had changed, then watching him, the answer came to me. There was hesitation in his manner, an element of ambiguity that hadn’t been there this morning. It was a side to Aidan I had never seen before.

“What do you mean?” His brows knitted as he turned back to me. “Nothing has happened.”

“You just seem...” I paused, trying to think of the right word that wouldn’t rile him. “Unsettled.” I shifted, my pulse quickening as I tried to ascertain if my plan had worked.

“No.” His tone was serious. “You are quite mistaken.”

But I wasn’t, and as his gaze locked with mine, his eyes confirmed the point. Something had happened on his journey that had knocked his confidence. I might not have known Aidan for long, but in that short time, I knew him better than I’d known almost anyone else, and something had definitely altered.

“Oh.”

I didn’t push the matter, knowing where that would land me, but I sensed his discomfort at my knowing tone.

“My misunderstanding.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Smiling, he stirred whatever concoction he was creating. My stomach growled at the growing aroma of rich gravy. The pot had been heating most of the day, but since his return, my hunger had peaked.

“Let me ask you something, little girl.”

Glancing up at him, I braced for whatever was coming next. With Aidan, I never knew what I would get.

“M-Master?” A tiny spike of indignation flared at the word. I still despised having to use it.

“Do not fret.” His smile widened. “It is not a trick question. I only seek to know what would bring you greater joy.”

Joy? Was he joking? I spent hours bound to this precise spot every day. I didn’t even know how many days had passed since I’d stumbled here in the storm. He’d snatched my life away from me in a single evening.

“I don’t like being bound.” I started with the basics. I couldn’t even stretch properly in this position, let alone contemplate how to get my life back. “I need to be mobile.”

“It is your mobility that concerns me.” He eyed me skeptically. “You have a proven track record, little girl. When you are free, you try to flee.” He chuckled, as if his dark rhyme was in any way amusing.

“We are past that, though, Master,” I implored him, not believing it for one moment. “You’ve said it yourself—I am yours—so I would like to contribute something to your home.”

“It is laudable,” he decided, though I noticed he made me no promises. “Something we can work toward, perhaps?”

Perhaps? Jeez, if he couldn’t even agree to ease off the bondage, what hope was there?

“My question, though,”—Dropping the ladle, he turned toward me—“was more aimed around the things I could offer that would increase your happiness?”

Staring at him, I didn’t know how to respond. I asked for so little, but he wasn’t prepared to compromise at all.

“I don’t know, Master.” My shoulders fell. It was a disconcerting thought.

“Iris.” He employed that soft, seductive tone, the one he’d used to lure me. “I am trying to help you.”

“Then please help me!” Lifting my wrists, I motioned to the thick ropes wound around them. “Let me out of these binds and give me some purpose.”

“Watch your tone, little girl.”

There it was, the normal response to finding my voice. Aidan immediately sought to pulverize my apparent insolence. He didn't want any narrative that inferred my independence.

“I am not being disrespectful, Master.” My tone oozed the exasperation flooding my system. “Only answering your question.”

“We have already discussed the ropes.” He arched a brow at me, and even though I loathed my body's betrayal, I couldn't deny the low-lying thrum between my legs. “I shall release you when I am ready to do so.”

Exhaling, I turned my face away, willing the room and the walls to disappear, so that I might once again feel the fresh air on my face. Enough of this shadowy existence, enough of the dirty fireplace, and enough of the rub of his ropes. Panic rose inside me, compelling me to yank futilely against the binds. I would never be free without his assent—it was crystal clear as he loomed over me. I could never leave Desiree Cottage or do a damn thing without his say-so.

“Do not sulk.” He chuckled, adding insult to injury. “Your time will come, little girl.”

Brooded

Kade

She brooded by the fire. Not that she had much choice since my ropes offered her less than two feet of breathing space.

“I have a special treat for you.”

Not that her sullen expression deserved it. Iris had been a banshee when I’d laid down the law this morning. She had found settling to my rules practically impossible, and only my ropes and the tutelage of my palm had helped to placate her. My balls contracted at the scintillating memories. I could not lie. Disciplining Iris was sublime. It had been since the first night, but I was no fool. I needed to keep her on a short leash, or she would be gone, running out to the moors the way she had done before—hurtling to her demise.

Now she spoke of a difference in me, though none was discernible. It sounded as though the woman was gifted in sorcery and could decipher the lines on my face to know what had troubled me on the moors, but that was ridiculous. All of that was behind me, the incessant voice finally quieted. I had made my choices, and I would equally make them for her.

My lips curled as her focus flitted to me.

“What’s that, Master?”

So, she continued to use my correct title without a fight? That was good.

“I was gone a long time today, and there was good reason.” I watched her responses carefully.

“I remember.”

Her gaze was glassy, suggesting she wasn’t listening to me. Perhaps she was thinking about how long I had been away, recalling long bound and jaded hours. It was true I often left her for too long, but I had little choice. Someone had to feed and provide for us, and that role had long been mine. I

couldn't yet trust the beautiful brunette not to flee. She'd proven that often enough.

"I went a little farther than normal." Inching toward the fireplace, I smiled. "Much farther actually."

"Where did you go, Master?"

"To town."

Her eyes widened, lips parting as she registered what I'd said.

"To town?" She swallowed. "Where I live?"

"Lived," I corrected, running my fingers over her thick mane of hair. There were some items I was unable to provide a woman, and for those things, I was prepared to go the extra mile.

"Wh-Why?"

I arched my eyebrow at her until she gave the appropriate reply.

"Why, Master?"

"For you." I signaled to the corner of the room. "Did you not notice the items I brought back?"

"No." She twisted, turning to the place I motioned.

"Take a look for yourself. They are in the paper bag."

"But Master." Her hands rose, and she gestured to the ropes at her wrists. "I can't go that far."

"Here," Falling to my knees, I released one of the sturdy knots, lengthening the rope. "That should aid your purpose."

Sighing, she rose gingerly, brushing past me as she walked to the bag. I held my breath as she looked inside, her gorgeous ass perfectly on display as her gaze lingered inside the paper.

"This is for me, Master?" She peered back.

"Yes." My lips curled as she turned back. "Those are things I can't find out on the moors for you."

"Thank you." Grabbing the contents, she pulled out the shampoo and conditioner I'd unearthed. "But I didn't think

you went to town?”

“I do not.” I had loathed every moment of the experience. “But for you, I shall.”

“So, you know which direction to go then?” Her brow furrowed. “You know *how* to get there?”

“Of course,” I replied. “I know this whole landscape like the back of my hand, little girl.”

“I...” She inhaled shakily. “I thought we were miles from anywhere. So far that I’d never find my way back.”

“*You* would not...” I clarified. “I, on the other hand, had no trouble.”

Iris shook her head in disbelief. “How could you?”

“How could I what, little girl?” I did not care for her tone, and once again she seemed to have forgotten her manners.

“Lie to me?” she hissed, dropping the products back into the paper bag and discarding it to the hard floor.

“I have done no such thing.” I could not believe her ingratitude. “And you had better remember how to address me.”

“You made it sound as though I’d never find my way back!” Her small hands balled into fists at her sides. “That we were too far away.”

“I never said anything of the sort.” Fury simmered at her accusation. “This is your final warning. Address me properly or pay the price.”

“All of this time.” Glancing to the window, tears brimmed in her eyes. “I thought it was impossible to get home.”

“Nothing is impossible.” I had learned that well enough, and while her performance was fascinating in a theatrical way, I was tiring of her need for attention. There were chores that required my focus, and I did not have the humor for her constant drama.

Marching past her, I unfastened the knot that secured her rope to the grate, turning to grab her wrist before she could flee.

She stumbled in my direction, her free hand flailing and beating against my chest as she lurched against me.

“Wh-What are you doing?” she cried as I turned and dragged her to my chair.

I did not have time for this today, but Iris gave me no choice. If she could not treat me with the respect I deserved, then another lesson was in order.

“You already know the answer,” I growled, settling in my chair before tugging her down over my thighs.

Iris fought as she always fought, kicking and screaming as she tumbled, her fists banging into the floor, and then my shin.

“Enough!” My voice thundered around the room as one hand pinned her down, and finally, her hands fell to the floor. “That behavior will only earn you more strikes.”

“This is ridiculous!” she complained. “All this time, you’ve hidden the possibility I might return home, and now you’re spanking me... for what?”

Lifting the shawl, I permitted her to wear around the house from her backside, my free palm grazed over her pert backside. A couple of pale bruises lingered from the last time she had overstepped her place, blemishes that should have served as reminders of why she needed to behave but had apparently failed in the task.

“You know what for.” I grew weary with this game. “You also know how to address me.”

“That’s what this is about?” Her muscles tautened as she scrambled to get back to her feet, but the weight of my hand meant that was unachievable. “Not calling you, Master?”

“Correct.” Lifting my palm, I brought it crashing down over her ass. Yelping, she inhaled, her head rising as the impact of the swat resonated. “Your frustration is unwarranted, little girl. I never said you were too far from home. I merely mentioned you would never find your way in the storm that first night, and subsequently, I decided to keep you for myself.”

Smacking her again, I relished the ripples that spread across her delicious bottom. Even when I was cross with Iris, I could never get enough of her. She truly was the most beautiful flower I had ever encountered.

“And now that you are mine, you shall regard me in the proper way.”

“But I’m not yours.” Her voice broke, although I had hardly even started her spanking. “I don’t need a Master!”

“You stumbled to my door, little girl.” Swatting her ass harder, my lips twitched at her ragged breathing. “You silently begged to be mastered.”

“I did not,” she insisted, kicking her feet into the floor as a fast flurry of strikes peppered her tempting backside. The ropes, still attached to her ankles, thrashed behind her.

“You pleaded for my help,” I reminded her, enjoying myself, despite the delay to my daily agenda.

“I was desperate,” she gasped.

“You would have died.” My hand paused, squeezing her cheeks as she tried to catch her breath. “The moors have taken more than one life.” My mind flitted to Desiree, an unpleasant interruption as Iris writhed over my thighs.

“I was grateful, but that doesn’t justify keeping me as your prisoner. It doesn’t make this right.”

“I rescued you again, as I recall.” My palm resumed its mission, smacking her upturned bottom as I continued. “When you foolishly fled back into the storm.”

“After you spanked me!” She blurted out the words, evidently struggling to contain her rising sobs. “You have no right to do this. You never did.”

“We have been through this.” I shook my head, scarcely believing I had to repeat myself so often. “I am the master of this house. You reverted your rights to me the day you came to my door.”

“That’s not how it works, Aidan.” She heaved in a breath, her tiny hands balling again as she insisted on persisting in her

protest. "I'm not yours just because you helped me. I don't answer to you."

"This impasse is irrelevant." I rained the swats down over her, unable to assuage my soaring arousal each time she squirmed. "You might not agree, but you will comply."

"Because you'll do this to me?" Her tone echoed with disdain, even over the sound of my palm meeting her flesh.

"Precisely."

Among other things.

I closed my eyes, refusing to acknowledge the insidious voice sniping in my head. That wasn't going to happen again. Iris would not end up like Desiree.

"I don't accept that," she sobbed. "I'm not giving in to you!"

Lessening the pressure on her back, I stroked her soft skin as my other hand tanned her pretty hide.

"Then you, little girl, shall have a spectacularly sore bottom."

CHAPTER SIX

Bombed

Iris

My head ached, the hurt compounded every time his infernal palm crashed against my ass. I couldn't believe this was happening again. Each time he forced me over his lap and humbled me I swore it would be the last. I would never allow it again, but every time I found myself there again, exposed and spanked at the whim of my so-called master.

Pressing my palms into the cool floor, I tried to gather my scattered thoughts. Aidan was spanking me because I had allegedly not showed him the appropriate respect. *Respect!* That was laughable when I considered how he was treating me.

“Are you willing to accept your place?” His voice boomed over me as his hand stilled. “Willing to show me the respect I am due?”

The respect *he* was due? My toes curled at his sheer hypocrisy. He wanted deference while he was happy to treat me this way? Where was my respect?

My lips parted as the onslaught went on, every strike echoing around me before the sting of the swat registered, and they were coming thick and fast. Apparently, my supposed master was riled by my refusal, and the reality only made me want to deny him all the more.

I won't call him, Master. I assured myself as the smacks continued. *I won't concede.*

Even as I gritted my teeth, I sensed it was untrue. The spanks were starting to hurt like hell, and Aidan's favored position meant there was no way I could avoid the lesson. At the rate he was blistering my backside, I wouldn't be able to sit down for days—an unnerving prospect when he often left me bound for hours on end.

“Why do you delay?”

Aidan smacked me again, multiple strikes that seemed to cover every inch of my ass. Then, just as I was on the brink of begging him for mercy, his palm moved south, connecting with the flesh that met my sex. I inhaled at the change of tack, wondering if the shift was intentional as the impact reverberated to my clit. Catching my lip between my teeth, I was thankful he couldn't see my face as I processed the sudden surge of hedonism.

Oh God.

My brow furrowed. This was what Aidan did. He humiliated me for seemingly no reason, infuriating and spanking me, yet he managed to twist the deed, making the suffering suddenly seductive. It wasn't the first-time shoots of desire had bloomed under the brunt of his palm, but this time was different. I was so angry at his audacity, I was surprised I even had the capacity for arousal.

“Iris.” His voice had deepened, the timbre startling me. “What do you have to say?”

He wanted me to call him master. He'd made no bones about it, but using passion to purge me of my pride was a low blow, even for my captor. The problem was, as his palm lowered to smack my sex, we could both hear how much the idea excited me. I hated the power he wielded over me but couldn't deny my craving for it. No other man had affected me this way. I was starting to believe no other man ever could.

“Master.”

In the end, I choked out the word as his hand struck my labia, dismayed at my soaring desire.

“Better,” he replied, though the rhythm of his hand never ceased. “You shall swear here and now to refer to me that way every day from now on.”

Oh God.

My eyes squeezed closed as my every fiber focused on the pace of his palm. Aidan alternated the position, permitting just enough pleasure to goad me into compliance. It was a clever

technique, and as his fingers skimmed my small needy bud, I knew I would succumb. I'd call him anything he wanted to ensure the suffering ceased and the indulgence never ended.

"Iris..."

I caught my breath, not wanting to cede, yet knowing beyond a doubt that I had no choice. I would, for the pain and the pleasure. Aidan meant business. He was going to master me—whether or not I approved.

"I swear it," I gasped, unable to comprehend how turned on I'd become since he'd strewn me there. Lost to the cadence of his punishment, I'd be willing to bet I could come apart if he continued at the same intensity.

"You swear *what*, little girl?" He insisted, striking my pussy with one particularly hard strike.

"Master," I corrected myself with a guttural groan. "I swear it, Master."

"Good." Pausing the offensive, he pressed his palm into my wet, heated flesh. "Then we have an accord."

We might indeed have a resigned agreement, but the pulsing arousal at my core demanded a hell of a lot more than that from the man who had held me there.

"Master," I moaned, no longer caring the indignity as I rocked my hips back to meet his hand. I needed to come, needed the release before he degraded me by tethering and abandoning me again. It was the least he owed me. "Please."

"What's this?" he quipped, his tone feigning ignorance as though he was unaware of my arousal. "After your performance, you have a question for me?"

"I..." I whimpered when his palm slid south, no doubt intentionally nudging my clit. "Please, I'm so horny. I need to come."

"You *need* to behave," he counseled, lifting his hand and smacking my clit directly.

"Y-Yes, Master." Fuck, I didn't know how he could read my mind and know precisely how to turn me into pliant mush, but

Aidan appeared to have the knowledge and ability with zero tuition.

“I have not seen much compliance from you, little girl.”

Straining for more of his touch, I mewled. I loathed how I was willing to degrade myself for the pleasure, but captured between his hands, I accepted, at this moment, I was. I would do almost anything he asked to reach the apex of this pleasure, considering it was what I deserved after such an ignominious and unwarranted penance.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped, knowing I wasn’t in the least regretful. “I’ll do better, Master,” I added, already sensing that I wouldn’t.

“You will say anything to get what you seek,” he mused, the smile in his voice obvious as one wandering digit slid into my eager sex.

“Oh, God.” I couldn’t prevent the words from escaping as his curling finger elicited another strained groan.

“And what you want—what you always seek—is the pleasure.”

Gasping, I yearned to tell him I merited that much, that if I was consigned there to be his carnal thrall, then let there be powerful orgasms—multiple ones, but I didn’t think the plea would favor my cause. Aidan knew already how much I was lost to his touch. He was well aware of the way his punishment dissolved me into fervor. That was, I presumed, the reason he reverted to the tactic, knowing it would garner him what he wanted.

“Yes, Master.”

Arching my back, I panted as he stroked my sex while the rest of his palm provided the friction my clit so frantically sought.

“Do you really think I will grant you an orgasm after your little outburst?” His sardonic tone might have been more disconcerting had I not been so lost to my desire.

“Please,” I tried again, barely registering how pitiful I sounded.

Later, I was sure this conversation would come back to haunt me, taunting whenever it was recalled, but in the present, it was only another necessary evil, a tonic to the torment I had endured.

“Please, Master.”

“Why would I do that?” His dark chuckle danced around me as a second finger joined the first before both eased in, then out of me. “Why would I reward such atrocious behavior?”

Grappling for air, dozens of answers to his question ricocheted in my head, the loudest of them nearly rising to my lips.

Because he loved provoking me as much as I adored the tantalizing arousal.

Because deep down, despite his chauvinistic approach, he longed for me to be satisfied. That, I presumed, was the way he was hoping to make me stay. After all, he couldn't keep me bound forever.

Because he enjoyed my desire as much as I did, knowing I would cede to practically any of his desires once mine had been granted.

Any and all of those were true, but I dared not speak them.

“Because I have sworn to do better,” I suggested, grinding myself against his hand.

“You have sworn to address me correctly,” he reminded me. “Nothing more. It is quite a leap from there to the obedience you infer.”

“Aid...” I started before correcting myself. “Master.”

“Very good,” he enthused, leaning to plant a warm kiss on my shoulder. “You do feel incredible, little girl, and the memory will keep me warm tomorrow as I toil on the moors, knowing how red and tender your little bottom shall be.”

“Don't.” Clenching around his fingers, I inhaled. “Don't tease me, Master.”

“I mean not to,” he clarified, sliding his digits from me. I whimpered as his palm withdrew, my hips bucking as they

sought an alternative. “So, let me clarify.” Resting his hand on my sore backside, he patted it disapprovingly. “There shall be no pleasure for naughty little girls who counter me.”

“But—” I began, only to be cut off by his insistent tone.

“No climaxes for those who argue and do not show the appropriate respect.”

“Master, I—”

“I had thought to leave you more rope tomorrow,” he went on, speaking over me on purpose. “To give you more room to maneuver, but it seems that was a mistake.”

I tensed, sensing where this latest admonishment was headed.

“What you need instead, little girl, is greater structure.”

Squeezing my sore cheek, his other hand grazed my cooling back. “More rope and stricter rules.”

“No, Master,” I sighed wearily, woeful to have lost the chance to chase my orgasm.

Though perhaps not all was lost. If he needed to bring more wood from the stocks outside, I could take care of the burning need myself. It wouldn’t take long to topple me after he’d stoked my fire.

“Yes, Master,” he reiterated. “I am nothing if not a responsible man. So, little girl, I shall give you what you need. On your knees now.”

Tapping me on the shoulder, he gestured for me to slide from his lap and resignedly, I landed in a heap by the side of his chair.

“You shall be bound.” He rose over me like a dark god, reaching for my chin and compelling my gaze to meet his.

“Wrists fettered this time to ensure you are not tempted to conclude the pleasure yourself.”

Anxiety knotted in my belly, while a blush rose at my cheeks as he secured my wrists behind me. It was as if he could read my mind and was always able to envision my next step.

“I wouldn’t, Master,” I lied, locking gazes with him as he came to stand before me.

“You shall not be able,” he confirmed with a small nod. “I have wood to bring upstairs for tonight and need to make sure my little girl is wet and needy when I return. Your Master has needs.”

He had needs? Clenching my thighs together, my hips rocked, reminding us both of my needs.

“That means you shall polish my cock for me before I leave for the task. In fact, I have decided you shall polish it for me when I return every day.” His free hand fell to his trousers, tugging out his engorged prick while the one at my chin slid to my hair and fisted my tresses. “Open.”

Heart pounding, my lips parted just in time for his thick root to push past them before brushing the back of my throat.

“Marvelous,” he enthused. “Just what your master needs.”

Choking around his length, panic flared, but his tightening fingers left me in no doubt—I would do as he commanded, and God help me, I would enjoy it. Not seeing a choice, I complied, gripping my hands together in the ropes as he used my mouth. My gaze flitted to his as best I could, his hard, blue stare reminding me of my place. I would service him without complaint. Apparently, this was my duty as much as any punishment.

“As ‘er,” I gargled around him, water pricking in my eyes.

“Silence,” he soothed as his thumb stroked away the tears.

“There shall be no speaking with your mouth full.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Baited

Iris

Pulling against the ropes at all four limbs, I climbed to my knees. My ass ached from the spanking Aidan had inflicted the night before, aiding my inherent restlessness. Another day had passed, and I watched as the sunlight waned, bleeding into the horizon, visible from the window at the other end of the room. The fire beside me had dwindled, as had my hope.

Lost in my woe, my thoughts turned to the one place I had always sought solace in the past—the ocean. The rugged deep body of water had been one of the draws of moving north after Phil. Its endless expanse, along with the moors had provided me with all the nature the overcrowded South had failed to deliver. So far, in all the months since I'd moved, I'd only made it there once, and I certainly wasn't returning today.

I wasn't going anywhere.

Another day lost, another I would never get back. A heartfelt sigh escaped my lips. Another day when I'd neither breathed fresh air nor felt the sun on my skin, let alone enjoyed the ocean's spray. Glancing to my side, I eyed the bowls Aidan had left for my use. One filled with water, one with bread and fruit, and the other used to relieve myself when the urge became unbearable. I couldn't comprehend how I'd sunk so low, but forcing my focus back to the dying light, a more significant question burgeoned.

How long could I go on like this?

Frustration pinballed as, for the hundredth time since Aidan had marched out of the house, I fought against the ropes at my wrists. I'd never been a fan of ropes, but the coarse fibers he used irritated my skin, adding to my dreadful situation. This couldn't go on. I had to find a way to break the hypnotic hold he seemed to have over me and get the hell out of there. His reinforcement last night had only hardened my resolve.

Peering back to the window, my gaze settled on the moors. Somewhere beyond that view was my life, a target I'd previously assumed was unreachable. But if Aidan had managed to walk to town and back in one day, I could certainly manage the one-way journey. It was achievable. The knowledge bubbled in my belly, simmering excitement that threatened to explode in revolution.

I may have never experienced such soul-shattering sex before I met Aidan, but the price I was paying was unsustainable. However enthralled I was by our visceral connection, I couldn't let it be the reason I lost myself. I'd worked too damn hard after Phil to allow that to happen.

Determination settled over me, providing focus. I had to do better, had to plan and help him to trust me in order to find a way out. Whatever difference I'd noticed in him yesterday had only served to harden his resolve. I needed a new tack to achieve freedom. If he insisted on fettering me like this every day, it would make escape virtually impossible. Like it or not, I'd have to play nice to get what I wanted.

Inhaling, I noticed a shadow at the window, and my pulse quickened in response. Aidan was back, and based on the mood he'd been in after he'd painted my face with his cum and bound me to the grate this morning, I wasn't certain how he'd react. I fell to my haunches as the noise of the front door opening ratcheted up my anxiety, reaching for the blanket he'd left and tugging over me.

"Little girl?"

Aidan towered in the doorway, his stare drilling into me. I permitted my gaze to mirror his, lingering over his muscular shoulders and strong jaw. However much of a swine he was, he could also be gentle and caring, and there was no doubt, I would miss his strapping body once I was gone. It wasn't enough to make me stay, but I was no fool. I might never find another physical specimen like him.

"Master?"

I gave him what he wanted, but my chin rose with an unspoken message. He could bully me into submission,

physically bending me to his resolve and stirring the waves of carnal desire we both knew pooled inside me, but he hadn't broken my will. That would never happen.

"How was your day?" I bit my lip, determined not to smile. I sounded like a 1950s housewife, except I was tethered to the hearth—more Cinderella than Stepford Wife.

"How was my day?" His brow rose as he closed the door and stalked into the space. "That is a first."

"Yes, I..." Gripping the blanket tighter, I watched as he strode past me, dropping two fresh logs into the diminishing fire and stoking the flames. "I *am* trying, Master."

Glancing down at me, his dark eyebrow arched, and in his eyes, I read what he was thinking—I was very trying, *relentlessly* trying.

"I appreciate the gesture," he eventually replied, turning to one of the large containers of water on the counter. He drew in a deep breath as he washed his hands, before spinning back to me. "Even if it is unexpected."

"I've had a lot of time to think, Master." That much was true. "I've realized that I need to try harder, to do better."

"Better?"

His tone was skeptical. Evidently, Aidan had come to know me well in the days I'd been trapped in his brick house.

"With you." I sighed, shrugging my shoulders. "With this situation."

"Okay." He still sounded unconvinced as he walked toward me, drying his hands on a nearby animal skin. "Then we shall see how you fare tonight. Remember what one of your first duties is when I return?"

Heart racing, my attention fell to his pants. Aidan had made his expectations abundantly clear before he left—I was to clean his cock when he returned. Even though the coercion chilled me, my sex clenched at the enticing thought. I shouldn't yearn to be treated that way, but for some unknown reason, the idea was insanely hot.

“Yes, Master.”

“Good.” His hand fell to my hair, stroking away the loose strands from my face. “You shall see to my needs, Iris, but I am not blind to yours.” He motioned to the bowls behind me. “You have been cramped up there all day. Let me release you and allow you to stretch your legs. You will service me later.”

“Thank you.” My brows knitted at his spontaneous kindness.

“You are not the only one who has had time to think,” he explained, crouching and starting to work on the rope at my first ankle. “I have thought of little else but you all day.”

My gaze rose to meet his, unclear where this was going.

“Your insolence often angers me, but I am wrong to compel you.”

What was that in his gaze? A flicker of regret? I couldn't recall seeing it before.

“I apologize for that.” His fingers grazed my chin. “I shall also do better, as you say.”

“I...” My voice trailed away as I struggled to articulate my surprise. Whatever I had expected from his arrival, it had not been this soft contrition. “Thank you, Master.”

“There.” Tugging at the final rope at my wrist, we both watched as the binds fell to the floor. “Up you come.”

Rising to his full height, he offered me one of his enormous hands, and gingerly, I climbed to my feet, allowing the blanket to pool around them.

“I had not forgotten your great beauty.” He grinned, shaking his head as his gaze devoured the sight of me. “But I am determined not to let it distract me.”

Once again, I had little clue how to reply to his unanticipated approach, merely smiling as he reached for the blanket and folded it.

“You should walk awhile.” He signaled around the room.

“Allow your blood to flow through your limbs.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “I will, thank you, Master.”

Padding toward the window, I looked out at the beckoning moors. I had little doubt had Aidan's ropes not bound me today, I'd have made an attempt to join the alluring heath and see where it led, but his sudden dose of care was unsettling. My home wasn't far from the horizon—somewhere out in the unknown—and if my memory served, the sea summoned me in another direction. A whole world of adventure, holding its breath and waiting for me to take the leap, but inside these four walls was the tall, brooding enigma who had saved, then captured me. A woman would go mad musing on the contradiction. I wanted freedom but also a passion as intense as this. Why did I have to choose?

“What do you see?”

Spinning at the sound of his voice, I met his knowing eyes.

“The moors, Master,” I murmured, my hands rising to cover the blush blooming on my cheeks.

I couldn't tell him what I was truly thinking. One whiff of insurrection would be sufficient to see me fettered for life.

“Do not cover your blush,” he admonished, lowering to take care of the bowls he'd left for me. “I should prefer you not cover any part of you.”

Lowering my hands, I managed a smile. “I've never known anyone who makes me blush as much, Master.”

“It must be the effect I have on you, little girl.” He snorted, tidying away before stoking the fire.

“It is,” I agreed, mesmerized as he worked. In all the years I'd been with Phil, I'd never seen him labor as hard at anything.

“I am pleased.” His gaze rose, locking with mine as the flames behind him grew. “But you should be walking, not gazing.”

“Of course.” I gulped, leaving the window and starting a fresh circuit of the room.

“Are you hungry?” he inquired. “I have fresh potatoes and leeks from the garden, but there are other vegetables to dig up.”

“I could do that, Master.” My tone was hopeful, my feet pausing as I turned to glance back at him. “I would like to be useful.” *And to get my bearings of the surrounding area.*

“You are useful,” he chuckled wryly. “Just in other ways.”

“I’d like to be helpful for more than only sex.” There, I’d said it. My heart hammered as he stopped what he was doing and stared at me.

“Do you garden?” His tone was suddenly serious. “You did not strike me as the sort of lady who pulls weeds from the earth.”

“I have,” I answered, although, in truth, I’d only tried on a couple of occasions. “And I’d like to learn more.”

“What is this, little girl?” Aidan closed the distance between us in one long stride, looming over me. “I leave you fettered as usual, and suddenly, you have a complete change of heart?” His voice echoed with disbelief. “It seems too good to be true.”

I wasn’t surprised he had doubts about my motivation, but it was imperative I was able to quell his concerns. Aidan had to trust me for my unfurling scheme to have any shot of success.

“I thought about wh-what you said, Master,” I said, flustering. “I don’t want to be tied to the grate for the rest of my life, so it’s about time I started to show you that I can contribute and build a life with you.” I glanced around, frantically trying to emphasize my point. “That’s what I want.”

“Is it?” He inched closer, grabbing my tender ass and drawing me against him.

“Yes,” I insisted, wincing and inadvertently breathing in his masculine scent. My hands rose to his shirt, tugging on the fabric. “Why not let me prove it to you, Master?”

Suspicion glimmered in his gaze, but I could see his lust crowding and forcing it from view.

“I shall give it some thought,” he whispered, skimming his lips across my jaw. “And I do appreciate the change of heart.”

“You’re welcome.” My eyes fluttered closed as his lips nuzzled the side of my neck. I suspected he knew just how much I adored the attention, and as ever, it was insanely good. “I promise to make you proud, Master.”

“I am sure,” he replied breathlessly. “And it seems, despite my better judgment, I have permitted you to distract me yet again, little girl.” Grinding his growing arousal into my hip, he growled. “I am hungry for something more than only vegetables. Perhaps you should service my needs first after all?”

“Then take what’s yours, Master.” Meeting his eyes, my hand grazed over his bulging arousal. “Do you want me on my knees?”

“No.” Growling the command, he hiked one of my legs around his middle as my hand rose into the depths of his dark tresses. “First, I fuck you. We have all night.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Belonging

Aidan

Illuminated by the flickering fire and the many candles I had lit around the bedroom, Iris was all the more beautiful. Ethereal and seductive, her soft, pale skin spoke of a woman who had rarely seen fresh air, let alone spent time in the garden, but I chose not to dwell on the probable lie. Her plea had seemed genuine enough, and after so many hours pent up in the house, she was no doubt desperate to feel the earth over her fingers. Plus, I liked this new willingness—it was warming and after the trauma of the day before, restorative.

Watching her doze, I ran my hands through my hair, thinking back to our glorious evening. Her eagerness to see me satisfied before and after our meal was more than I had hoped. When I stipulated she should attend me daily, I had not had time to think through the consequences. The reality was my evenings were filled with domestic tasks—preparing our meal and tidying the house, ensuring it was maintained before I had leave to play. I had little time for her mouth, however exquisite, and even less for the welcome diversions she had sent my way tonight. Still, I was not complaining and enjoyed sharing the domestic chores with her. Working with someone else was a rare and special treat I could learn to look forward to.

Rolling to one side, I grazed my fingertips over her shoulder before tugging the covers higher to keep her warm. Iris was an urban girl, unused to the chill of the moorlands, and however well I kept the fire stoked, her skin seemed permanently cold.

“Master?”

“Mmmm.” My balls tightened at her sleepy, rasping tone. Increasingly, there was nothing the wonderful imp could do without arousing me. “I did not mean to wake you.”

“What time is it?” Leaning on one elbow, she peered around in the half-light. I followed her gaze, watching the twisted, dancing shadows that the frolicking flames produced on the wall.

“Time we both slept.”

“Then why are *you* awake, Master?” She chuckled at my apparent idiosyncrasy.

It was a decent question. I had devoured enough hot food and pleasure to have happily delved into slumber’s embrace, but sleep had not come. I had been content to simply watch over her and think.

A part of me realized what she was doing. Of course, I knew her motivation. Tethered and frustrated, Iris wanted a way out, and likely she had concluded that playing my good girl was her fastest route. Her logic was sound, but the problem was, even though I understood her duplicity, I was still partially fooled by her performance or, at least, would have liked to have been.

I so badly wanted the display to be real, for her desire to please me to be tangible, I was almost ready to overlook her ill intent and just cede. Perhaps if she learned to revel in the role, it would grow on her. Iris could learn to be content with me in Desiree Cottage. God knew I would take care of her. I would see to her every need if she’d only succumb and behave.

“Things on your mind?” Her tone was knowing.

“Yes.” My lips twitched at her intuition. It was stronger than she realized.

“Then, can we talk?” Pulling herself upright, she edged closer to me between the sheets. “I’d like to know you better, Master.”

“You know me well enough,” I muttered, pulling her into my arms.

“I hardly know you at all or anything about this house of yours.”

Riled by her tone, my brow furrowed, yet I could not bring myself to chastise her. Iris' curiosity was inevitable. I had plucked her from another life and had to expect some turbulence, questions included.

"Okay," I sighed, planting a kiss on her crown. "What would you like to know?"

"How long have you lived here?" She turned in my embrace, the weight of her inquiring hazel stare penetrating me from the shadows.

Too long.

The words were right there on the tip of my tongue, yet I fought to hold them in. My sharp wit would end nowhere but in another quarrel, and much though I savored the chance to spank her again, I really did need to sleep, sooner rather than later.

"For most of my life," I answered.

"On your own?"

"Mostly."

I could just make out the concern in her beautiful eyes, but this conversation was steering dangerously close to the one subject I was sworn to never speak of—Desiree.

"You must have been so alone." Reaching for me, she ran her fingers through the hair on my chin.

"I grew accustomed to my own company." I shrugged. "For the most part, I did not mind it, but it is far preferable to have you in my bed." Squeezing her gently, I held her gaze and imagined her smile.

"I can't imagine."

Her tone was wistful, reminding me of the sadness she had previously expressed about missing her old life. I could hold her against her will forever, but deep down, I recognized I needed to create an alluring life for her with me. My ropes would only get me so far.

“It matters not.” Holding her closer, I breathed in the sweet scent of her. “I have you now.”

“Yes, Master.”

No hesitation from her this time, and I wondered if this change in her was not a pretense at all but the way she genuinely felt.

“I do love you, Iris.” My voice faltered as I wrenched open the steel door that my vulnerability had remained hidden behind.

“I know I do not always show it, know I have been cruel and uncaring, and you probably deserve better, but I swear it. Deep down, there is nothing I would not do for you.”

“I know, Master.” She snuggled closer, giving me hope. “I have love for you as well. In ways I didn’t know were possible, but those emotions are clouded by the things that have happened between us.”

She murmured words of affection, yet a nervy silence bloomed as I was forced to accept her unspoken accusation. I had tainted any chance of unadulterated love between us with my continued malice. I had few excuses, but still, I could not let her go, could not bear the thought of a day without her.

“I understand.” Eventually, I broke the silence. “I should do better.”

Amusing how we both promised it so often, but somehow, we never achieved the goal.

“Let’s sleep,” she suggested, apparently wanting to placate me. It was no doubt more than I merited. “Although, I do have one other question...” Her voice trailed away, leading me to believe that whatever came next was the crux of what she wanted to say.

“Go on...” My desire to make amends and the heat of her body had made me amenable to her inquiries.

“Are we far from the ocean?”

“The ocean?” I straightened, not expecting such an off-topic question.

“Yes.” She pressed closer. “I thought the water bordered the moors on one side, but never found it in all the time I was

lost.”

“‘Tis just as well,” I teased, caressing the side of her face.

“You might have fallen to its dark depths during the storm.”

“Instead, I fell for yours.” Her hazel eyes, barely visible in the half-light, were as piercing as her soft words.

“Careful,” I warned, though I did not dispute her logic. She had fallen, that much was clear, and was as ensnared by our desire as any great body of water could drown and consume.

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair.” Her gaze lowered.

“No,” I countered, grazing my fingers under her chin and tipping her head to meet my eyes. “It was fair.”

Our gazes locked in a moment of thoughtful silence.

“Yet I have not answered your question.” I broke the quiet with my hushed reply. “The sea lies to the east, though it is some miles from us.”

“A day of walking?” she pressed. “Or farther?”

“I have not made the journey for some time.” Stroking her skin, I went on. “Why the sudden compulsion for the ocean?”

“It calls to me.” She sighed. “It was one of the reasons I moved up here, Master. I love to be close to the water’s edge.”

“Then I shall have to take you some time.”

Even in the shadows, I noticed how her eyes lit up at my reply.

“Do you mean it?”

“*If* you are well behaved,” I added playfully.

I yearned, more than anything else, to give Iris what she wanted, to see her happy and not constantly seeking to flee. Her joy was how I avoided the dark blight that threatened to overcome me. That was how I ensured Iris never became another victim like Desiree, but the thought of the trek to the coast was more than I could manage at this time of the night.

Her lips smiled as though she was also considering the possibility.

“I promise to try.”

CHAPTER NINE

Blemished

Iris

Listening to his rhythmic breathing, I rolled away from his body heat. My mind was full of the ocean, of the possibility and wonder it offered. I wanted to go home, but suddenly, the desire to hear the waves lapping at the shore was even more compelling. Before Aidan, in the months I'd lived in the north while hiking with Michael and Clare, I'd discussed staying by the beach. I'd made it to the coast once but had planned to take a full week and explore the shoreline, to allow the cadence of the ocean's graceful, yet rugged pace lull me.

Then I got lost on the moors and slipped into Aidan's deep rabbit hole. Now, the ocean seemed farther away than ever.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes, visualizing the rise and fall of the tide. I imagined breathing in the clean ozone, my lips curling as my toes wiggled in the wet sand. By the time my gaze opened, I was there, sea breeze in my hair, the sound of gulls overhead drawing my attention to the clear blue sky.

A dream.

I knew it was, but still, the scene warmed me. I walked forward, aware of the sea lapping at my feet. Only a dream, but it didn't matter. It was so real. The fresh air and cold water were all I needed. Raising my arms, I reached for the sunlight as the waves pulsed at my shins. On I trekked until the sea reached my thighs, but I didn't stop, didn't want to. I'd waited so long for this moment, this chance of freedom, and I wasn't going to give it up. Not a chance.

I called out as the chilly water reached my waist, but it was exhilaration inspiring the cry, not fear. I wasn't afraid as it rose to my neck, nor concerned as the enormous wave bounded toward me. Only then did I look to the sky and notice the gray blanket that had stretched over me. Only then did I register how deep I was, how much trouble I was in.

The wave swallowed me whole, knocking me under the water, the force of the current sending me farther out to sea.

“No!” I tried to scream, but the sound was lost in bubbles to the ocean, the thunderous noise of the cascading water scattering my thoughts.

Frantically, I swam for the surface, heaving in a deep breath as I broke it, but moments later, another gigantic wave crashed overhead, consuming me. Falling from the surface, I reached toward the last place I had seen the sky, conscious that this was it. The end. I couldn't swim against a current that strong, just as I couldn't survive out there on my own. I'd been a fool to think otherwise.

“No!”

I wasn't sure if I cried the word aloud. My head was heavy as I plummeted to the ocean floor, but I felt it in my heart. Its ache resonated through the organ as I bounced off the seabed.

No!

Eyes closing, I reached toward the waves that had sent me falling to my fate. Clutching at the water, I grasped at something—nothing—frantic for anything to cling on to but knowing my future was doomed. The water would consume me. It was over. I should give up, stop trying, yet somehow, I couldn't. Fist tightening, I grappled harder, my fingers feeling something in the darkness.

Curling my digits around the unknown object, I fought with all of my strength. It wasn't possible to overcome the strength of the ocean, and I should succumb to its beauty and power, but for the life of me, I couldn't stop fighting.

Harder, I gripped, pulling frantically at what felt like wood until from somewhere in the depths, the sound of my name resonated.

Iris!

I heard it through the gloomy water, although I couldn't say how or from where. I must be dead already. I hadn't taken air for an age, so surely, I had drowned.

Iris!

Turning my head, I tried to decide where the call came from. It wasn't until I felt a tug on my shoulder, I realized something was wrong. I wasn't on the seabed at all. In fact, I wasn't even in the water.

"Iris!"

Gasping, my eyes opened to find myself at Aidan's window, but this time, I had flung the pane open, and allowed the full strength of the gusting moorland wind into the room.

"Careful." Aidan wrestled me from the window, closing the window while his body cast the room into shadow.

Disorientated, I glanced around, noticing the fire had been extinguished. "You nearly fell."

"I..." I shook my head. "I was dreaming."

"The same dream?" His unimpressed tone deepened as he moved toward me and guided me to the bed.

"No," I panted, recalling the sense of powerlessness as the water crashed over me. For the first time in more nights than I could recall, a new dream had engulfed me. "A different dream, Master. I was in the ocean."

"The ocean again?" Aidan snorted. "This really is your new obsession."

"Yes," I agreed as he pulled the covers over me, though I knew he was wrong. There was nothing new about my desire for the sea, but this was the first time I'd dreamed about it overpowering me.

"Tomorrow, I tie you to the bed." His growl came from beside me. "Not for punishment, little girl, but for your safety. You could have hurtled to the ground and broken your neck."

My brow furrowed at his caution.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

I wouldn't argue, there was no point, and perhaps he had a valid argument. My sleepwalking had gotten worse since he'd

incarcerated me, and it was becoming treacherous.

“Good.” He sighed, reaching for me in the darkness. “Now, sleep. We have a few hours until dawn.”

Swallowing, I stared into the shadows, too alarmed to close my eyes. My dreams were haunting me, but this latest development was even more disconcerting. The ocean had always been my friend—a source of solace and joy—so why would I dream about it surmounting me? My heart pounded as I remembered each overwhelming detail of the nightmare, my panic escalating as I recalled the enormous sense of hopelessness as I sprawled across the ocean bed.

Yes, I had fought, but ultimately, I’d known it was futile. I could never overcome a foe as wild and dangerous as the sea. It had taken me, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do to stop it. If Aidan hadn’t woken me, I could have thrown myself to my death, certain in the knowledge I was captured by its power.

“Oh God.”

Mouthing the words, I glanced in Aidan’s direction, unsure if he was still awake. Stretching in the gloom, it all started to make sense. I could see how the dream had been conceived, the genesis of its hold over me resting soundly at my side.

Aidan.

He was like the ocean. Miles from the shore we might be, but trapped in the confines of Desiree Cottage, Aidan was the sprawling and commanding influence in my life. When he was placated, all was well. I dipped my toes in the water and was rewarded with joy and pleasure. But when he was angry, the waves rose high enough to devour me. The waves that had taken me under represented his control over me. That was the authority he had. At any moment, he could pull the rug out from under my feet and send me flying. Any time he liked, he could ensure I never took another breath.

I loved the sea, its alluring majesty mesmerizing me from a young age, but in the same way I wouldn’t allow myself to get out of my depth, I shouldn’t have permitted Aidan to

overcome me. It was almost too late, his supremacy nearly too strong. I thought I had time to placate him and win his trust, but if I believed the warning of my nightmare, I might not. Aidan had taken me over and was already perilously close to taking me under. If I didn't get out soon, I might never come up for air.

By the time exhaustion compelled my lids to close again, I was resolved. I had to accelerate my plan and get away from Aidan's dark clutches. It didn't matter how he tried to fool me. Whatever passion we shared was not worth dying for. I couldn't let his deft tongue and soft words lull me. I would escape before his wave overcame me.

CHAPTER TEN

Bloomed

Aidan

I allowed her to rest when I woke, dressing quietly and creeping past her to build up the fire before I headed downstairs. Last night had been the final straw. I had toyed with the idea of tethering her at night, but her nocturnal adventures had shifted from riling to downright dangerous. Shivering over the embers of the grate, I remembered how I had found her when I'd roused to find her gone from my bed. Folded over the open window and face to the wind, for one terrible moment, I thought I was too late, that she was about to plummet to her death.

The panic that had spiked in me was greater than any I had known, more intense even than when the life had slipped from Desiree. Lurching from the bed, I had grabbed her, easing her back into the room as I tried to wake her, but as ever, the slumber that took hold of her was deep and impenetrable. For the longest time, I held her, my arms enclosing her waist as the wind from the moors whipped past us and dowsed the flames in my hearth.

“Iris.”

Blowing out a breath at the memory, I warmed my hands on the growing fire. I couldn't lose her, too, especially in such a traumatic way. Her sleep walking left me with no choice. I would bind her until the dreams settled.

“Master.”

Turning at her voice, I realized that I had not heard Iris' tread on the steps. Wrapped in one of the blankets from my bed, she stood in the doorway, her face weary. I was so consumed with reliving the terror of last night, I must not have recognized the creaks of the wooden stairs.

“Iris.” Rising, I wandered to her and swallowed her in my embrace. “I had hoped you would rest.”

“I’ve rested enough, Master.” She sighed, the noise clawing at my insides.

So much for my grand plan to keep her happy. Maybe today was the day to stay at home and offer the seeds of a compromise?

“You look worn out,” I murmured into her hair. Absently, I wondered what had happened to the shampoo I had acquired from town. She had not washed her hair since I had gifted them. “And you shall need your energy today.”

Tired hazel eyes rose to meet mine. “Why, Master?”

“You said you wanted to help in the garden.” I motioned out of the window. “And today the weather is as fair as it ever gets in these parts.” I waited a moment for her to understand.

“You want me to help you garden today?” Her brow rose. Clearly, she hadn’t expected the concession.

“Yes,” I clarified as she snuggled into my chest. “We have food and wood enough, so today I shall remain with you, and we shall work together. Then, once you are grubby from the earth, I shall heat some water and you can bathe.” If I knew anything about women, it was their unremitting desire to always be clean. This, I recognized, was one of the best rewards I could offer her.

“Well?” I goaded, moving back an inch to assess her face. “What do you think?”

“Thank you, Master.” She grinned. “I would love that.”

Towering over the vegetable patch, I shook my head. It was obvious Iris had never so much as sowed a seed before, much less pull their bounty from the ground.

“Keep going,” I encouraged, wishing I had undertaken the task myself.

It would have been a much faster process, but she had insisted, as if she had something greater to prove to me. Seeking continued solace between us, I agreed to let her take the lead, but so far, in the hours since breakfast, Iris had only produced

three potatoes and a handful of carrots. The earth was rich with many more rewards if she would only get her hands in the dirt properly and discover them.

Holding back my criticism, I pushed the spade into the mud next to her, turning over the earth. A quick sideways glance showed no improvement in her technique, though her attire was amusing. I had considered ordering her to perform the task nude, but that was folly. The weather was merciless, and even when the sun shone, it was too cold for public humiliation. Plus, there was no public on the moors, only Iris and me in the midst of paradise.

Besides, the clothing I had offered her was arguably as denigrating for her as being made to crawl about naked. Dressed in a pair of my old trousers, held up by a tightly buckled belt, and a tattered old shirt, she looked like a farm hand from the 1800s. With her hands and forearms smothered in mud and flecks of dirt smudging her delicate neck and diminutive nose, I had never seen her so dirty.

“Ugh!” she exclaimed, falling back on her knees and flailing her arms in the air as though she had been burned. Chunks of earth flew around her as they were flung from her fingers.

“What is it?” I demanded, sliding the spade into the ground.

“A worm!” she shrieked, leaping to her feet and darting away barefoot from the aforementioned villain. “Oh my God, I touched it!”

“It is only a worm.” I would have laughed at her if I thought it would improve her performance. “There to aid us, not harm. It shall not hurt you.”

“It’s disgusting!” Lips parted, she looked to be on the brink of tears as her gaze flitted around the ground, searching for more so-called offenders.

“Can I assume you have not spent as much time in the garden as you led me to believe, young lady?” My eyebrow arched as I wandered toward her.

“I...” Gaze flying to me, she hesitated, considering whether it was worth another lie. “No, Master,” she conceded at length.

“But I want to help.”

“I know,” I soothed, beckoning her forward with one finger.

“And look, you have.” I gestured to the tiny horde of vegetables she had collected. “Behold, your bounty!”

“You’re mocking me.” Her panic had dissolved into disdain.

“Do you mean, you are mocking me, *Master*?” I clarified, tipping her chin to meet my gaze.

“Yes,” she muttered. “That’s what I meant, *Master*.”

“I thought so.” I chuckled, releasing some of the pent-up hilarity and frustration that had ballooned. “What I meant to say was, I appreciate your effort, little girl, but I am not sure harvesting is your forte.”

“No, I think you’re right.”

Her shoulders fell, her disappointment tugging at whatever remained of my heart. I had thought the organ buried long ago, but she had come and helped to resurrect it.

“Never mind.” Tugging back her hair, I kissed her forehead.

“You have other skills, *Iris*.”

“Do I, though?” She inhaled slowly. “I don’t seem to be able to do anything to help you, *Master*.”

“Oh, you do lots to help me,” I countered, conscious of my cock swelling inside my pants.

Evidently, my little girl had no idea how tempting she was out there in the dirt. The fact that she had labored on her knees for the most part of the morning was breathtaking, and she had done so for me. Perhaps I had misjudged her desire to flee? Maybe there was a genuine need to be mine, after all?

“How?” Her deflation was morphing into bratty sullenness, yet still she was adorable. “What do I do, *Master*? This is the first day you have ever let me out of the house.”

“That is true,” I confirmed, tightening my grip on her hair.

“Yet you have your merits, little girl. You demonstrate them every day.”

“You mean sex?” Her gaze rose to mine, the fresh-air color in her cheeks deepening.

“I mean, submission...”

The breeze whipped around side of the house, funneling my words away with them.

“Oh.”

Her chest rose and fell beneath my oversized shirt. Unfastening the buttons, I reached inside and grazed my palm over her right breast. Her nipple was pebbled, just as I expected, evidence of her own burgeoning interest.

“It is not your fine body that captivates me.” Though squeezing her pert breast, I couldn’t deny what a turn on it was. “It is more your desire to cede and how wonderfully wet you become when you finally follow my commands.”

“Master.” The crimson hue on her face grew.

“What?” I asked. “Is it not the truth?”

“Yes,” she admitted, although I sensed her confession was painful. “But we can’t talk about those things out here.”

“Why not?” I laughed at her discomfort, enjoying her developing dismay. Iris was rarely sweeter than when her panic ballooned. “There is no one but the moors to witness our truth, and my old mistress is a marvelous confidant.”

That much I could vouch for myself.

“Master, we’re supposed to be gardening...” Her gaze flitted around to the muddy patch she had abandoned.

“I shall finish the job later,” I told her, knowing what I wanted before my labor began.

“And what of me?” She tilted her head in feigned insult.

“I will find something for you to do.” My lips curled at the enticing prospect. “But first, I have something for you to take care of.”

Reaching for her hand, I slid it down to my throbbing girth.

“I didn’t know you found the dirt such a turn on, Master,” she giggled, wrapping her fingers around my length as far as the fabric allowed.

“I find *you* in the dirt a turn on.” Reaching for my shirt, I ripped it open to reveal both of her wonderful assets. The facet of me that wanted to shroud her in warmth and comfort was lost in the frenzy of my growing passion. She would survive some time in the open, then I would soothe her by the fire. Reaching for my belt at her middle, I eased the buckle, pulling it open. “Get these off.”

“But Master.” Glancing around, she started work on the zipper. “I’ll freeze out here.”

“I shall keep you warm,” I growled, irritated by her protracted display. I could push her to her knees and enjoy the pleasure of her hot throat, but I had another goal in mind. “If you are a good girl, I shall have you cleaned up in no time.” Grabbing her hair, I waited as my trousers slid to her ankles, my gaze feasting on her glorious naked body.

“Down.” Pushing her to the mud on her knees, I wandered behind her, ripping my shirt from her arms.

“Master?” She twisted on her knees, fidgeting in the dirt as worried eyes met mine.

“Did I ask you to speak?” Easing my erection from its confines, I fisted my shaft as I moved behind her.

“No, I...” She hesitated, conscious of the change of tack yet still unsure what I expected.

“Then be quiet,” I advised, fisting her tresses and pushing her face down as I climbed into position behind her.

“But Master.” Palms sinking into the earth, she panted as I cocooned her body. “We can’t! Not in the mud.”

“That is precisely where I want you.” I smiled at the perfect analogy—my dirty little girl pushed into the mud while I fucked her. What could be better?

What could more wonderfully surmise her place in this new solitary life—at my feet and at the end of my cock. I would

love and worship her, devote my whole being to her safety and pleasure—but it would always come down to this. I was master of Desiree Cottage, and now master of the wild Iris.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Belittled

Iris

The mud was colder than I recalled, the dirt rising between my outstretched fingers as Aidan pressed his weight against my shoulders.

“Oh!” I pleaded, conscious of the tremble in my arms. At the rate he was applying pressure I would land flat on my face before long.

“Hush.”

His boot nudged my thigh wider, my knees squelching deeper into the sludge as I grappled for balance.

“Master!” I tried again, terror mushrooming inside me. “Not here, not like this.”

Why was he doing this? Aidan could have me whenever he chose, it had been proven often enough, so why degrade me with such overt authority? The ground was not only mucky and grim, but there were hundreds of bloody insects and other horrible creatures everywhere. No place had ever spoken less of arousal.

“What did I tell you?” His question thundered past my ear, carried by the breeze.

“I—” I opened my mouth to speak, but whatever I was going to say was splintered by the swat that landed on my upturned ass. “Fuck.” Lowering my chin, I mumbled the profanity, praying it was also lost to the cooling winds of the moors.

“What. Did. I. Tell. You?”

Heaving in a breath, I struggled to remain still in the filth as he spanked me again. “To be quiet,” I gasped. “Master.”

“Then, do it.” Leaning over me, his hand wrapped around my throat, holding me as he resumed his position and slid his cock into place. “You. Are. Mine.” Aidan punctuated each word

with a hard lunge, his length filling me before vanishing as swiftly as it had come.

“Understand?” His fingers tightened at my throat, alluding to even worse if I failed to comply.

“Y-Yes,” I gasped, my back arching as I strained for air, and all the while he screwed me, each thrust pressing me deeper into the grime.

“This is what you help me with.” Triumph resounded in his voice, as though denigrating me in this awful way was in some way a victory.

That’s Aidan. The nagging voice reminded me. He’s the same man who thought it appropriate to bind you to his grate every fucking day. He’s the monster who won’t let you leave.

My internal monologue was woefully right. This was who Aidan was, and rather than fight and counter him, I had ceded to his desire too many times. My refusal to resist had led to this moment; I’d conditioned him into thinking this was in any way acceptable.

“Fuck,” he grunted, grinding into me at an even faster pace.

Struggling for breath around his stiffening fingers, I panted, trying not to think about the mud I was sinking into.

“This is more like it.” His snarl was a low whisper in my right ear. “This is what you deserve.”

My eyes flickered closed at the insult. I knew what he was doing. As if it wasn’t enough physically fucking me into the ground, he was goading me into enjoying it. Aidan knew well enough that degrading me made me hotter than just about anything else, and by the same logic, he’d concluded he could muster revelry if he pushed the right buttons.

“Is it not?” The pressure at my neck softened. “Tell me, little girl.”

“Yes, Master,” I breathed, focusing on the sublime sense of fullness he provided and not the mess I was in.

“Tell. Me.” His hand shifted quickly, tugging my hair and back and forcing me into an even more extreme arch.

“This is what I deserve,” I panted, relishing the electricity at my scalp as his balls banged hard against my sensitive flesh.

Damn him, and damn me as well, but the more he pounded me, the more I could believe in the lie. The fallacy that this was all I was worth—a whore he could screw in the sludge—furled inside, taunting me toward hedonism. I loathed him for this, should absolutely despise him, but the same old magic twisted in my head, tricking me into warped compliance. Gripping my fingers into the mire, I held on, knowing deep down, he was giving me exactly what I needed.

“That is correct.” His hips stilled, pushing him deeper as he steadied himself against me. “I am your Master and will take you this way whenever it pleases me, and you, little girl, will thank me and appreciate it.”

He withdrew as fast as he’d slammed inside me, leaving me reeling on all fours as he marched around to my face.

“Open,” he instructed, yanking my head up with a clutch of my hair. Mud clinging to my hands, I rose onto my knees, eyeing his engorged cock as my lips parted. “This is how you show your gratitude.”

Aidan shoved his shaft into my mouth, lunging until I gagged around his crown. Holding me in place, he fucked my face ruthlessly, swatting away my hands if they rose to halt him.

“This is how you are useful, little girl.” Pulling away with a stream of saliva, he pumped the first shots of his cum over my face. “Do not forget it.”

“How is it?” he asked, adding another candle to the selection already laid out in the bathroom.

Swirling the water in the tub with my hand, I nodded. “Lovely, thank you, Master.”

Aidan studied the water level. “I’ll bring more boiling water,” he concluded. “Can I trust you to stay?”

“Yes,” I sighed, sliding deeper into the bath as he turned and walked out of the room. I blew out a breath as his tread

disappeared down the steps.

It didn't bear thinking about, but only an hour ago, the same man who was so keen to keep my bath water warm had been pushing me into the mud and using me. Closing my eyes, I tried to reconcile everything that had happened since then. Pulling me to my feet and throwing me over his shoulder, it had been Aidan who had carried me to the hallway where, using a container of water, he removed the majority of grime from my hands and knees.

I was quiet throughout, stunned not only by what had transpired but also by my responses. Being shoved into the dirt for sex was a step too far, so why hadn't I tried to fight him off? Hell, I'd welcomed his advances, playing along with his sick games before he painted my face with his seed.

That was when the tears had flowed, ugly memories of our perverse carnality tightening my windpipe the way his fingers had threatened to. Time protracted into odd pockets when he was either there with me, holding and consoling, or running past me with vessels of water which he took upstairs. Once the bath was ready, he had returned, easing the remaining clothing from my body before carrying me more traditionally up to the dark bathroom.

"Iris."

Stirred by his voice, I startled to find Aidan looming over the iron tub.

"Make room for the hot water," he warned, waiting until I had curled into a ball before he poured the latest fluid inside.

"There." Pride echoed in his voice. "Have you used your new products?"

"Not yet, Master."

I glanced to the shampoo and conditioner he'd bought, my brows knitting. I still didn't know how a man who effectively lived in the wilderness had acquired them, but I dared't ask.

"Then, may I?"

What was this? The same man who'd been happy to push me into the filth now sought to wash me clean? My head ached at the competing paradoxes. Aidan was as messed up as I was. Aroused by the same shameful behavior, he seemed as adroit at tenderness as he was ruthlessness.

"O-kay." I couldn't help my stunned tone.

He only smiled as he reached for the first bottle and examined the lid. "How does this work?"

"You lift the lid, Master." I motioned to the cap of the bottle. "And then squeeze a small amount of the contents into your palm."

"My palm?"

My sex clenched as his tantalizing eyebrow cocked. "Yes," I confirmed.

"Okay then." Falling to his knees beside the tub, he followed my instructions, staring at the amber colored shampoo in his hand. "And this goes into your hair?"

"Yes, Master." I might have laughed at his little boy lost act had I not been so recently degraded by the performer.

"Like this?" He dropped the shampoo on to the top of my head, running it along my tresses before massaging it into my scalp.

"Yes." I let out a satisfied sigh, unable to hide how good it felt. It had been so long since my hair was properly cleaned.

"Thank you."

I sat in the tub as he cleansed me, guiding my head back while he rinsed the suds with the same vessel that had carried the water to the bath. The passivity suited, giving me time to simply feel as I enjoyed the sensation of him working the conditioner through my lengths, but it couldn't halt my conflicted questions.

"Master." I inhaled, steeling myself. "Why did you treat me that way outside?" Hearing the quiver in my voice, I closed my eyes for strength. Had I ever been more vulnerable than this, sitting naked with my tormentor while he soothed me?

“Because it was what you needed, little girl.” He ran his hand along my wet hair before caressing my shoulder.

“Was it?” I refused to acknowledge the tears burning in my eyes. I couldn’t be crying, not when I finally had his attention.

“I pushed you.” His tone was contemplative. “I realize that.”

“Yes.” Heaving in a breath, I met his gaze. “You pushed me down into the dirt.” Waves of fury simmered inside me as I recounted the recent trauma. “Nobody has ever treated me like that.”

“Yet you enjoyed it, little girl.” His blue eyes were full of knowing. “In the end, your body betrayed your need.”

“That’s not the point, Master.” How many times did we have to have this conversation? Aidan thought it was acceptable to tear through my boundaries whenever it suited him.

All the more reason to go. I tensed at my inner voice. *You need to go, Iris, and you need to take the chance while you have it.*

“I can’t cope with your split personalities.” There, I said it aloud.

“My what?” He smiled as he stroked my skin.

“The dual sides to you.” I exhaled. “The way one moment you want to brutalize me, and the next you’re like this.” I gestured to the gentle man sitting beside the tub. “Tender and caring.”

“You need both versions of me,” he replied, lifting one hand to wipe the tears from my cheek. “We both know that.”

“They’re difficult to reconcile. Sometimes, the change of pace is perturbing.”

“Duly noted.” He pressed his lips together, making me no promises of improvements to come. Aidan had heard me, and as far as he was concerned, that was enough. The problem was, it wasn’t.

“What’s next then, Master?” We appeared to have reached an impasse, and I saw no benefit to plowing on with the line of inquiry.

“Next, we get you dry.” His expression brightened. “Then I collect the rest of those potatoes and we prepare supper.”

Supper. Of course, that was what was on his mind. He didn't want to discuss the whiplash his shifting approaches left me with but was all for peeling and dicing potatoes.

“Okay.” I managed a small smile as he turned and found one of the few reasonable towels in the house. Now wasn't the time to argue. Another discussion would change nothing, but change was coming to Desiree Cottage.

Whether Aidan liked it or not.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bolted

Aidan

Silence reigned as I dug the remaining root vegetables from the same dirt I'd fucked her in, an eerie blanket of quiet that reminded me of all the years I had spent there alone with only the ghost of Desiree and my memories for company.

Peering over my shoulder, I found Iris precisely where I had left her, perched in the doorway, and wrapped in a blanket. I had relented to her pleas and allowed her to wear clothes beneath it—an old top and a pair of pants that had once been Desiree's, plus a small pair of her boots. Mercy was not usually my style, but guilt badgered me. Had I gone too far when I had pushed her in the mud? I had vowed to keep the beast who lurked within me chained, yet sometimes it seemed he took control no matter what I said.

Still, the garments had placated Iris, and she was finally compliant. I should have been pleased, but I could not shake the nagging sense that the obedience was ominous. She always had so many complaints. Surely, I had not managed to resolve them all?

Collecting the remaining carrots into the container filled with potatoes, I rose and carried it toward her. "We have a feast!"

"Excellent." Her lips twitched. "I'm just sorry I couldn't help you harvest."

"You were more than useful." I chuckled at her mournful tone. "Remember?"

"How can I forget, Master?" Her chin rose to meet my gaze.

"Inside now." I signaled into the house. "You can help prepare the vegetables."

"Yes, Master." She smiled, pulling the blanket tighter as I approached.

“Are you still cold?”

Maybe the bath had not been the smartest plan, but I had ensured the water temperature was warm, and it was the closest thing Iris would get to the ocean for the time being.

“A little,” she replied.

“Then some time by the fire will serve you well.”

“After you, Master.” She rose to her full height without protest, motioning for me to go ahead. “You have the burden of the weight to carry.”

Nodding, I stepped over the threshold into the hall. “The fire should be well stoked by now. It did boil several pots of hot water for you already.”

“That’s true.”

Entering the main room, I scanned the area for a good location for the vegetables. I would prepare the remaining meat while she worked on them. Things were starting to make sense, and oddly it had been offering her greater liberty that had brought the ease. When we both had roles to play, contentment swelled. It was a lesson I needed to remember.

“I shall put these here,” I concluded, walking into the room and leaving the container between the clean water and fire.

“You can make a start on them.”

I turned, expecting to find her right behind me, but to my surprise, there was no one there.

“Iris?”

Heart pounding, I wandered to the doorway, certain I would discover her in the hall, fiddling with the blanket, or with some other flimsy excuse, but no, the darkening corridor was as empty as the main room.

“Iris?”

A knot of panic tightened at my throat, threatening to cut off my air supply as I headed for the front door. Staring out onto the moors, she was just visible on the brow of the hill, a tiny, wild woman running for her freedom.

“Damn it!” I spat, abandoning all thoughts of supper as I set off after her. “Iris, stop! Get back here!”

What was she thinking, fleeing from me? After everything we had been through, I had only just started to trust her. This little escape attempt would knock us back to square one. She would find herself bound to my fucking fire grate forever.

“Iris!”

By the time I reached the summit, Iris was already way down the slope. She was moving fast, her feet pounding the earth as if each step had been practiced in her mind a thousand times. A ball of rejection stung in my chest as I flew after her. She *had* planned this, she must have. That was why she had been so compliant after bathing, and why she had turned on the puppy dog eyes and begged so nicely for clothes. I thought she had only been cold after washing, but evidently, Iris had ulterior motives.

“I am going to hunt you,” I hollered, trying to judge the distance between us as she dashed toward the gathering of trees.

I looked to be closing on her, but for such a diminutive woman, she had great speed. No doubt her stamina would wane soon enough, though. She would not be able to keep up the pace.

“You will not get away!”

My words were whipped back into my face by a sudden gust of wind. I watched as she fled between the giant trunks, shrouded by a canopy of leaves and branches. It was as if my old mistress the moors was on her side, aiding and abetting her flight.

It is because the moors know you. The answer came to me as I dashed after her. *She knows who you are and what you have done.*

Smashing past the branches that seemed determined to obstruct my path, I hurtled on, just catching a glimpse of my runaway as I dodged the roots of another tree.

“Fuck!”

Maneuvering around the undergrowth meant I had not noticed the cruel fingers of another branch. Its sharp end clawed at my face before I jerked it away, inadvertently breaking the twig from the tree. I had no wish to harm nature, but if it got in my way, I would destroy it.

“Iris!”

I yelled her name as I stopped for breath, straining my ears to listen beyond my ragged breaths. She could not have gone far. She did not know these woods and was no fitter than I, but for the life of me, I could not see her.

“Are you hiding?” I called out, certain that must be the answer. The woman was lurking somewhere, crouched behind some foliage or another. “I shall discover you.” And when I did, God help her. It would take more than a sound spanking to repay the debt of this performance. Iris would rue the day she had ever thought to flee.

Stepping forward, I peered around, my senses on high alert. My little girl was there somewhere, toying with me. Swallowing down my irritation, I inhaled slowly.

This was a hunt, pure and simple, and I was a proficient tracker, out on the moors many times a month pursuing prey much larger than Iris. This was nothing I could not handle. I just had to keep my head, and let my instincts lead...

There!

A noise in the undergrowth drew my attention to the west, a small creature perhaps or a large bird. *Or a frantic little girl?* My lips curled as I stared in the direction of the noise, my feet edging closer as quietly as possible.

Time prolonged as my heart rate elevated, and all the while, I inched toward my goal.

Iris.

I whispered her name in my head, imagining how terrified she would be when I caught her. No doubt she would kick and scream, but we both knew her resistance would be futile. Her master would have his way, and there would be hell to pay for her insurrection.

I was only a couple of feet from the ancient trunk when the sound came again, my feet pausing as I prepared to attack. Just as I was about to strike, a squirrel burst out from behind the bark and hurtled past me at breakneck speed. I turned to see it tear away, disappearing into the undergrowth.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered under my breath, leaning against the tree as I glanced around.

She was in the woods somewhere. I would have heard if she had broken out of the timbered area. It was only a matter of time before she was mine again.

“Iris.” Her name was like a song as it rang out around the dense trees. “I am coming for you, little girl, and you know what?”

I waited until I could no longer hear the echo of my voice before I went on.

“When I find you, you had better say your prayers.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brutalized

Iris

My heart was pounding so fast, I was sure I would lose consciousness. Sliding farther down the length of the tree propping me up, I focused on steadying my breath. Panting loudly was sure to make it easier for Aidan to find me.

The escape had gone better than I'd dared to hope. I knew he would come after me, he was always going to, but I had a decent head start and had bought myself a few seconds to hide in the woods. It was strange, but the scene reminded me of the old recurring dream I had experienced, the branches closing in just as recalled, except the nightmare was always set at night and seemed to allude to something insidious. Today, the trees were my protectors.

Glancing up, the sky was barely visible through the thick canopy of leaves, the evergreens maintaining their cover even though their deciduous friends had blanketed the ground with red and golden hues. Inhaling, I mentally thanked them all for the cover they provided. Without them, I would surely have been caught in Aidan's grip by now. My plan hadn't gone much farther than these woods. I knew I couldn't outrun him forever so finding somewhere to lie low was the best chance I had. Leaning against the bark, I tried to decide which direction my captor was coming from.

"Iris." His voice splintered the unnatural silence. "I am coming for you, little girl, and you know what?"

Tensing at his words, I peered around the trunk. I couldn't see Aidan, but his cry suggested he wasn't too far away.

"When I find you, you had better say your prayers."

The pit of nervous energy in my tummy knotted until it hurt. I had no doubt his threat was not idle. Aidan would be livid and would view my escape as twisted treachery. Never mind the fact that he'd held me captive, kept me bound until today, and

thought it appropriate to degrade me. My duplicitous body's attempt to fool him into my assent was irrelevant. I might have relished his carnal attention, but I had never agreed to be his prisoner.

It had to end before I was lost in Aidan's dark world for good.

Straightening, I pressed my back into the tree, conscious of footsteps to my left. Shit, he was closer than I realized, and if I didn't conceal myself, the whole thing would have been for nothing. Lowering down the bark again, I held my breath. I couldn't go back there, couldn't spend another day bound in Desiree Cottage. This getaway had to work.

"I know you are here."

His tone was playful, as though he was getting off on the thrill of the chase. No doubt, he was. Any man who could enjoy fucking a woman while he pushed her into the dirt, would likely revel in this sport. That was how he would see it—I was sport for his entertainment.

You liked it as well, though, didn't you? My brows knitted at the unhelpful monologue. You liked it when he held you down and made you submit. You enjoyed being humiliated in the filth, and you loved having to admit it to—

Stop!

I sent the word rattling through my brain as Aidan's footsteps sounded from somewhere behind me. In my mind I envisioned every step he took, his large dirty boots crunching through the leaves.

Stop this!

I tried to focus my mind. There would be time for self-reflection later when I was safe in the pub with Clare or curled up at home on my couch, but this was not that time. Right now, I had to stay alive.

"You are in so much trouble, little girl."

His voice came from a different direction, suggesting he had veered away from the tree I was crouched by and taken a

different route. Hope bloomed inside me, a green shoot that promised a shot at a brighter tomorrow.

Slowly, I eased myself upright, my heart hammering with every miniscule sound the move made. If Aidan continued in the wrong direction, I could move on, dashing to the next tree, then the next. If I was lucky, eventually I could lose him entirely. It was the only opportunity I had.

Gazing around at the nearby trees, I considered which one to dart to next. I would need to stay low and make as little noise as possible—a feat made all the more difficult by the array of gorgeous leaves scattered all around me. Deciding on another bulky specimen a few feet away, I sized up the journey, all the while listening for more clues to where he was.

Each breath I pulled in was painful, my every movement heavy as I got ready to take the plunge, but I knew I had no choice. If I stayed where I was, Aidan would double back and find me. I had to move.

Stepping forward, I crouched down and went for it. Trying to keep my strides as long and as light as I could, I winced every time a step was audible, but I had no choice but to keep going. By the time I reached the new tree, panic had spiked, accelerating my pulse to the point of nausea. Still, I had done it. I had successfully made it from one tree to the next.

“I hear you.”

Aidan’s dark chuckle reverberated around me. I didn’t know if it was the insistent pounding of my own heart that confused me, but I couldn’t discern where his voice came from.

“I know where you are, little girl.”

He was bluffing. He *had* to be bluffing, but still the thought gnawed—what if he wasn’t? Terror ballooned in my chest, making it impossible to think until finally the sound of his footsteps became clearer, and they were headed in my direction.

“Oh God!”

I mouthed words, curling into a ball and making myself as small as I could. This couldn’t be happening—not again—but

as I lifted my head, I saw his shadow looming, the first tangible sign that my attempt had failed, and I was royally fucked.

“Do not try to run again.” He was there in a heartbeat, towering over me.

At that moment, the edges of my world came crashing down. Every hope I had, any chance of a happy future depended upon me getting out of there, away from the house—away from *him*.

“You are in enough trouble already.”

Peeking up at his glower, the last few ounces of my courage surfaced. Why was he so angry? His liberty hadn’t been denied. I was the victim here!

“Stand up slowly.” The instruction echoed around the trees. “Now, Iris.”

Forcing out a breath, I pushed my heels into the ground and began my ascent. I appeared to be going along with his order, but inside, revolution roared. There was no way I was going to let him take me back there. No way I could contemplate it.

“Good.” His voice was like thunder. “Since I had to leave in a hurry, I do not have any rope with me, but you can take off that top and I shall use it as makeshift fetters.”

I glanced his way, locking gazes with the devil who had possessed me. He’d taken me and like a fool I had allowed it, but this was where our journey ended.

“I’m not taking off the top.”

“Pardon me?” Aidan’s voice deepened as he scowled.

“I said, I’m not taking off the top, Master, Sir, or whatever the hell you demand to be called.” Fury merged with my fear, deciding I had nothing left to lose. I knew what awaited me if he took me back to Desiree Cottage.

“I am surprised at your tone, Iris.” Leaning one strong arm on the trunk behind me, he frowned. “Especially when you know you are in the wrong.”

That was funny because I wasn't even vaguely shocked by his tone.

"I'm still not taking off the top." My jaw tightened. "This is where it ends, Aidan. No more arguments, no more fights, and no more ropes. It's over."

"Oh, little girl." He shook his head, pressing me against the tree trunk. "Where is this coming from? I thought we had gotten past this."

"No. There is no getting over this. I want my life back. I can't stay here and be your whore anymore."

"That's enough," he barked, his anger flaring before my eyes. "It is not open for discussion. You are coming back with me."

"No!" Glimpsing my one final opportunity for liberty, I bolted, squeezing past his hard body and fleeing.

Naturally, he was after me seconds later, the echo of his heavy boots haunting as my heart threatened to jump into my mouth.

I was never going to make it, I knew I wouldn't, but still, I had no choice. I had to run, had to—

The thought was obliterated as his grasping hand clasped the top I wore and yanked me back. Yelling with frustration, I lurched into his body before he pushed me to the ground. I landed on the cold, hard terrain, my jaw bouncing off a sprouting root before he dragged me toward him.

Pain ricocheted in my head, telling me I might have broken a bone, but it was already overridden by panic as he pulled me onto my back. Pinning my lower body down with his legs, he rose over me, every inch the devil I'd recognized.

"You are not going anywhere." Hellfire raged in his gaze, assuring me there was no hope of an empathetic reprieve as his hands pinioned my wrists into the soil. "Ever. Again."

"Uck you!" I spat, inhaling at the burgeoning hurt.

"Maybe later, darling," he sneered. "First, I am going to require some obedience."

“No way!” I cried, grappling for any kind of control, but Aidan’s weight and strength were overpowering.

Just like the fierce ocean in my dream last night, he was overwhelming, and in that moment, I knew it was over. I had no chance. There was no way out.

“Just stop it, little girl.” Emotion choked in his throat. “Stop tainting what we have.”

Straightening, he released my hands, in an apparent act of clemency. Wasting no time, I rose, beating my fists into his throat. I had to stop him. It didn’t matter if I hurt him, didn’t matter that the thought of never having him again made my heart ache. This was about survival.

“Iris!” he hissed, raising his forearms to defend himself. “Stop this.”

No!

I didn’t know if I said the word aloud, but I didn’t stop, my fists thumping into him with every ounce of energy I had left.

“For God’s sake!” He lurched at me, those enormous hands wrapping around my throat and squeezing. “Stop this.”

My air disappeared faster than I thought it would, my hands falling to his and clawing at his fingers.

Stop! I hoped my eyes conveyed the entreaty because my lips were unable to. *Please stop!* The pain in my jaw scarcely registered anymore, panic blurring into oblivion as the world around me whited into insignificance.

But Aidan didn’t stop. He was never going to stop.

Suddenly, that much was obvious. In fact, as his expression faded from my sight, all I could see was the determination in his eyes, a steely resolve that spoke of blinkered hatred. He pretended to love me, but in that sordid gaze was only loathing, a determination that if he couldn’t have me, then no one could.

The last thing I registered before the lights went out were his twitching lips, although whether they indicated sorrow or vindication, I couldn’t be sure.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Betrayed

Aidan

Heaving in a breath, I folded over her, my temple resting against the nearest tree as rage surged in my veins. There was nothing in the world but her face, her betrayal, and the pain it had caused. Nothing but my maddening emotions and an uncontrollable thirst for control.

I had to control Iris, her actions, her words, her every move. Nothing else was acceptable.

Time stretched out around me, contracting and accelerating in a whirlwind of disorientated confusion, and all the while my hands remained at her neck, cradling her. I loved her, could she not see that? There was no possibility of a future without her.

It was not until I could focus again that I acknowledged she had stopped moving, had not moved for the longest time. Pulling away from her, I gulped, assessing the rise and fall of her chest. There were none. She was not breathing.

“Iris.”

A strangled sob left my lips as the horrific reality dawned. I had done it again. I had let the unthinkable happen.

“No!”

Collapsing onto her lifeless body, I sobbed, permitting the release. What did it matter now? Whatever happened, I had lost. I had destroyed the one beautiful thing in my life.

I did not know how many hours passed as I mourned, but by the time I looked up, dusk was falling, the sheath of night coming to conceal my wickedness. That was when I decided. She could not stay there, could not remain a nymph of the woods. Scooping her into my arms, I carried what remained of Iris back to the house, each sorry step filled with woe. I had felt this sorrow once before, but the weight of Iris’ passing

pressed more heavily on my shoulders. I should have known better, should have *done* better...

Reaching the house, I found the door still open, although the fire had burned itself out. I laid her on the rug, by the grate—the same place I had left her on many occasions—collapsing in my chair. I could not look at her because to acknowledge her fate meant accepting the truth about myself. I was a killer. Not just once in an exceptional outburst, but twice. My lack of premeditation was meaningless in the face of her fate. I had sought to stop her, not to annihilate, but still she was gone.

At some point, I rose from the chair, finding the dawn had already broken, and knew the task that lay ahead. Stalking past her body, I grabbed the spade that had so happily dug up the vegetables and walked to the rear of the house. There, marked by a single bush, was the place Desiree rested.

I set to work, lining up a plot beside her and digging out the earth. The labor was back breaking, but no more than I warranted. The least my lovers deserved was burial. It was a level of respect I had scarcely shown them in life.

Once my spade had done its work, I climbed into the hole it left until the mud was up to my middle. It was deep enough to dissuade any passing animal from digging and would become Iris' final resting place. Climbing out of the grave, I made my way back inside and collected her. Rigor mortis consumed her cold body, much as I had endeavored to overtake her when she was warm, but it did not stop me. Carrying her to the back garden, I eased her into the depths before covering her body with dirt. It was a cruel irony for a woman who had so despised being in filth that she should find herself bedded in the soil.

There were no wise or spiritual words as I completed the task. My exhaustion was matched only by my misery, but it was done. She was at rest, and—somehow—I had to find a way to carry on.

Stumbling back to the house, I closed the door, leaving the moors behind, but my melancholy was not so easily deterred, hanging heavy over me wherever I went. I cleaned myself up,

remade the fire and forced food past my lips, but all the while, I felt nothing. Like before, numb had become the new normal, the constant void a gloomy and wretched companion.

It was not until I headed for bed—the same bed I had shared with her—the reality hit me. Tears came then—more than before—pouring from my eyes in a torrent of self-loathing until sleep seized the momentum and led me from the dull reality of my life.

“Master?” Her voice was quiet, stirring me from my slumber.
“Aidan.”

That had my attention, and adrenaline surged, although still I did not move. How many times had I told her not to use my name? Were we doomed to play this relentless game for all time?

“Sir.”

That was not perfect, but a better effort. Rolling toward the sound of voice, my eyes slowly opened.

“Master.”

My brow furrowed. Where was she? I could hear her voice, recognized its soft, taunting tone, but Iris was nowhere to be seen.

“Master, it’s me. It’s Iris.”

Blowing out a breath, I eased the cover back, determined to find my playful damsel. My first thought was that she was experiencing another nightmare, but clearly, I was wrong. She was not at the window where I had found her before. Heart pounding, I checked the bed next to me, finding nothing but empty, cold covers. Pulling myself upright, I stared around the room, sure I was going crazy. Again, her voice came, muted mutterings from somewhere in the room. I shuddered at the resonance.

“It is cold in here.” Glancing toward the dying embers in the grate, I noted that the fire had once again burned out. “I should have left the fire burning.”

My eyes squeezed closed briefly as her voice came again, an ethereal murmur that floated in all directions. Why could I no longer discern what she said? It was as if she was only here to plague me.

“Always so infernally cold.”

Ignoring the nagging question, I drew in a breath, trying to decide what was wrong. It took a few minutes for the answer to come to me—Iris should be there in bed with me. I should not be hearing her voice when she was absent. In fact, she should not be absent at all.

Straining my mind, I grappled with my memories. Where was she? I must know. She never went anywhere without my say-so, which was the beauty of the arrangement. She was mine—mine to love, to possess, mine to... I jolted as the end of the sentence exploded into my mind.

Mine to kill.

Oh, fuck. My blood ran cold as I recalled the way I had throttled her in the woods. I had done that. I had pulverized her. That was why she was not there. The voice I heard was only in my head.

“If only I still had my beautiful Iris.” Shivering, the rising emotion incapacitated me. “You always kept my blood boiling.”

Her wonderful face burst into my mind, her smile fading fast as though she too remembered my atrocity.

“I should not have done it.” Remorse mushroomed, forcing my head to turn toward the moonlight. “Should not have chosen that road again.” How could I live with myself? I had put Desiree’s death down to a moment of madness, but that could not explain this away.

“Oh, Iris.” My hand rose to my temple, trying to rub away my sadness. “I miss you. I am sorry. It was not supposed to be this way.” I sighed. “You were not meant to end up like her.”

Clutching the covers, I acknowledged how chilly the air had grown beside the bed. It was a metaphor perhaps, for the monster I had become—my home as cold as my cruel heart.

Remorse swelled in my chest. I had not meant to extinguish the life of my Iris, had intended only to warn and cajole. I should have just flung her over my shoulder and endured her thrashing limbs, should have engaged my brain before I permitted my demons to reign.

But I had not, and it was not my first occurrence of uncontrollable rage.

“Like Desiree.” I released some of the tension building in my chest. “She didn’t deserve it, either.”

I had named the house after her in some perverse tribute, but what good had that done her? She had been snubbed out as easily as Iris, and I was doomed to be haunted by them both.

“I miss her.” Shame lowered my gaze as a memory of both women sprung in my mind. I rose from the bed, peering around in the darkness. “I miss you both.”

I had the oddest sense that someone was there with me, as if the weight of someone’s gaze burned into my skin. I was probably only tired, exhausted from the guilt and woe, but still, the gnawing thought lingered, and compelled by the sensation, I turned into the shadows.

“I really messed things up.”

There was something cathartic about saying the words out loud. No doubt I was losing the plot, as I had lost all rational thought, but it felt as though someone was listening, as if the house itself heard my regret, and it meant something.

I could not take back the terrible things I had done, but I could understand their full ramifications. I had glossed over Desiree’s death, convincing myself it was somehow her fault, she had provoked me, had deserved it, but staring into the gloom, I could see the lie for what it was—a narrative designed to lull myself, the first step to compartmentalizing my awful behavior.

“And now it is too late.”

The cavernous vacuum in my heart stretched another inch, the pain resounding in my chest until I fell back to the bed.

It was too late.

My one chance of happiness had come, and I had squeezed the life from her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blindsided

Iris

Stepping back from the bed, the room began to spin. It was nighttime, the light of the moon had persuaded me of that much, yet suddenly, the world around me blanched, as if a snowstorm had bleached the color from the star lit sky.

“What’s happening?” I croaked, abruptly aware of the ache in my neck. It felt as if my airway was closing and however much I gasped for breath, I couldn’t take in the required oxygen.

“I don’t feel good.” My hands rose to my throat as the room around me swayed. “Aidan... Master.”

Falling to my knees, I managed to lift my hand and reach for him, but however much I called out, he didn’t hear my cries.

“Fuck.”

Slamming my fist into the floor, I noticed how it passed through the hard layer as though the ground wasn’t there at all, but that didn’t make sense. How could the floor not be there?

Aidan!

His name didn’t make it to my lips but echoed around my head as the space I had known disappeared before my eyes.

Unexpectedly, I was falling, tumbling like Alice down the rabbit hole, plummeting far farther than Desiree Cottage should have permitted. Bracing, I prepared for the pain of impact, my eyes squeezing closed as I held my breath, but to my surprise, as I gazed around my surroundings, I realized I was sprawled not in the confines of his home, but outside on damp soil.

Glancing around, I tried to fathom what had happened, but whichever way I contemplated it, nothing made sense. Why was I outside? Even if my walk back to the house had been a dream, I hadn’t fallen asleep outside. I’d been in the relative

comfort of Aidan's bed. It shouldn't be possible that I was anywhere else. Groaning, I rolled to one side, trying to decide where precisely I was. I noticed the twisted canopy of branches overhead, recognizing the small woods at the bottom of the hill from Aidan's house. My fingers grazed the loose dirt as I righted myself, skimming past a small procession of ants as they headed toward my leg.

"De ja vu," I whispered, although there was no one there to hear me.

I had lived this moment before, but usually the sight of the insects perturbed me. This time, I felt nothing as I leaned down and I flicked them away from my calf. Watching their dismay, the thought cemented. I *had* lived this moment before—many times in my boundless dreams, but none of them had ever been like this. Normally, I would be wandering from the woods, starting the trek back to the house, but this time, I had little inclination for the journey.

"Why?" I demanded of the ants scabbling to form an orderly line. "Why is this different?"

Brows knitting, I climbed to my feet, and stared at the dark trees. I should be frozen, teeth chattering as I clambered past the roots, but standing there, I couldn't even feel the cold, and when I blew out a breath, there was no visible air.

"Strange."

The word resounded, as if the ancient trunks agreed.

"It's probably just another dream."

Yes, that was what was happening. This was just a new version of the same recurring trance I had lived over and over. Probably my brain had tired of replaying the same reverie, and this was its answer—a variation on the theme.

"It's not a dream."

Thoughts scattering, I spun toward the unknown voice. "Who are you?"

Gaping frantically around, I couldn't make out its owner, even when the female tone came again.

“A friend... of sorts.”

“I don’t have any.” Hurt rebounded at the admission. The only real friends I had made since coming north were Clare and Michael, and I didn’t know what had become of them.

“I’ve been watching you.” Her voice was louder, and suddenly she was visible, a slim shadow merging from the mist, gaining color and depth as she strode in my direction. “Watching both of you.”

Pain swelled as she approached, this woman who’d appeared from thin air. Searching her face, I looked for someone I recognized, for something that would help this make sense, but there was nothing. Her long hair was lighter than mine, the color of wet sand at the ocean, and her face was pale, with tight skin stretched over high cheekbones to reveal an expression that seemed permanently melancholy.

“Who are you?” I tried again, determined to stand my ground. Whoever she was, she was a mere slip of a woman. If I’d survived Aidan’s brutish strength, I could surely withstand a run-in with her?

“I know who you are.” She half-smiled, the gesture only highlighting her obvious sorrow. “You’re Iris.”

A chill raced along my spine. She knew my name?

“H-How do you know me?”

“I told you.” She shrugged, the gesture causing a ripple down the front of her long white nightdress, though I questioned why she was wandering the moors in bed attire. “I’ve been watching you.”

“I-I don’t understand,” I replied, though my confidence grew as I tiptoed toward her. “I’ve never seen you before.”

“Of course, not.” Her lips twitched. “How silly of me. I have seen you many times, Iris, though you might not have seen me.”

“Can you explain?” My head throbbed, fit to burst with the spiraling events.

“I’m usually around here.” She glanced around the tall trees, before her green eyes pierced me. “Though sometimes back at the house as well. That’s how it is with us. We can travel to certain places, but not others.” She sighed. “Even after all these years, I still haven’t mastered proper movement.”

“Years?” She wasn’t making any sense. “How long have you been out here?”

“I’ve lost track,” she confessed. “I can no longer measure time the way I once could.”

“What happened to you?” I was only a couple of feet from her now, her thin face even gaunter as I neared.

“I...” Her brow furrowed. “I do not often have to say it aloud.”

“Please.” Reaching for her hand, I tugged her fingers toward me, surprised at their wintry temperature. “It would help me if you could, and perhaps, it will help you as well.”

It was an absurd thing to say, but bizarrely, I sensed it was true. Whoever she was, she clearly required help. Peering up, I eyed the branches above us. Was this wood filled with women in search of aid? If so, I prayed they didn’t all seek sanctuary at Desiree Cottage. Lord knew Aidan was not so keen to let his guests go.

“I was killed.” She forced the words out, trembling as they reverberated around us.

“Killed?” Squeezing her digits, I inched closer. “What do you mean? Has someone hurt you?”

“You don’t understand.” She shook her head, and if I didn’t know better, a sympathetic gleam shone in her troubled eyes. “I remember how difficult it was at first.”

“Who hurt you?” I insisted, terror burgeoning at her statement. “I can help.”

“It’s too late.” She chuckled sadly. “Too late for us both.”

“What do you mean?” Frustration furled at her perplexing riddles.

“This.” Tilting her neck, she signaled to her throat with her free hand. “This is what he does.”

Leaning closer, I examined her flesh, and as if the moon sought to facilitate the goal, a chink of its illumination shone between the branches, lighting the space.

“I don’t see anything.” Brow creasing, I leaned closer until the bruises were visible. Then, as soon as I noticed them, they grew darker and more discernible in front of my eyes. “Oh God!” Dropping her hand, my palm covered my gaping mouth. “What happened?”

“You already know.” The stranger motioned to my neck.

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t!”

“Aidan.” Green eyes fixed on me, widening as she hissed his name. “He did this.”

“Aidan?” A thousand shards of glass plummeted, piercing me as I tried to process what she was telling me. “He did that to you?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “he did, and now he has done it again.”

One ghostly hand rose, nearing me. I wanted to recoil, to move away, but somehow, my feet remained rooted as if I was one of the trees planted in the earth.

“Look at you.” Tears filled her eyes as her freezing fingers brushed my hair aside and skimmed over my neck. “I can’t believe he has done this again.”

“What?” I asked, brushing her hand aside as I stroked my throat. “Aidan’s done nothing. I’m fine.” A peculiar sense of indignation spiked at her insinuation. How dare she touch me? How dare she infer he had hurt me? Aidan was far from an angel, but he had never caused me real harm, he—

“You don’t remember yet.” Her tone was wistful. “But you will, Iris.”

I shivered at the certainty in her voice.

“You will remember, then you’ll be just like me, fated to wander these damn moors for all time.”

“Wait!” I flung my hands up, stepping back and almost toppling over one of the roots breaking from the ground.

“You’re saying Aidan killed you?”

“Yes.” Her lips pressed into a firm line. “He wrapped his enormous hands around my neck and squeezed until I couldn’t take another breath.”

“No!” Yet somehow, as I screamed in protest, I accepted my objection was folly. Aidan had held me under duress and threatened me with violence on more than one occasion. He was more than capable of the act she described.

“Yes.” There was no malice or glee in her tone, only the dull sound of resignation, of a woman doomed to accept and replay her fate until someone else believed her. At that moment, I knew she was telling the truth.

“He did that to you.” My knees buckled, tumbling me down to the hard, cold earth.

“Yes.” Her voice resounded above me. “I never wanted to see you here, but in some ways, I am glad. It has been so hard on my own, drifting in the darkness, lost and lonely.”

“What do you mean?” Tears pricked in my eyes as I glanced up at her spectral face.

“I don’t want you to be afraid.” Her body had taken on an odd ethereal quality, as if she was translucent. “I will be here with you, Iris.”

“Who are you?” I demanded, the question sounding through the trees long after she had vanished from my sight, though her final reply was audible.

“You know me, Iris. I am Desiree.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blinkered

Iris

Desiree.

Her name ricocheted between the bark as if it sought to taunt me.

“Desiree,” I mumbled, as I trembled on my hands and knees, heaving in painful, dry breaths. Like the cottage. Aidan hadn’t elaborated, but I’d assumed the place was named after someone. It had seemed innocuous enough, but the spectral visit had made me think otherwise.

“You’re going mad,” I told myself, struggling to regain my composure. “You weren’t visited by a ghost, could not have been. Stop being ridiculous.”

“It will get easier, Iris.” Desiree’s soft voice floated from around me, although she was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh God.” Lifting my palms, I covered my ears, not wanting to hear her knowing tone.

“Do not fret.” She was still audible, as though her words were pinballing in my head, rather than between the trees. “I’m here with you.”

“I don’t want this!” Spitting out the words, I climbed to my feet. “I don’t want to hear dead people.”

“It’s inevitable, I’m afraid.” Glee rose fleetingly in her tone. “The dead do hear one another.”

“But I’m not dead!” I hollered, and the unexpected noise sent a flustered owl hurtling into the night sky from one of the branches above. “Look at me.” Stomping my feet into the earth, I waved my arms over my head like a mad woman. If I wasn’t already insane, the display would surely have provided the diagnosis.

“Desiree!” I shrieked, my gaze flitting around, expecting to see her emerging from the trees, but there was no one. Even the voice in my head had abated. “Good,” I muttered, walking out of the wooded area. “Time to put all of this nonsense behind me.”

Stalking across the grass, I headed for Aidan’s house. I would find him and put all this madness to bed. Oddly, as I made my way up the incline, I barely noticed the effort it took, my attention mesmerized by the sun rising in the east, a slow expanse of light beckoning in a new day.

It wasn’t until Desiree Cottage rose on the horizon that I halted. What was I doing? Hadn’t I spent days and weeks conniving ways *out* of this house? Why was I so keen to return to my prison?

“Because I have to know.”

My brows knitted at the prospect, though I wasn’t sure if my rising terror was derived from what Aidan would do to me once he got his hands on me again or the other... inconceivable alternative.

“She’s wrong.”

Turning, I glanced back to the shrouded collection of trees, thinking of Desiree. I’d conjured her from my imagination, like all the dreams that had haunted me since I’d arrived there. That had to be the answer.

“She’s wrong, and I’m going to prove it.” Steeling myself, I approached, convincing myself that all was well.

Nothing but a dream, nothing but a dream.

The mantra played out in my head like a child’s lullaby, lubricating the wheels of my courage. Everything would be all right. It had to be because the other option wasn’t possible. I had not just encountered the spirit of Aidan’s past lover, Desiree, and she had not just inferred my own untimely demise.

If that was true, I wouldn’t be there, wouldn’t be able to register the beauty of the intensifying sun. I wouldn’t have a consciousness at all.

Reaching the front door, my palm stretched for the handle, expecting to feel its cold metallic quality on my skin, but I watched in silent horror as it passed through the lever, disappearing into the wooden frame.

“No.” The word choked in my throat, reminding me of the nagging pain there, though I could hardly concentrate on anything but my vanishing limb. I couldn’t understand what was happening as I pushed the entirety of my arm through the door but couldn’t deny it, either. Holding my breath, I stepped right through the wood, appearing in Aidan’s tiny hallway.

“A dream.” This was different from the normal nightmare, but that didn’t mean I was wrong. It had to be part of a dream.

A noise from the main room drew my attention, and slowly, I moved toward it. There, leaning over the same fireplace he so liked to tether me to, was the architect of all my affliction.

That isn’t fair.

My eyes closed at the admonishing tone. He was cruel, like the harshest winter, but he also brought me sunlight. I’d bloomed under his touch, and for all his proclivities, I had found pleasure and passion I’d never known before.

“Aidan.” My lips curled as I spoke his name, the one thing he disliked the most, yet apparently, he did not hear me.

“Master.” The slightest flinch from his muscular body conveyed his acknowledgement, his head inching in my direction, although he never moved from the fire.

“Iris.” He sighed, visibly bereft as his face turned to me. For the briefest second, I yearned to run to him, to hold him and stroke his pain away, but I didn’t dare. Instead, triumph soared at his reaction.

There! He sees me, and if he sees me, I can’t be dead!

“Iris, I sense you there, and I’m sorry.” Tears burned in his blue gaze as he rose to his feet.

“It’s okay, Master.” I noticed my own emotions rising. “I’m okay.”

“I know now why you’re here.” His head fell as if he couldn’t bear to look at me. “I understand.”

“What do you mean?”

Moving into the room, I once again longed to reach for him but resisted. Suddenly, his caress seemed forbidden, off limits to me. I wanted to tell him that I’d come for validation, to know that I was still alive, but Aidan would think I was crazy if I admitted such a thing. He’d never leave me unfettered again.

“In the past, I saw Desiree but willed her away.” He shook his head, as if ashamed. “Didn’t want to face what I had done, but with you...” His head rose, pained blue eyes meeting mine. “With you, I have no excuses.”

Desiree. He’d mentioned the woman I’d conjured in my head, inferring some ill-fated end for her, but my mind couldn’t keep up with the pace of my racing emotions, couldn’t process the unavailability of what he said.

“I don’t understand.” But I did. Every inch of me was trembling, but it wasn’t from the cold. Temperature, it seemed, no longer affected me, neither the nighttime chill nor the roaring fire. Deep down, I knew the truth, had suspected it even before Desiree had come to me. I just couldn’t say it aloud.

“You are here to haunt me.” He half-smiled, one hand rising to beckon me toward him. “Let me see you.”

As if acting on instinct, I glided in his direction, craving his caress. I didn’t recall each step, aware only that soon enough I was there with him, only inches apart.

“Look at you.” His brow furrowed. “Just as beautiful as I remember.” His gaze ran over me, settling on my throat. “Aside from the scars I have left on your body.”

“I don’t remember what happened.” My hands rose to my neck, conscious again of the lingering hurt there.

“I put you in your grave.” His voice rasped with pain. “Though I swear I did not intend to.”

“You killed me.”

It all made sense. The falling, the odd sense of detachment in the woods, and my encounter with Desiree. It had all led me to this moment with him—the man who’d murdered me.

“I...” He faltered, perhaps the first time I’d ever seen genuine hesitation in his demeanor. “I did not mean to.”

“But you did.” Seizing upon the concept, I could have sworn my heart rate increased, but it couldn’t be true. The organ was now still, as lifeless as the rest of my physical body. I only existed in this energetic body, powerful enough for him to interact with but not taking any real earthbound form.

“Yes.” He gulped, accepting culpability. “I did, and I do not want to go on without you.”

“Why?”

Succumbing to temptation, I lifted my hand, intending to feel the lush strands of his dark hair, but my fingers slipped through them, just as they slid through his body.

Aidan gasped at the sensation, his lips parting as I withdrew, staring at my palm. What was the point of having an astral form if I couldn’t touch him? Was this my own personal hell? A place where I was condemned to visit night after night, never able to feel the warmth of his caress again?

“Why did you do it?” Tears flowed from me freely, though they, too, could not have been real. “I wanted to live, to be free.”

“That was why.” The furrow at his brow deepened. “I am a possessive bastard, and God help me, I could not bear to see you leave me again.”

“So, that’s your excuse?” Anger flared at his pathetic explanation. He’d snubbed me out because I fled. “If you couldn’t have me, then no one could?”

“I know.” Regret flashed in his eyes. “It is wretched and pitiful.”

“You had no right!” Lurching at him, I was filled with so much anger and loathing, I couldn’t think straight. Rushing at

his chest, I didn't know what response I expected, but surely it wasn't the one I achieved. Shoving him, I watched as he stumbled back, dropping to one knee in shock.

"You are right," he panted, lifting his palms in a gesture of conciliation. "I had no right!"

"Bastard!" I hissed, hoping he felt my rancor. His crumbling expression suggested he had, but nowhere near enough for my liking. "You fucking killed me. You've taken away my chance of a life, of a happy future."

"You are strong." He wiped his tears with the heel of his hand. "Stronger than Desiree."

"I'm fucking seething." The intensity of the feeling swirling inside me was difficult to contain. I sensed I could ravage the place, destroying his cozy house and taking him with it in the process. "You have no idea."

"I deserve your rage." He blew out a breath, the air passing through me as if I wasn't there. "I do not dispute it. Give me everything you have, little girl." Aidan held his arms aloft. "I shall not fight you, shall not resist my fate." Glancing up at me, his lips curled, reminding me of the handsome face that had captured and mesmerized me. "It is, I think, poetic if you are the one who finishes this."

"Finish?" My fury subsided just enough for me to focus on his words.

"Yes." His chin rose. "I have taken more than one human life. It is time I paid for my sins."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Backfired

Aidan

The end. It was closer than it had ever been, and as its certainty rained down on me, I was suddenly free. I no longer had to deal with the burden of guilt that Desiree's death had left me with, no longer had to toil day to day. Iris would bring balance.

Iris.

The fragile flower who stumbled into my lair and changed everything. The woman who had infuriated me before capturing my heart.

It was always going to be Iris.

I had known it for much longer than I had known her.

"You want to drag me down to hell with you." Wildfire raged in her voice; her hazel eyes more alive than her spirit conveyed. "Want to make me a killer like you."

"I ask you for justice." Shifting to my knees, I waited like a lamb in a slaughterhouse but sensed no fear. If her soul was strong enough to push me, it had great enough intensity to do the job I required. "For Desiree and for you, little girl."

"It's not my place." Gritting her teeth, she turned from me, her image diminishing as she drew away.

"No!" I insisted, suddenly frantic that she did not disappear. I had been awake all night, sometimes sensing her, other times merely musing on my misery, but I could not face another night like that, let alone a lifetime of them. Perhaps it made me a coward, but I did not think I had the fortitude to take my own life.

"Please, do not go."

I should have loathed the alarm in my voice, the terror based on an eternity of never-ending nights, but my ego was slipping

away. The demons lurking inside me had to be managed, and the only way to do so was to extinguish the flame that fed them.

“You... want me to stay?” She glanced back, her brows knitting.

“I want you to do what I am not brave enough to do.” My breath caught at the admission.

“Then what?” Her question hung in the air like the damp as she floated back to my side. “Once I am a murderer, what is my reward?”

“Me.” It sounded contemptible when I said it aloud, but it was all I had. “If you still want your master?”

“*Want* you?” Her voice dripped with disdain.

I shrank at the tone. Swallowing at her derision, I inhaled. I merited it, but the fact made her sneer no more bearable.

“I never stopped wanting you.”

“Really?” I lifted my head at her softer tone. “After everything I have done?”

“Yes.” Her voice quivered with emotion. “I thought I had loved Phil, but now that I have passed into this plane, it’s easy to see that you were the only man who ever moved me.” She pressed her lips into a hard line. “I did not always like the things you did but could never deny the way you made me feel.”

“I do not know what to say.” I had thought it since she first stumbled to my door, but surely, Iris was more than I deserved? The rarest flower that had ever deigned to bloom in these parts, she had blossomed, despite my cruel wintry chill and even now, shone like a reassuring flame.

“There is nothing to say.” Her shoulders relaxed as she went on. “It is the truth.”

“Then you do not loathe me?”

“No, Master.” She edged closer, every inch the beauty I remembered. “Only the things you have done.”

“If I pass, we could still be together.”

“Like this?” Her features screwed into an unpleasant ball.

“There’s no point. I can’t even touch you!”

“You are energy,” I explained. “Just as Desire has been. But energy can interact with spirit, even if it cannot always affect the earthly world.”

“Perhaps you are right.” Her brow rose, as if she was considering the idea. “I could hold Desiree’s hand earlier.”

“You met Desiree?” The color drained from my face.

“Yes.” Her gaze was knowing. “She was the one who told me I’d passed. She also told me that you were responsible for destroying us both.”

“Is she o-okay?” It was a preposterous question to ask one victim about another.

“No.” Her expression was serious. “She is bound to haunt, traveling from this house to the woods. It is a miserable and secluded existence.”

“Desiree.” Shame swelled, reminding me that however I tried to brush over my deeds, there were real, tangible consequences. She was one of them. “I have to help her before I leave.”

“Yes,” Iris nodded. “We both do. She warrants that much.”

“As to the rest?” Trepidation twisted in my stomach, the thought of her vanishing and leaving me alone in this torment more than I could tolerate. “Will you consider finishing what I cannot?”

“I need time,” she answered. “And fortunately, time is the one thing I have in abundance, Master.”

“Aside from my love.” I had no right to say so, but I had to let her know. “You shall always have that.”

“I might have believed that once,”—Iris’ gaze was filled with skepticism as she watched me—“but I don’t know anymore.”

Her reticence was understandable, but the rejection hurt like a blade through my heart. My gaze shifted to my nearby knife,

considering just cutting my losses and doing the job myself, but even if I found the strength, nothing I did could guarantee her love. I had taken her for granted and kept her against her will, and now all I could do was await her verdict.

“I shall think on it, Master.” Gliding toward the window, she paused, spinning to meet my eyes. “You shall know my mind.”

Desiree

Whatever remained of my heart ached as I watched them talk through the window. Once upon a time, I had loved Aidan that way, with the essence of all of my being. Maybe I still did, and that was why I was bound to remain by his side, despite everything he had done. It didn't matter either way.

Clearly, his new love was much stronger than me. She had managed to bring him to his knees, and I had seen the genuine hurt in his usually unyielding gaze. Dead less than a day, she was already fervent enough to have attracted his attention—a genuine feat when you comprised nothing but energy—and had affected him more than I ever had. There was no comparison between us. Iris was tougher.

Giving into the weight of my despondency, I sensed my spirit waning, knowing my form would soon dissipate until my physicality matched my memory—nothing at all.

“Desiree.”

From outside the house, she called my name, her presence fierce and impossible to deny. With a sigh, I willed my resilience, returning to the earthly plane.

“You have communicated with him, then?” I gestured inside to the man still on his knees. It was strange to see the oppressor I'd once loved so vulnerable. I couldn't decide whether I pitied him or simply felt nothing at all.

“Yes.” Stepping toward me, there was caring in her huge hazel eyes. “He wants to help you.”

“He killed me.” After so long roaming alone, it was liberating to speak my truth. “He killed you, too.”

“I know.” Her voice was solemn. “I know who he is and what he has done.”

“You wish to make excuses for him?”

“He wants me to return the favor.” Her slim eyebrow rose.

“How?” If I didn’t know better, excitement bounded through my aura.

“By taking his life.” Her gaze locked with mine. “He wants to be one of us.”

“It’s what he deserves.” Even I was surprised by the bitterness in my voice.

“I know and so does he.” If it were possible, she shivered.

“But I don’t know if I have what it takes.”

“You have the strength,” I encouraged, disconcertedly eager about the idea. “I saw you. I saw you with him.”

“My strength came from my anger.” Iris shook her head.

“That’s not who I want to be. I came here to be a better person.”

“What do you mean, anger?”

She shrugged. “The more furious I became, the more I could affect him. I only managed to push him when I was consumed with rage.”

She looked at the sky as if God would help her. I hated to tell her, but in all the time I’d been stranded on this celestial plane, He had never offered me comfort. Us lost souls were all but abandoned.

“I didn’t like the emotion, Desiree. I don’t want to feel that way again.”

“But if it works, then why not?” I countered. “You have achieved more in a few short hours than I ever have. I never knew how...” My voice trailed away as I considered the long empty nights I had roamed without purpose, unable to reach my murderer.

“You are a better person.” She smiled. “And I will ensure you are able to move on, Desiree. You don’t have to stay here anymore.”

“But...” I couldn’t believe her reticence. “Look at what he has done! He has taken everything from us.”

“I know.” There was no glee in her voice. “I understand.”

She moved toward me, her palm grazing my shoulder, and I leaned into the touch. She was the first person I’d interacted with for years, the only one who truly comprehended my plight, yet Iris had only been dead for only a matter of hours. She could not grasp the affliction that loneliness and loathing had created.

“Let me think about his proposal. We shall see.”

Nodding, I watched her glide away, but her decision was already clear. A soul as vivacious as she would never cede to Aidan’s brutal request. She didn’t have it in her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Buttressed

Iris

“I have spoken to Desiree.”

Aidan’s face rose at my statement, lit eerily by the flickering flame of a candle. “How did you find her?”

“She came to me, Master.”

There was ease in the address. His status hardly mattered since I had moved to this ethereal plane.

“Oh.” Drawing in a breath, he turned to the window, his expression reflected back to me in the dark glass. “And?”

“She thinks I should take you up on your proposal, that you deserve death.”

“And what do you think?” He glanced in my direction, hurt simmering in his haunting blue eyes. “Have you had time to think?”

“All I have is time,” I reminded him. “In death, it is as endless as the air around us.”

In truth, I had spent what remained of the day wandering the moors. I never tired, the wind and rain did not distress me and contrary to my prior belief about life after death, it seemed effortless to remain earthbound, as if there was a greater purpose I was yet to serve.

Killing Aidan. My eyes closed at the viscous sneer. *That’s my purpose. I have to bring justice for Desiree and for me.*

“I don’t know if I can do it.” I was as much answering the voice in my head as his query. “Don’t know if I have it in me.”

“You are a good person,” he agreed.

“You never used to say that, Master.” The tone was wry. “You said I was willful and needed guidance.”

“As I recall, you enjoyed my guidance, little girl?” His seductive timbre rattled through the air.

“Sometimes.” My lips curled. “But you can’t spank me now, Master.”

“No.” He inhaled as if the act was painful. “Perhaps I could in the next life, though.”

“Maybe.” I couldn’t even process what an eternity of Aidan might be like. “But I can tell you one thing, if you join me then you do so as my equal.” I waited until his gaze met mine. “You might have held my body prisoner, but my soul is free to come and go as it pleases.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” I probed, moving closer. “Because it’s important, Master. I won’t be held down anymore.”

“I can tell.” He offered me a lop-sided grin. “In a strange way, death becomes you, Iris.”

I might have been offended by his compliment, but peculiarly, I knew what he meant. I had never felt this strong when I’d lived, never been filled with such a sense of resolve. Desiree had inferred my power when she’d made the case for Aidan’s death and in some ways, she was right. I was a potent spirit and rather than dwell on my death, the thought buoyed me.

“And yes, when I…” His brow creased as he tripped over the word.

“Die?” I offered.

“Yes.” He blew out a lungful of air, the gesture strangely foreign to me, although less than one day before, I had required the same oxygen that filled his bronchioles. “I would not impose myself on you again.” Rising from his seat, he closed the distance between us. “I only want to capture the magic we had before.” Aidan smiled. “It was not all bad, was it?”

“No.” There was no hesitation in my answer. Death had given me a new perspective. “It wasn’t all bad, Master. You entranced me. I just couldn’t abide being your captive.”

“I made too many mistakes.” He reached for me, his fingertips passing into my energetic field. “But I cannot bear not being able to touch you. That alone is killing me. You might as well finish the job.”

“It’s not that easy.” My gaze lowered, watching his fingers pass through me. There was no pain, only an unsettling sensation that compelled me to step away. “I’m not a killer, and my desire for revenge is not strong enough.”

“Please.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe he was pleading. “Look, my hunting blade is just by the fire.” Motioning to the flames, I followed his gaze to find the evil-looking knife where he had left it. “I can show you how to inflict a mortal wound. I would be dead within five minutes.”

“You would leave an awful mess, Master.” Peering around the room that had once served as my cell, I chuckled. Who had known that there was such liberation in demise? There were no ropes that could contain me now. I was as free as the water that slipped into my beloved sea. “And if we’re both dead, who would clean up?”

“You mock me?”

“You’ve earned it, Master.” I could have laughed at his pitiful tone. “Far more than you merit a mortal wound.”

“Perhaps.” He practically pouted. “But my point still stands. The blade would do the job, and we would find a way to manage my corpse.”

“But I love you, Master.”

Emotion wavered in my voice as I finally said the words out loud, but smiling, I acknowledged they were true. I did love the bullish son-of-a-bitch, despite all his flaws. He was the only man who’d ever moved me, the one I was bound to return to.

My one true master.

“It makes me so happy to hear that,” he enthused. “It is why I need your help. I do not have the courage for suicide.”

“My love is the reason I cannot kill you. Don’t you understand?” I wanted to shake away his vacant stare. “Real love doesn’t bind or kill; it releases and takes pleasure in seeing the other soul’s joy.”

“I see that, but it is too late for me. I cannot reverse the possessive way I treated you, cannot take back your fate.” Squeezing his eyes closed, he turned away. “I have to live with that. Day after day, I have to acknowledge that I throttled the life out of you, and there is nothing I can do to change it.”

“No.”

I turned at the voice, stunned to see Desiree manifesting in the doorway.

“But there *is* something I can do.”

I never sensed her presence before she spoke, but abruptly there she was, a much stronger vision than I had encountered earlier. Glimmering with energy, she didn’t meet my eyes as she glided into the room.

“Des-iree?” Aidan’s jaw fell open, his eyes widening. “Wh-What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Master.” Her voice radiated with contempt, her dark laugh more insidious than any I had heard from my captor. Only as she passed by me, I noticed the gleaming blade in her grasp.

“Desiree, no!”

All at once, her plan unfolded in front of my eyes. She had taken my advice and found the fortitude to take physical form, but far worse, she had decided to take matters into her own hands... literally.

“Let me help you, Master,” she sneered. “Let me give you what you deserve.”

As though my words had breathed fresh might into her, she accelerated, rushing Aidan with his own hunting knife. I lurched forward in slow motion but couldn’t halt the tragedy playing out. The jagged knife sliced through his stomach,

ripping his abdomen before she withdrew and stabbed him again.

“For God’s sake, Desiree!”

I ran at her, wrestling the knife from her hands, but even as I flung the weapon into the fire, it was clear her work was done. Aidan had fallen first to his knees, then onto his side, and all around us, the pool of his blood grew larger.

“There!” Triumph resonated in her voice. “It is done. Now he is no more than us. Now he knows pain the way we did.”

“Aidan,” I gasped, falling to my knees in the lake of his lifeblood. “You must apply pressure to the wounds, you must —”

My words dried up as I watched his face. I’d never seen him so pale and vulnerable.

“It’s too late.” Lurching to the window, Desiree seemed drunk with her newfound power. “He’s dying, Iris. I can finally move on.” Turning to me, she lifted her hands to the air, gleeful as her aura shimmered. “He kept me here.” Her voice was fainter as she faded before my eyes. “His crimes chained me to this place, but with his death comes freedom.”

I watched as she disappeared, her life force reduced to a single sparkle that grew brighter before vanishing altogether.

“What have I done?”

My attention fell on the man bleeding beside me. His rugs were drenched with the fluid, the air thick with the heavy aroma of iron.

“Master, I’m sorry.”

Overcome with emotion, I reached for him, and for the first time since I’d pushed him to the ground, my fingers skimmed his cold skin. His palm shifted to mine, weak fingers clasping my flesh as he struggled with the last of his pain. I stayed with him, his faithful guardian, as life silently slipped from his veins.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Burnished

Aidan

I expected more pain. Thought there would be more anguish in the face of oblivion, but all I sensed was a deadening of sensation as a contented numbness spread over me.

It helped that I knew there was more. Before Desiree, I had little belief in an afterlife, but even her limited presence had persuaded me otherwise, and leaning over my dying body, Iris confirmed it. This was not the end. It was only the beginning. A second chapter where we would write a better story, where I would be a better man and make amends for the terrible things I had done.

Consciousness filled me quickly, awakening me the way cold water would stir someone from a deep sleep. Gasping, I sat upright, struggling for breath as Iris gripped my hand. Except I was not gasping for air since I no longer required breath. Now that I existed on a totally different layer of existence, it was only an illusion of need, a habit I had not yet learned to break.

“Iris?”

Turning to her, I watched her response with care. Nothing else in the universe mattered more than how she reacted in the next few minutes. I had hedged my bets—and my life—on her support and on a love that would become more meaningful than flesh and bone. It was time to see if my wager would pay off.

“Master.” Her relaxed smile eased the tension from my psyche. “You made it, but you did make a mess...”

Glancing around the room, it was clear she was correct. I had never realized how much blood the human body contained until it was spilled across a floor.

“Yes, a bloody mess.”

“Can you stand?”

Rising, she thrust her small palm toward me, and I tried my bodiless limbs for the first time. A sense of calm washed over me as my spirit stretched out, gliding to the more than six feet height I had once occupied.

“This is... surreal.”

“You kinda get used to it.” She shrugged. “Although I’m not much of an expert. It’s only been a day since someone strangled me.”

“Iris.” Her thinly veiled criticism drove another blade into me, but this one was invisible. “I am so sorry. I have no excuses, only an insecure need for power and control.” I reached for her hand. “It took losing you to realize that.”

“I know.” She sighed. “If I didn’t truly believe it, I wouldn’t be here. I’d have gone to wherever Desiree disappeared to.”

“Desiree.” I turned at the sound of her name, expecting to see the woman who had ended my life hiding in the corner of the room. “Where is she?”

“She’s gone,” Iris reiterated. “She shone brighter than we shine, then left.” Iris smiled. “I think, despite the violence, she was at peace.”

Lifting my free hand, I eyed the shimmery essence of what was once my skin, unable to decide if I was enthralled or perturbed.

“Killing me released her.” Somehow, it made sense in my head. “I owed her that much.”

“It’s true.” Iris’ beautiful eyes were doleful. “She was filled with hatred for the things you had done. I don’t think she would ever have gotten past it, Master.”

“I cannot blame her.” Guilt constricted in the space that had once been my chest. “I am not certain I could have been as forgiving as you.”

“Who said I’ve forgiven you, Master?”

Her wry tone drew my focus back to her face. Iris was every inch as delightful as she had ever been. Paler perhaps, but the blanched tone suited her, highlighting her hazel gaze and full

lips. I meant what I had said earlier—death had only accentuated her magnificence.

“I would understand if you could not.”

“I can.” Chuckling, her fingers clutched my hand. “But it will take time and work on your part.”

“Work?”

“Yes.” The demanding gleam in her eye grew. “You killed me, Master. I deserve recompense for that.”

I could not argue with her logic.

“I see.” Relaxing into my new form, I lifted her ethereal hand to my mouth and brushed my lips over her knuckles. It was incredible to be able to touch her again, even if the cool caress of her skin was distinctly chillier than I remembered.

“What can I do to compensate, little girl?”

“I would like more of your tenderness, Master.” Her lips twitched, conveying she definitely had a plan in mind. “More of the man who allures.”

“Less spanking, you mean?”

“Not necessarily.”

Her answer took me by surprise.

“I enjoy your spankings, but only when they are warranted.”

“As I recall, they were warranted whenever I said so.”

“That’s what I mean, Master.” She grinned. “Spankings should be more consensual.”

“Consent,” I repeated. “I see why you say that, and as I promised you a new era before my death, I vow to try.”

“You sound pained, Master.” She stifled her laughter. “Do you think you can manage?”

“Yes, little girl.” Something akin to arousal flooded my core.

“For you, I can manage.”

We glided above the floor, inches from the place my blood covered the floor in a crimson ocean.

“I never thought this was possible.” She pressed against me, her energy warming an otherwise lifeless form. “Never thought we could be together like this.”

“It took a revolution of sorts,” I agreed. “A part of us had to end before we could restart.”

“I like the way that sounds.” Her head buried into the crook of my shoulder. “You always did have a way with words, Master.”

“You are more than I deserve.”

I was more comfortable with my new configuration, understanding that with intention we could touch, even if I did not know how we could enjoy each other again. Death had not stopped the passion firing between us. I understood now that nothing ever could.

“You’ll earn me, Master.”

Her smile widened, convincing me she was reveling in this new dynamic between us. Not that it would last. I would spend the rest of time worshipping her and making amends for the atrocious act I had committed, but I would still have her back on her knees before too long.

“What did you have in mind, little girl?” I played along, relishing the resumption of intimacy.

“I don’t know yet,” she admitted. “I’m not sure what’s possible.” Shifting away, she glanced down at our otherworldly bodies.

“We shall find out,” I purred, running my hand along her dark mane of hair.

“You have a one-track mind, Master.” Rising to her tiptoes, her lips skimmed over my chin, tickling my beard. “I like it.”

“Guilty,” I purred, fisting her tresses. “Guilty, guilty, guilty.”

“You are,” she breathed, if such a thing was possible. “And yet, you are loved. I could never contemplate a life without you.” Her brow furrowed. “Even after everything you’ve done, the tug between us is too strong.”

“If there is a God, I thank Him.” Gratitude swelled at the humbling thought.

“I don’t know about God,”—she shrugged—“but I definitely have a master.”

“Yes, you do.” My fingers tightened. “One who loves you.”

“Maybe we’re just both insane?” She shook her head, her gaze taking in the dreadful scene spread out around us. “But I love you, too.”

“Care to show me what you have learned about this new existence?” I motioned outside, knowing my old mistress, the moors, could no longer harm either of us. I would never again need to chop wood to keep us warm, never again have to hunt to provide meals. Those things were now only for show, an aesthetic if we could manage and desired it. The thought was liberating.

“Of course, Master, although I’m no connoisseur.” She snuggled closer.

“Then we shall do so together.”

Wrapping her arm around me, she guided me to the window.

“Wait,” I countered as the pane neared. “The glass.”

“Cannot harm us now.” She turned, reassuring me. “No physical ail will ever harm us again.”

Brow rising, I ceded, accepting she was right.

I was lifeless but not loveless. It was a revelation.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Blessed

Iris

The moors were even more wonderful at night. Where I had previously shied away from the terrain after dusk, tonight the world was filled with wonder, as if I looked upon the heath with brand new eyes.

It was anomalous to be only energy, a nebulous form that could take any shape or size—purely spirit—yet it also had its advantages. There was no chill as the wind whipped past us, no fear as the sky was lit by a looming electrical storm.

“Spectacular.” Aidan’s voice was filled with awe. “I have not seen it this way for years.” Taking my palm, he tugged me closer against his hip.

How unorthodox to be so close to the man who slayed me, yet leaning into him, there wasn’t a flicker of regret. I did not like Aidan’s past behavior but was ready to forgive. Whatever future this new reality offered was one I wanted to grasp with both hands.

“I am so happy to be with you again,” he enthused, guiding my chin for me to look him in the eyes. “It was only a matter of hours without you, but it was agonizing.”

“The last twenty-four hours have been mind-blowing, Master.” There seemed no shame in admitting it. “The trauma of our time together, my attempted escape, and the way you squeezed the life out of me.”

Brow furrowing, my gaze traveled back to the outline of the woods. It was my mausoleum, every inch as much as Aidan’s house had become his.

“I should rather not dwell on those things.” His words were almost lost on the breeze. “Yet I know we must. There can be no future until the past is resolved.”

“I am not dwelling,” I replied. “Only musing on everything that has occurred, all that happened before I realized I was a spirit and could commune with the ghost of your old lover, as well as inhabit the world of the living.”

Jaw tightening, he stared out over the dark territory. “There is not much for me to be proud of in your list.”

“That’s true,” I commented. “But you’ll improve.”

“Why do you have such faith in me, little girl?” He planted a kiss on my crown.

“Because you have no choice, Master,” I reminded him.

“Remember?”

Rounding on me, Aidan towered over my aura. “What makes you say that?”

Had he forgotten so soon?

“Because there are no chains holding me to Desiree Cottage anymore.” It was strange referring to the place now that I knew who it was named after and why.

“I never chained you.” His response was gruff.

“You know what I mean. There are no ropes that can keep me at your hearth. This time, I only stay because I want to, I love you because it’s my choice.”

The noise of the elements ballooned between us.

“For too long, my needs were hidden.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“I was buried in the vast expanse of your moors, your house, and your expectations, and I played along...” I paused, trying to recall why. Why had I put up with his brutish behavior? Why had it taken so long to flee? “Sometimes from fear, other times desire, but all the while because the connection between us was fierce and more tangible than anything I’ve ever known.” Reaching for him, I ran my fingertips over his dark beard. “I can’t give that up, but I want to be clear. This new arrangement is a change of tack, Master.”

“I accept that.” His arms snaking around me was oddly comforting. “From now on, we focus on consent.”

“Yes.” I was relieved to hear him say so.

“We explore this new verve together and see where it takes us.” His lips curled. “I am relieved to have you with me, to have this second chance.”

“We’re on a level playing field.” Turning in his embrace, I stretched my arms around him. “The moors are our playing fields.”

“You are right.” His expression softened. “My only regret is that I never got to make peace with Desiree.”

“Perhaps the chance will come again?” Reaching for his forearm, I stroked his soft hair. “Although I hope personally that wherever she has gone, she will find serenity there. I did not know her for long, but she seemed sad until that final moment, then—”

“Then she was angry,” he interrupted wistfully.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Let’s be fair, Desiree had reasons for wanting revenge.”

“Of course. I do not deny it. I only hoped for forgiveness.”

“Sometimes, that’s a stretch too far.” My mind flitted back to Phil and the reasons I had fled to the north. “Sometimes, absolution takes time.”

“Do you speak from experience?” he asked, stroking the side of my face.

“Yes, Master.” Suddenly, the weight of Phil’s specter was as present as Aidan’s fingers.

“Me?” he probed.

“Not this time.” I managed a small smile. “I was thinking more about my ex.”

“Phil?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed, surprised Aidan had remembered.

“What did he do?”

Aidan's question pinballed around in my head.

"He assaulted me."

I had pushed the memory away for so long, working through my feelings and refusing to let them dominate me, but in doing so, I'd inadvertently permitted Aidan to consume me as well. My life had seemed doomed to cede to the will of men, but I was determined whatever existence came next would be different.

"He did what?" Fury flared in his voice. "He hurt you?"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore, Master." Amusing that the man who'd captured me took such umbrage with the sins of another. "Another time, perhaps."

"Okay." Some of the tension eased from his shoulders. "Know I am here whenever you want to talk. Maybe we'll find the fucker and haunt him."

Laughter exploded at his proposal, an image of Phil's face frozen with horror burgeoning in my head.

"Maybe," I agreed. "But for now, let's focus on us. We have the house to clean somehow, then the matter of your body."

"Is it possible to manage all those things?" he asked, as if I was an expert on the afterlife.

"I believe so. If Desiree managed to force the blade into you, then we can manage. We are stronger than she was, our intention fiercer, and we can hardly leave your house smothered in blood."

His knowing chuckle rang out around me.

"Then," I continued, "if we can, I'd like to give Desiree a proper funeral."

"Proper?" His eyebrow arched in that way that had always tantalized me.

"A prayer or two?" I shrugged. "Nothing too onerous, but I think it will help bring peace of mind for us all."

He nodded, apparently not inclined to argue. "There is a lot to do then."

“True,” I replied. “But there’s also a lot to be thankful for.” Spinning to face him, I reached for his face, brushing my knuckles over his stubble. “We are together, and despite everything, we have something worth fighting for.”

“You are of course right.” Leaning forward, he skimmed his mouth over mine. “Thank you, little girl.”

My eyes closed as he kissed me, our first sensual caress since leaving our bodies. The fusing of our energies was slow and ethereal, stirring whatever remained of lust when there was no longer a physical body to inhabit it. It was a strange sensation, to succumb to him when there was nothing physical to cede to. I felt the intention of his touch, the same way I could hold his hand, but missed the heat of his body, the feel of his hard, masculine lines and the way he possessed me carnally.

Turning to the top of the hillside, I pressed my head to his ethereal chest and looked at the shiny blanket of stars that twinkled overhead. No scene had ever been so perfect.

We were like those stars—unknown and removed from people—but I had no tears for my old life. In our own twisted way, we adored each other, and for the first time, I was hopeful when he held me.

Aidan was mine forever. I would be the only one to ignite his desire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bothered

Clare

“Still nothing?” Michael’s brow creased as he turned to me.

“No.”

My voice rasped as I switched off my phone and pulled in a deep breath. It had been a month since my accident, four weeks since I last saw Iris, and in all that time, we hadn’t heard from my dear friend.

“Her phone is still switched off.”

“We should try the police again.” His hands slid to his pockets as he wandered to me.

“I have.” Emotion choked in my throat. “The police filed a missing person’s report and well...” I shrugged glumly.

“There’s not much else they can do.”

“This is ridiculous.” He sighed as he sat beside me on the sofa. “She cannot just have disappeared!”

“I know.”

Eyes closed tight, I tried not to dwell on the dilemma but couldn’t push it from my mind. Iris was nowhere to be seen, and no one had heard from her. The authorities tracked her phone to some distant point on the moors before the signal vanished, and that was the final time her whereabouts were known.

Anxiety knotted in my belly as that reality echoed in my mind.

Her whereabouts were unknown...

Unknown.

“I can’t let this go, Mike.”

I was close to my breaking point, the stress of her disappearance taking its toll. I hadn’t known Iris for years, but

in the time that I had, she'd become a pivotal part of my life. I loved her, and losing her was incomprehensible.

"I know." He echoed my words, stroking my shoulder. "I miss her, too, but I don't know what else we can do."

"We can go back out there." I twisted to meet his gaze. "Look for her."

"But honey, you're still recovering."

Michael frowned, gesturing to the injury I obtained on the moors. It had been the cause of all the trauma and the reason Iris had gone off alone.

"If only I hadn't fallen." The tears fell hard and fast as I vocalized my shame. "None of this would have happened, and she'd still be with us."

"Don't," he soothed. "You can't keep blaming yourself. Iris was headstrong and responsible for herself."

"But it's my fault," I insisted. "If only I could go back in time and not hurt myself. If only we'd have stopped her from going off alone."

If only...

"Hey." He pulled me into his embrace. "Stop tormenting yourself."

"I can't help it," I sniffed, almost unable to get the words out between sobs. "She's dead, and it's down to me."

"She's not dead." His tone hardened. "A team went out to look for her only hours after we reported her missing. No body was ever found, Clare. She's out there somewhere."

"Oh God."

Shuddering, I tried not to let my brain slide into the potential worst-case scenarios. There were animals out there that might have attacked her, or worse, taken her body.

"Listen, if it helps, once you're stronger, we'll go." Stroking my hair back from my face, he planted a kiss on my cheek.

"We'll look for her."

Pulling in a shaky breath, I nodded. “Thanks. I think that will help.”

“Of course.”

He held me in silence, only the sound of our lounge clock illustrating the passing seconds.

“I hope she’s okay.” I croaked the words that bounced endlessly around my mind. “I just pray to God that wherever she is, whatever happened, she’s okay. I hate the thought of her being alone and afraid.”

“She’s strong,” he reminded me. “Physically and emotionally. Stronger than most people I know.”

“You’re right.” I forced a smile, resting my temple to his jaw. “She’s okay. She’ll. Be. Okay.” Punctuating the point helped somehow, satisfying my disquiet.

“That’s right,” he whispered. “And I need you to be okay, too, honey. The only way we can get back out there on the moors is for you to heal.”

“I’m getting there.” Nodding, I lifted my wounded leg. Rest and physiotherapy had aided my recovery, but I was still a little afraid to put too much pressure on the limb. “It won’t be long.”

“And then we’ll go,” he promised. “We’ll search for her. If there’s any sign of Iris out there, we’ll find her.”

There was no doubt, hiking was exhausting. Perhaps all those hours on the couch had taken more from me than I’d realized, but trekking behind Michael reminded me how unfit I had become. We’d been walking for hours and there was still no sight of our friend. I couldn’t decide if I was relieved or perturbed.

“Come on!” From up ahead, Michael beckoned for me to hurry up. “We’ll lose the light at this rate.”

It was nearly a month after our chat, and true to his word, Michael had coached me to full health, and—with no new news of Iris emerging—brought me back to the moors.

“We’ve covered a lot of ground already.” Unfolding his map, he motioned to the area he referred to.

“I know.” Every fiber of my body was telling me so with aches and stiffness. “What’s left?”

“Well, there’re miles...” His brow rose as his gaze drifted to the horizon. “But in the interests of being back to the pub by nightfall, I suggest we head northwest for an hour before we head back.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t like the idea that we’d come all this way for nothing but accepted he was right. We didn’t want to end up in a similar situation to whatever Iris had encountered. We had to play it safe.

“Hey.” Slipping his hand into mine, he tugged me on. “We can come back. We’ll make sure we cover every inch of ground.”

“I love you.” Squeezing his fingers, I rose to my tiptoes and kissed his jaw. “Have I told you that?”

“Never enough.” Passion glinted in his eyes. “Come on, gorgeous.”

We trudged along the heath in silence, our gazes scanning the surroundings. Frantically, I searched for evidence of Iris as we made our way up a steep knoll, an item of her clothing or perhaps her phone. She had to be here somewhere. Women didn’t just vanish into thin air. They couldn’t just—

“There!”

Spinning at Mike’s excited tone, my stare fixed in the direction he was pointing.

“Oh God!”

I didn’t have to ask for clarification, the reason for his animation was clear. Over the brow of the hill was a small brick house.

“That has to be it.” My heart rate spiked as I ran toward it. Suddenly, I was filled with energy and enthusiasm. This was

the closest we'd been to an answer for weeks. "That has to be where she's been."

"Clare," he shouted, sprinting to keep up with me. "Wait! We don't know anything yet."

Reaching the edge of what had once evidently been a neatly kept allotment, I doubled over, trying to catch my breath.

"It looks abandoned." Michael's brow furrowed as he walked the small path to the front door. "There's no sign of life."

"Maybe she's inside?" I pressed on, determined not to give up on my theory. "We should check."

"Okay." Pausing at the front door, Mike pulled in a breath as his fist rose to knock on the wood. "But let me do the talking, honey. We don't know who lives out here, but they're probably not used to outsiders."

Nodding, I took in the look of the house. What sort of person would live in the middle of nowhere? Brows knitting, I tried to ignore the answer that played in my mind.

Someone who has something to hide...

The wind raced around the building as Michael knocked again, louder this time.

"There's no answer," he concluded, glancing back at me. "But it looks as if it's unlocked." Leaning into the door, it slid open into the dark hallway. "Shall we go inside?"

"We haven't come this far to turn back now," I replied, though my cocky tone hid my accelerating pulse.

Something about the place didn't feel right—I couldn't put my finger on why, or what it was specifically, but noticed the tiny hairs on my arms rose beneath my clothes.

"Come on then." Gripping my hand, he tugged me inside.

All at once, my senses were consumed by the shadows.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Burglars

Aidan

“Strangers.”

They crept into my house like small, frightened mice, the sounds of their racing hearts resurrecting the predator inside me. It had been a while since I’d sensed someone’s fear, the boundless love swirling between Iris and me mollifying my old instincts.

“What a creepy house.” The woman shuddered, gripping the hand of the man harder.

“Mmmm,” her partner replied, striding to my main room and leaning around the door to assess the space.

My furniture was still there, as was the hearth I had so liked tying Iris to. The place was clean enough, although if they looked hard enough, an uninvited guest might notice the specs of blood on the floor. It was the reason we had to burn the rugs.

“Master!” Iris’ gasp was only audible to me. Her aura eddied as she glided down the stairs to where I watched the intruders. “It’s Clare and Michael, my friends.”

Eyeing the couple, my eyes widened. So, this was the pair that my little girl had missed? The ones who had looked after her when she traveled to my domain, but also those that had let her wander off on her own.

“I can’t believe they’ve found me!”

“They haven’t found you,” I reminded her. “They don’t know we’re there.”

Tangibly, we were not really *there* at all. Existing only as energy, we had no physical form unless we decided to exert it, and that took an awful lot of intention and effort. After the

extensive clean-up of Desiree Cottage, I had rarely seen the need to make it.

I had learned to revel in the union of Iris' energy with mine and was constantly thankful to have been permitted to spend the rest of eternity with her, but still, the loss of our bodies nagged. It was the oddest thing. Our energies could entwine, but the merger was not as satisfying as our sexual hedonism used to be.

Perhaps I loved her more deeply now that I could not rely on a mere kiss or a fleeting touch to demonstrate my affection? Maybe it was true that the sense of being bereft enhanced our devotion, but I would be lying if I did not admit I craved the carnality. Fusing together was beautiful, but it did not match the fervor of fettering and fucking my wonderful woman. Those losses resonated deep in whatever remained of my soul.

"But they're here." Iris' eagerness was palpable. "It's so good to see them."

Reaching for her, I held her hand as she strained to run to her friends.

"Clare, come here." The man, Michael, motioned for his woman to come to him and she scampered forward without complaint.

"Look at this place."

"It's oppressive." She shivered. "I don't like it."

"Clare!" Iris' eyes shone with pleasure as she called to her friend.

"Calm," I soothed. "Or they might sense you."

I doubted it was possible. Most mortals were blind to the spiritual energy around them, but it was just possible that one of these two was sensitive, and the last thing I sought was to invite their company. I was content to be with her—just Iris and me—and had no desire to give that up.

"Good." She peered back at me. "I want them to notice me, Master... want them to know we're here."

"Iris." My voice lowered. "That is not what we agreed."

Her shoulders fell at my warning.

“We decided to remain here together.” *Just the two of us.*

“But I didn’t know they’d come.” Dissipating from my grasp, she slid through the wall to join her associates. “I’m so happy they’re here.”

“Iris!”

Irritated at her non-compliance, I went after her, witnessing the scene as her old companions huddled in the middle of the room.

“Clare.” Iris lurched forward, her arms open wide as if she sought to embrace the woman, but despite her obvious joy, Iris merely slipped through her, rushing at the black iron grate. Spinning, she turned back to me, dismayed. “Why can’t I touch her?”

“I do not know.” I shook my head, moving around the couple, who were still surveying my room, to hold her.

We used our anger to interact when we scrubbed this place down, but I had no experience with mortal interaction, save for opening and closing the occasional door. Iris had been my tutor.

“Clare!” Waving her arms around, Iris screeched her friend’s name as she moved toward her. “Can you hear me?”

“We should go.” Michael glanced around, pulling Clare closer to him.

“Let’s look upstairs first,” Clare whispered, obviously unable to hear Iris’ pleas. “See if she’s been here.”

“Okay.” Michael pressed his lips together. “But let’s make it fast.”

Iris and I watched as they went back into the hall, the sound of their footwear on the steps drawing us both after them.

“I can’t believe it.” Iris’s tone was despondent. “I can’t make them see or hear me at all.”

“I am sorry, little girl.”

Wrapping her up in my energy, I held her. I might not be pleased to see her companions, but it was obvious how much they meant to Iris. I had taken so much from her already. This latest loss might be one too many.

“Here!” Clare’s shriek garnered our focus and lithely, we followed the sound to the bedroom. “These are Iris’ boots.”

“How can you be sure?” Michael shook his head. “They could belong to anyone.”

“They’re a size five,” Clare went on, ignoring him.

“They’re a pair of women’s boots.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t prove anything, honey.”

“I know they’re hers.” Clare waved them in his face. “I was with her when she bought them.”

“She’s right,” Iris whispered. “She was with me.”

“We should have buried them.” I’d remembered to inter her clothes after we cleaned the house.

“Okay.” Michael pulled in a deep breath. “I believe you, but it doesn’t help us find her, does it?”

“It proves she was here.” Claire’s lips curled. “It means there’s hope.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Burgeoning Terror

Iris

“They’re leaving.” Panic ballooned in the essence I had become. “No! We can’t let them leave!”

“It is better this way,” he muttered, watching as the couple traveled back down the stairs. “They could never understand what has happened here.”

I had the sense even he failed to comprehend it.

“No!” Eyes widening, I turned to him. “Please, Master. Don’t let them leave. I need them. I need this!”

I couldn’t explain why, but seeing my friends had resurrected something within me, an aspect of my soul I had all but given up. The joy I’d shared with Clare represented something of the real me, the woman I’d become and still wanted to be. My love for Aidan had been so consuming, that facet had nearly been hidden forever.

“You need them to stay?”

The edge in Aidan’s voice might have concerned me had I not been so horrified at the prospect of Clare disappearing back to the moors.

“Yes.” Spinning to him, I gestured as Clare clutched my boots to her chest.

“There might be a way...” His voice trailed away, luring me to respond.

“Anything!” I gasped, waving my arms frantically and blocking Michael’s route to the front door, but naturally, it was hopeless. He moved through me with ease, reaching for the door handle. “Please.”

From behind my friends, Aidan glowered, lifting his fist into the air and smashing it down on the banister. The dull boom filled the small hallway, echoing endlessly as my eyes locked

with my master. Knowing the concerted effort it had taken for him to create the sound, I nodded thankfully. I didn't know his plan, but at least he'd created a distraction.

"What the hell was that?" Clare shrieked, turning back to the place Aidan stood. She was only inches from him but couldn't sense his presence at all.

Pausing, Michael spun, leaving my energy, and reaching for her. "I have no idea." His voice quivered. "But I don't like it. We need to leave."

"No one's leaving." Aidan smiled, banging another section of the wood.

"Oh God!" Squealing, Clare clung to her husband. "It's happening again."

"It's okay," Michael soothed, taking her in his arms. "It's an old house. The noises are natural."

Guilt twisted at my friend's obvious terror, but it wasn't enough to placate me. I needed them to stay and satiate this loss in me.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Aidan glided through them, approaching me with hard blue eyes.

"I just can't bear to lose them all over again."

"I need you to say it." Aidan was on me, his aura pressing into mine. "Say it is what you want, little girl."

"It's what I want, Master." Eyes closing, I succumbed, permitting him to fill me up.

"Because there might be a way they can stay and give us back the pleasure of carnal intimacy."

"What?" I mumbled, not comprehending what he was trying to tell me. All I could concentrate on was the sensation of his possession, coupled with the relentless anxiety that the fear he'd inspired wouldn't be enough, that Michael would take Clare and lead her away, regardless.

"If it is what you want, then tell me," he ordered, much more like the man who'd captivated and captured me. "Because it is

what I yearn for, too.”

“Master?” I moaned, attempting to focus past my rising emotions.

“I love this, but I miss what we used to have.” His tone was breathless. “The physicality, the sound of your flesh on mine, the heat we used to make together.”

“I miss that, as well,” I murmured. “But we’ve been through this, Master. We gave that up for this—an eternity of togetherness.”

“What if we can have both?” His question ricocheted louder than the whispered words exchanged between Clare and Michael. “Have your friends remain and be able to fuck each other again.”

“How, Master?” I demanded, reveling in his overpowering mastery.

“Do you want it?” One tantalizing brow arched.

“Yes.” I smiled, still unaware of his plan but sensing his growing excitement. I hadn’t seen Aidan so animated since he joined this celestial plane. “I want it. Just tell me how.”

“We jump them.” He slid away from me, our ethereal bodies skimming each other as Michael turned toward the door again.

“Jump them?” Had I still owned a beating heart, I swore it would have been racing at his suggestion. “What does that mean?”

“We take over their bodies.” Aidan motioned toward Michael. “I become him, and you become her.”

“Take them over?” All rational thought splintered. “Possess them, you mean?”

“I mean, our astral spirits in their bodies.” Aidan’s old smirk returned to his handsome face. “That way, you get your friends to stay, and I get to spank you again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bewitched

Aidan

The idea came to me in an instant, the solution to both of our problems, and I could not see why I had not thought of it before. The way to claw back the parts of our relationship we missed so badly was to find a new body to inhabit. I might never have reached the conclusion had her inquiring pals not wandered into my lair, but as if their arrival was divine providence, it presented a clear explanation.

“You c-can’t be serious, Master.” Even in spirit, she flushed, sliding from me. “We can’t just take over their bodies. It’s not right! They’re my friends.”

“If we did, they would never leave.”

I had known she would resist. Iris was fundamentally still *my good girl*, the one who refused to end my life and had sympathized with my killer. Her morality was her one weakness.

“But...” She glanced around, desperation flickering in her gaze as her friends steeled themselves to leave.

“We do not have long,” I goaded. “If you want them to stay, you must decide now.”

“But we don’t even know if it will work.” She was practically panting, except I knew she no longer needed air to survive.

“We don’t know how to.”

“We know how to interact with the physical,” I reminded her. “I imagine it is much the same, little girl. Focus on the same emotion, all the loathing you stored away for me, for your ex, for everyone who ever let you down...”

It did not please me to have to lead her down this dark path again. I did not want to fill her with all the hatred she once had to bear, but there was no choice. This was how we mastered

the physical world, and, if my instincts were correct, how we would dominate her hapless friends.

“Then set the intention to take them over.”

“Master.” She shook her head, unwilling.

“We have no choice,” I snapped, signaling to Michael, already walking to the door. “Do it.”

Her tiny hands balled into fists between us, the urgency growing within until it was palpable, until I could feel its potency. Joining her, I focused on the sense of betrayal that had consumed me when she had fled, on the loss of both her and Desiree, on the many horrors I had presided over until my etheric body was warm with the depth of feeling.

“We need to do this together.”

I no longer looked for her assent, trusting she would follow my lead. Iris might not like my logic, but when push came to shove, it was our only chance at a mortal future—another lifetime in borrowed bodies. Our fairy tale was broken unless we snatched this opportunity.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded, gritting her teeth.

“We leap into them on the count of three,” I commanded as Michael yanked the door open. “Push their spirits down and take over their bodies. They will not be expecting such an attack, so they should offer no resistance.”

“Master?” She glanced my way, her eyes filled with queries as we rounded on the couple, Iris behind Clare and me following Michael.

“On three. No second thoughts,” I soothed. “Focus on the feeling. Two...”

“Come on, honey.” Michael moved forward, wrapping his arm around his wife. “We’ve done all we can do today.”

“One.” Exhilaration soared through me. “Now!”

Leaping into the mortal man, I had little time to see if my little girl had complied, every ounce of my energy attuned to my goal. He was mine! Michael would never voluntarily leave

Desiree Cottage again. I had suffered enough with powerlessness, with only swirling around the place with my love. It was time for something bolder.

Time to take back control.

Iris

Had I ever known such uncertainty?

I accepted Aidan was right, this was a possible solution to all of our concerns, but surely, he couldn't agree with the ethics?

It's Aidan. The nagging voice returned. *A man with no morality. You know that.*

I did know. He had snatched Desiree's life from her before extinguishing my own. What more did he need to do to prove it to me?

"No second thoughts," Aidan's tone was comforting, covering up the hideously unfair act we were contemplating. "Focus on the feeling. Two..."

"Come on, honey." Michael moved, pulling Clare closer to him, and I realized that this was it. It was now or never—either take up Aidan's suggestion and take possession of the closest friend I had in these parts or watch her and Michael walk out of my existence for good. "We've done all we can do today."

"One." Aidan's voice oozed excitement.

"Now!"

I was out of time. I had to choose and sensed without needing to look that Aidan had already made the leap. Closing my eyes, I focused the force swirling within me, directing it at Clare. Sensation whipped around my ankles, burgeoning as it met my knees, and encompassing me in the same way it did when I'd lurched at Aidan.

"Fuck!"

The word was lost in the frenzy of momentum as it spun around me, buzzing in my ears until all I could hear was the intensity of its strength and purpose, and then—in that final moment of choice—I dove into Clare.

The wave of feeling booming over me was mind-blowing, akin to the sense of helplessness I'd felt in my dream when the ocean crashed over my head. Seconds of surety that the end had come, but that couldn't be true for me. I was already dead. It was as if I couldn't take a breath, my soul lost in her physicality, attempting to get my bearings in a strange and foreign land.

She fought me. Her aura pressed against me even as her body stumbled backward. Vaguely conscious of the pain as she fell, I landed awkwardly against Aidan's hard floor.

Don't resist, I urged her, knowing I had no more right to ask than I did take this horrendous liberty, but still, I took it.

Perhaps I'd spent too long with my master and my own morality had morphed into something new and questionable, but either way, it was too late. I was committed to the violation, sworn to snatch my friend's liberty away, the same way my master had seized mine.

What's happening?

The fear in Clare's voice twisted in my gut, or maybe it was still hers—I didn't know.

Who are you?

I'll look after you. I promised, although the guarantee was built on nothing more than dust. *You'll be okay, Clare.*

Iris?

Shit, she recognized me!

Is that you?

It's okay.

Why was I lying to her? For me to gain control, she had to lose. There was no compromise available in this zero-sum game.

“Fuck.”

Peering up, Michael climbed to his knees, though I couldn't recall seeing him fall to them.

“This is different.”

It was Michael's voice, except it wasn't. I sensed immediately it was Aidan talking, and the devilish gleam in his gaze confirmed my suspicions. Glancing down at his hands, he stretched Michael's fingers, turning his palms over.

“Are you okay, little girl?” Leaning for me, he thrust out one of the palms in my direction.

“I... I don't know.” I didn't sound like me and cringing, I gripped his hand and compelled myself to my feet.

Clare's feet.

My feet! She screamed from somewhere deep in my psyche, although her voice had grown quieter.

“It is going to take some getting used to.” Aidan's grin appeared on Michael's face as he pulled me into his embrace.

“You no longer look like you, little girl.”

“It's me,” I assured him, breathing in the scent of Michael's clean linen. “I can't believe it, but somehow, it *is* me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bereaved

Iris

My mind was in free fall. What had I done? I was Clare, but I wasn't Clare. I was alive even though I was already dead.

You've taken my body!

Clare's voice grew fainter, but I could still hear the strangled terror laced in it.

It's my damn body, Iris.

"I know," I mumbled, grasping the old wooden bannister for support.

"Little girl?"

Aidan's tone was consoling, his hand stroking my back, except it wasn't his voice or his palm. They belonged to Michael.

"It's Clare."

Brows knitting, I tried to process everything that had happened. I'd been killed by the man I both loved and loathed, thought I'd found a place in the afterlife, and now this. Blowing out a breath, my fingers tightened on the wood. I'd leapt into the body of my friend with a view to taking permanent possession of it. What sort of sick and twisted scheme was that?

"She shall fade away."

It was peculiar, but the longer Aidan inhabited Michael's form, the more he was starting to sound like himself. He looked like Clare's husband, the kind soul who had permitted his wife to take me under her wing and embrace the stranger from the south, but he was more and more like Aidan.

"You will grow stronger as you become accustomed to the new physique." His breath was warm on my skin. "Do not fret."

“Fret?”

Even by Aidan’s standards, that was a preposterous thing to say.

“Master, she was my friend—they both were! What have we done to them? Have we k-killed them?”

My heart was hammering so fast, I could hardly take another breath, or should I say, Clare’s heart? My heart was a dried-up old peach already buried in the earth outside. Aidan had taken me to the spot on more than one occasion.

“No.” His face was serious. “They are not dead, only sleeping.”

“So, we just...” Panting, I peered around the dark hall. “Carry on living, but as Clare and Michael?”

Briefly, I considered their lives, of the cozy two-bedroom cottage they owned and the local church they attended.

“We stay here.” His arm wrapped around me. “For the time being at least. I want our lives back, Iris. Want to feel the blood pumping around an incarnate being, want to be inside you.”

Clare. I bit back on the word sitting at the tip of my tongue.
Not me, but Clare.

“Do not look at me that way.” He shook his head. “This is the only way we have a life together.”

“We had all of eternity,” I reminded him.

“Swirling around with no physical body.” His brow rose. “I am sorry, but it was not enough for me.”

“My love wasn’t enough?” I translated his words, suddenly understanding. “It never was. You need more... the spanking and the sex and every other manifestation of your dominance. You want that back.”

“I miss it, yes.” His tone was unapologetic. “I saw an opportunity to have those things again, and I took it.”

“You took it?” I met his eyes. Not the intense blue I’d fallen in love with, but the chocolate brown of Michael’s gaze. “Just

like you took my life?" I shook his hand away. "And Desiree's?"

"It is not the same thing, Iris," he countered. "We have not killed Clare or Michael."

"We might as well have." Stumbling back to the wall, self-disgust filled me as I slid to the floor. "How many lives do you have to destroy?"

There was no anger in my question, only the realization of who he was and what he'd become. What *I'd allowed* him to become. I had forgiven him time and time again, and for what? So, we could steal the bodies of my friends and live out some feigned existence together?

"Have you missed my punishment so badly, you need to bait me into a spanking?" He loomed over me, the query lingering between us.

"No, Master."

Climbing to my feet, I was emboldened by the stark acknowledgment. This was who Aidan was. I'd known it and chosen to stay. I might have fallen for the façade of old-fashioned desire, the passion pooling between my legs and his never-ending game of cat and mouse, but there was more to it now.

I loved the essence of the man he truly was. The one who had tended to my needs, fed and cared for me, the one who'd run out to the moors and saved me on more than one occasion. The one born with so much untapped potential. Yes, he was a killer, but he was also kind and considerate. I needed more of the latter and to lay the former to rest.

"No spanking until I say so."

"Oh?" His brow rose, one eyebrow arching at my defiance. "Is that right?"

"That's right." A serene calm had fallen over me. "Because that's consent, Master, and if these new guises have any chance of success, that's what I require."

"Consent?" His voice faltered.

“Yes,” I replied. “No more compelling me to conform or fettering me to make me stay. If we do this, I stay because I want to.” I had told him this already, but the reminder seemed important.

“Okay.” Aidan nodded slowly, Michael’s hair falling into his eyes.

“Okay?” It couldn’t be so simple, could it? After three murders, including his own and the possession of two innocent people, could I have finally gotten through to him? “Really?”

“I shall try,” he vowed, falling to one knee. “Change is not easy for me, but for you, I shall try.”

I couldn’t resist my smile. The ice that had hardened my heart was finally thawing. “Thank you, Master.”

He reached for my hand, squeezing my fingers gently as he rose to his full height. “And that spanking?”

“Will have to wait until we’re at the ocean.”

“The ocean?” He chuckled, the most relaxed I had seen him for a long time. “Back to that again?”

“It never left my heart, Master.” Rising on my tiptoes, my lips brushed over his mouth. It was odd kissing Michael, especially since he wasn’t as tall as Aidan, but even more peculiar how quickly I was overlooking the fact. “Just like you.”

“Then we shall go to the sea.” He shook his head, but I sensed he was not riled, only pleased. “You may dip your toes in the water and soothe your soul... because whoever’s body you inhabit, little girl, it is *your* soul.”

“There’s a bit more to it than that, Master.” Concern pounded in my head. It was easy to fall in love with Aidan and the notion of loving him, but much harder to reconcile what we’d done to poor Clare and Michael.

“Come on.” Gripping my hand, he led me toward the door.

“Do not dwell. We’re ocean bound.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Beckoned

Aidan

As it turned out, Michael had a wad of cash stashed in his pocket. That proved invaluable when we reached town, enabling my clever little girl to lease a vehicle. I suggested we could make the journey on foot, but she was insistent, and in deference to her new demand for assent, I complied, although I was reticent.

“What is the benefit of this machine?”

Grumbling, my gaze flitted around the vehicle as she sped down the road at the wheel. I had never traveled in one before but had seen them when I had made the journey into the urban world and did not enjoy what I found. All hard lines and sleek interior, they smacked of everything that perturbed me about the outside world.

“It will save us hours.” Laughing, she glanced at me before her focus flitted back to the road. I studied the side of her face—Clare’s face—as she concentrated. It had been my choice to snatch these new forms, as it had been mine to extinguish the flame of her life, but Iris was so beautiful, I could not help but miss her original countenance. Still, I understood more than most that the real essence of a woman was not her physical form but her soul. I would never tire of that wondrous essence. “Anyway, I haven’t driven for ages.”

“I remember.” It had been my hearth she was bound to. “I am just saying I do not enjoy the experience.”

“You just don’t like the fact that I’m in control.” She broke into more spontaneous laughter. “But that’s all part of the deal now, Master.”

“Hmmm.”

Turning, I watched the landscape rush past my eyes. My stomach knotted, forcing me to focus on my lap. I would have

her strewn back over my thighs before too long, then we would discover how Clare's skin compared to Iris'.

"There." She nodded excitedly. "I see the sea!"

Peering to the horizon, my heart jumped as I realized she was right. There, stretching out for miles, was the expanse of water she sought.

"I have never seen it from this angle," I admitted, leaning closer. "It is quite something."

She drove on until she found a spot that pleased her on the cliff edge, stilling the vehicle before cutting the engine and darting out to the roadside. Following her quickly, I watched as her grin grew.

"I can't believe I'm back here." Her hand rose to Clare's face—*her* face—her cheeks rosy at the fresh air. "Thank you!"

"I am glad it has made you happy, little girl." Going to her side, I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Clare's tresses were slighter lighter than Iris', a difference I was not yet used to. "Though we cannot dip our toes from this height."

"I am content." She sighed, peering at me. "More content than I have been for a while."

Silence swirled around us, interrupted only by the noise of the sea breeze.

"I should have brought you sooner... when we were both different people." Was that regret in my voice? "But we are here now."

"You're right. Things are different now, Master. I can't say I am comfortable with what we've done..." Her gaze traveled down the length of her body. "Maybe I never will be."

"Careful," I warned, raising my voice to be heard over the wind. "Regrets can haunt us if we allow them."

She stared at me, understanding my meaning. "Better to haunt than be hidden." She smiled sadly. "That is the fate we have assigned to Clare and Michael."

“They are not harmed.” I did not know why I was justifying our actions. We both knew the destiny we had doomed them too was desolate and bleak. “Only resting.”

“They’re crushed.” Tears brimmed in her eyes. “An outcome I understand only too well, but...”

“But?” I prompted.

“But you are still you and I am still me.”

“That much is true.” I chuckled. “Nothing lasts forever, of that much I am certain.”

She edged closer, clinging to me only a foot from the edge of the cliff.

“These bodies shall grow old and age, little girl. Just as we would have done, but I have learned something.” My lips twitched at the thought. “*You* have taught me something.”

“Oh?” She turned her head to look at me. “What’s that?”

“We still have each other.” My hand grazed her nape. “And we always shall.”

“We could leap from Clare and Michael.” Her eyes widened. “Survive as energy, as we once did?”

“But then I could not ravish you.” I squeezed her neck gently. “Or give you the punishment you so deserve... that we both know you crave.”

“That much is true.” She leaned into my hand. “But only once I’ve dabbled in the water.”

“Well, before you do, let me say this.” Trailing an invisible line down the length of her arm, my fingertips reached her wrist. “This moment is about us, a promise to each other, an oath.”

“What do you mean?” Her brow creased as another gust of wind swept her mane away from her eyes.

“I mean that we have hidden away for long enough, little girl.” It did not matter that Iris’ face had changed or that the body waiting under her clothes belonged to someone else. She was still Iris—still mine. “Now, let us live our lives where it suits

us. Whether that be Desiree Cottage, the sea, maybe even in town, so long as we're together, we shall thrive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Bliss

Iris

Thwack!

Electricity fired in my brain, acknowledging the hurt, then instantly ignoring it, translating it as deep, burgeoning passion.

“How many, little girl?”

His voice boomed over me like thunder, less and less like Michael and every inch the enigmatic man who’d taken me in that first night on the moors.

“Twenty-seven, Master.”

Smiling, I braced, eager for the next strike. As it turned out, I had missed the physicality of his spankings more than I liked to admit. Blowing out a breath with the next swat, I numbered the impact and reveled in the warm thrum pulsing between my legs.

My rational brain might have been able to reason away my desire, buried it under the weight of all the trauma. It would be understandable after everything that had transpired, reasonable, even, but it hadn’t overridden my true feelings. I still wanted him and yearned for his rough treatment. Even though it was that same dangerous spark in him that had gone too far and blotted out the sun, even though any sensible evaluation would scream to never trust him again, I put my faith in his hands.

We had new bodies, incarnate thanks to my friends, and we intended to put them to good use. I wrestled with the ethics of the decision, still unsure about our choice, but every time he called to me, took my hand, and offered me his familiar gleam, the urgency of their cause faded. They were Michael’s eyes devouring me, but it was Aidan’s dominance that shone back at me, his appetite that demanded to be satiated.

Clare's body was different from mine, smaller and trimmer than I had ever been, but it was my brain at the helm, my ardor that called the shots. Deep down, I pitied her fate and knew I was culpable, but increasingly, lust ensured I cared less. Aidan and I had this chance to indulge our hunger for each other, and God help me, I chose to take it, surrendering to the guidance of his palm whenever he required it.

"Look at you."

It took a moment for me to realize the spanking had paused. Twisting to look over my shoulder, he was smiling down at me, his fingers grazing between my thighs.

"You are drenched with excitement."

My grin grew at the accusation. I didn't deny it.

"Yes, Master."

Fire blazed in his eyes as one finger slipped inside me. "It is damn near impossible to punish you this way anymore." His amused tone swirled around me, the same timbre I recalled, although Michael's voice was different from Aidan's. "We both enjoy it too much."

"Perhaps you'll find new ways, Master?" I didn't want him to, never wanted this sense of ceding to his will to leave me again.

"Maybe."

Pressing deeper, his finger was joined by another, filling and stretching me until I moaned.

"Master."

Falling back over his thighs, I grasped the carpet below. Clare and Michael's house had gifted us another place to enjoy each other.

My house.

Inhaling, I pushed Clare's thoughts away. She had become easier to subdue, but I knew she was there, goading disapprovingly at my choices. Don't get me wrong, I understood why. I had taken everything from her—the same way Aidan had taken it from me. I was sure I should feel more

shame, but the soul strewn over his lap did not belong to the same woman he'd captured. It wasn't only the body that was different—it was who I was as well.

Aidan had hardened me, just as he'd opened my eyes. Like it or not, there was no going back to the person I'd once been.

“I want you.”

His breathy tone left me in no doubt. He nudged me from his thighs and climbed down behind me. Hearing the sound of his zipper, I arched my back, wiggling my ass at him provocatively. I'd never given much thought to how much sex had meant to me until my lack of body meant it was impossible, and however we'd acquired our carnal forms, I was thankful. Whatever he wanted to give, I was ready to take.

“Fuck.”

He hissed the word in my ear. His body enveloped mine as his cock slid into my wet heat. I no longer dwelt on the fact that it wasn't *his* cock or *my* pussy merging—those bodily realities were meaningless when our souls combined. The corporeal forms were necessary, adding the pounding of flesh on flesh that reminded me what we were—mortals who relished the passion of this pleasure. Humans who desired intimacy.

“I know.” Excited emotion furred inside of me, threatening to bubble over as he slammed into my cunt. “More, please.”

“You shall always have more,” he snarled, his breathing more erratic as his climax neared. “More of everything I can give you.”

I tumbled to the carpet as he plowed into me. He groaned with pleasure, pinioning me down as he erupted. Smiling into the deep fibers, my eyes fluttered closed, contentment swelling in my heart. It wasn't sane to love my own murderer, but it was the truth. Aidan had taken it all, but he also gave me more than anyone else I could remember.

“That is better.” He sighed, withdrawing from me, before pulling me into his arms. Rolling to one side, we collapsed together in a heap. “You are nowhere near sufficiently spanked, but at least we are replete.”

“Well, you are, Master,” I reminded him. “I haven’t had my pleasure yet.”

“Is that right?” He smirked, planting kisses on the side of my neck. “Are you saying that I have been remiss in my duties?”

“Duties?” I liked the idea that he had an obligation to please me. It was fitting. “Yes, I think that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“In that case, my apologies.”

The heat of his kisses glided to my shoulder, goosing my flesh as his caresses moved south.

“I must make amends immediately.”

Giggling, I mewled as he climbed down the length of my body, his lips tantalizing my midriff en route to my inner thighs. “Yes please, Master.”

“In days gone by, I might have bound you, little girl.” He rose to his knees, looming over me like a dark God. “But now I have no need to fetter.”

“Shame,” I murmured, my legs splaying as he lowered to nibble my skin. “Sometimes, I liked your ropes.”

Liked them? I could hardly believe what I was saying.

“I always knew.” His deep chuckle filled the air over the noise of the nearby fireplace. “Your protests never fooled me.”

Time lingered as his gaze met mine. Two souls earthbound in other people’s bodies, but when our gazes locked, it was as if we saw through the veneer of flesh straight into the essence that made up our souls.

“I love you.” It was the most natural answer in the world.

“Despite everything, you should know that I love you.”

“And I love you, Iris.” Pressing his mouth to my pussy, he whispered the words. “You are more than I could ever merit, and I shall spend all eternity proving it to you.”

Grasping the carpet, I whimpered at his intimate caress, knowing I would soon lose myself to the pleasure.

“You will remain here and be loved.”

I didn't need to look up to acknowledge the smile on his face.

“As God is my witness.”

God?

Maybe there was an omni being above us, some arbitrary adjudicator who spun the die and decided who lived and died. I had never gathered evidence that concluded in favor of either argument, never seen, heard, or felt any greater power than the magic he created and the entwined essence of our spirits.

Life, death, and love had taught me enough to know it didn't matter to beings like us.

We were free in the most tangible way. Liberated to live out a lifetime as Clare and Michael, or free to jump from their bodies and fly elsewhere, existing in our own existential paradise. If I could manage the morality of taking possession of another human's body, then the sky was really the limit. We could discover new hosts for our passion and inhabit many other people after them, strangers we didn't know, and wished no ill harm, but who could offer us the gift of carnality. The unthinkable was now more than achievable. It was all ours for the taking.

Living as Iris, I had barely considered survival beyond one lifetime, the concept alien and impossible to imagine. Often struggling through that one existence alone had seemed insurmountable. Looking back at the woman I had been might have been amusing had it not been so tragic.

Aidan had smashed into that life and changed the direction of everything. He'd given me wings, only to clip them, providing irrefutable passion he would then poison with his own hands.

In death, it all changed again. Something had resurrected me, an urgency I still couldn't comprehend. I didn't know if it was the longing we shared, the pain and pleasure that had collided in each other, or merely the energy at Desiree Cottage, but something or someone had brought me back. Maybe it was this God he spoke of? His lips made it impossible to care.

There was a new chance at life, maybe multiple opportunities, the prospect of never-ending fervor, an unstoppable ache only he could fulfill. Our desire had been overshadowed by death, but in the end, it was stronger than even its ghastly demise.

Aidan and I had found a love to last forever.

The End.

EPILOGUE

Beyond

Miles from suburban life, nestled on top of a grassy knoll on the Northumberland moors sat a small brick house. It was not special, nor enticing, but it was well built and kept out the lashing wind, and based on the withered allotment, it had perhaps once been loved.

If a passing traveler were to hike out on the heath, far from the beaten track, they might notice the dwelling, although it would be easy enough to dismiss from a distance. If, however, the sunlight caught the panes of glass settled in the brickwork, the traveler might be drawn closer, close enough to make out the smoke billowing from the chimney, to think they had found sanctuary.

Some days, they would find the residence oddly empty, the rooms as sparse as they were cold and dark. On another day—on the right day—they might encounter the house occupied, heat radiating from the hearth, and the aroma of a tasty meat stew bubbling happily over the fire. If they listened closely, they would also hear the rooms filled with the sounds of laughter and carnality—the echoes of a couple very much in love.

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