

New York Times bestseller

BRYN GREENWOOD



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RECKLESS
OATH
WE MADE**

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CHAPTER 1

Zee

People talk about having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. I had a pair of imaginary bill collectors, so no matter which way I turned, there was somebody to remind me I needed money. That's how I ended up on a train at four o'clock in the morning with my nephew and a hundred pounds of weed.

We were hours behind schedule, but the westbound Southwest Chief was running on time. When the two trains met each other, they rattled back and forth, and the air that leaked in through the vents smelled like diesel and burning brakes. I could see into the other train's windows, where a few people were still awake. Usually, it made me feel lonely, seeing those people so close but separated from me.

This time felt different. Having Marcus' head resting in my lap reminded me I wasn't alone. He was small like his mother and dark-haired like his father, but when he was asleep, he was like me. Always running hot and trying to burrow his way into things. After hours of him sleeping on me, my hip hurt so much I kept hoping he would wake up, but he slept through the railroad crossing bells in every small town we went through. When he did wake up,

rolling over and grinding his forehead into me, I didn't make him move. I smoothed his hair down and said, "Shh, it's okay. I'm here. Go back to sleep."

The trip to Trinidad had never been a big deal to me, but then I'd never had to take Marcus with me. I didn't have a choice, when LaReigne didn't come home, and twenty-four hours later, I was still waiting to hear from her. Waiting but dreading it, too, because there was no way I could keep lying to her. I would have to tell her about the weed, and she would have to get over it. She could be as mad as she wanted, but that wasn't going to pay the rent, and maybe it was time she knew where the extra cash came from. Sometimes she spent money like it magically appeared in our bank account. Like the gas money she burned up driving to El Dorado to volunteer at the prison.

Back before I started doing the Colorado run, LaReigne used to call Asher my *boyfriend*, I guess because that was the only way me having sex with him made sense to her. She didn't understand it was just about the money. My hospital bills, the rent, the groceries, Mom's prescriptions, LaReigne's tuition, and whatever thing Marcus needed, because kids are money pits.

In my experience, you could fuck for money, or wait tables for money, or sit in an insurance office forty hours a week like LaReigne did. However you get it, you need it, because money always decides whether things get better or worse. They never stay the same.

I was in too much pain to sleep, so I practiced in my head how I would explain all of that to LaReigne.

The thing that bothered me was that she didn't always come home on her volunteer nights, but she always texted. She always had an excuse. One time, exactly one time, she had completely flaked out on us. It was right after she'd filed for divorce, so Marcus had only been three. We'd been in our apartment for a month, and

we didn't know where the next month's rent was coming from. We were living on potatoes and canned stuff from the food bank. One Thursday, LaReigne had gone out for a job interview and hadn't come home. I'd spent the whole weekend trying to find her, and gotten fired from my job for not showing up. LaReigne had finally come home on Sunday night, and we had a knock-down, drag-out fight. She never told me where she'd been, but she'd promised she would never do that again. And she hadn't.

Except where was she? If she'd lost her phone, she would have replaced it by now, so I couldn't keep pretending that's why she wasn't answering. For the first time, I let myself think about other reasons. Maybe she was dead. A car wreck. Some asshole with a gun who got her office and the Planned Parenthood clinic down the street confused. Her ex-husband was in jail in Texas, or I would've added him to the possible ways LaReigne could die. He'd threatened her enough times. Looking at one of the last texts I'd sent her, I wished I could take it back. *If you're not dead, I'm going to kill you.* What if I'd jinxed her?

A new text popped up, but it was only from Asher's lackey, Toby:
Why is the train so late?

Engine problems

Ok well if there r cops at Newton ur on ur own

WTF are you talking about? Why would there be cops? I said.

The little dots flashed as Toby typed. When the answer came, I would have fallen down if I hadn't been sitting down: *This deal with your sister. Asher gonna murder u if the cops get his shit*

Panic washed over me, and my hands shook so hard I could barely type. *What are you talking about the shit with my sister???*

The thing out at the prison.

What thing at the prison???

Toby didn't answer.

I opened my Internet app to look at the *Wichita Eagle's* website. While I waited for it to load, I couldn't tell if it was the train rocking back and forth or my stomach.

MANHUNT FOR ESCAPED INMATES was the top headline. Underneath that were grainy pictures of two guys in orange prison jumpsuits.

The smaller headline was *Two Guards Killed in Riot*, with pictures of the guards in their uniforms. Below that: *Night of rioting ends with three inmates injured and two volunteers taken hostage*. LaReigne was so unimportant, they mentioned her last. I didn't recognize the picture they used for her, so it was probably from her volunteer badge at the prison. She managed to look glamorous even in a mug shot-style picture. Her hair in blond waves and her eyebrows drawn on perfectly. The other volunteer was a woman, too. Chubby and maybe fifty with short brown hair. Was it Molly, who LaReigne had stayed with a couple times when she had a migraine and didn't want to drive home?

I tried to find out more, but all the news sites had the same information. Rioting, low staffing, overcrowding, dead guards, escape, hostages. I was rereading it, over and over, when we pulled into Newton.

I was the last person off the train, practically carrying Marcus while the conductor tossed my suitcases out on the sidewalk. Marcus flopped down on the ground next to the bags, cried for about two minutes, and then fell asleep.

I almost cried, too, but I held it together while everybody was meeting up with their families and finding their rides. The whole time, Toby was standing in the shadows, watching me. Maybe he thought he was keeping a low profile, but he looked like a creeper.

"Do you want this shit or not?" I said, after the train pulled away.

“Keep your voice down.”

“There aren’t any cops.” I raised my voice, same as always, because being mad felt safer than being scared. Toby came over and started towing my suitcases toward where he’d parked his car next to mine. After sitting for twelve hours, my hip felt like it was full of gravel, but I picked Marcus up and limped after Toby.

Usually Toby unloaded the suitcases into his trunk and gave them back to me, but when I got to his car, he was tossing them into the back seat. Those suitcases were serious business: matching, locking, hard-sided, polycarbonate, all-terrain wheels. The only place I’d ever taken them was Trinidad, Colorado, and the only thing I’d ever packed in them was Asher’s weed. They’d cost me serious money, too, but right then didn’t seem like a safe time to argue about them, so I set Marcus down and unlocked my car.

“Why the hell did you bring the kid anyway?” Toby said.

“Because I had to. Asher said if I didn’t make the run tonight, he’d have you fuck me up.”

Toby laughed and said, “You’re already fucked up. What kinda person brings their kid on a run?”

“He’s my nephew, and my sister didn’t come home last night, which *you already know*. There was nobody else to watch him.”

“Shit, for real? This is LaReigne’s kid?” Toby looked at Marcus, who was asleep on his feet, leaning up against me. “So that’s some crazy shit, huh? What do you think is—”

“Shut up, you asshole!” I said.

Even though Marcus was right there, Toby reached out and grabbed me by the neck. He pushed me back against my car, digging his thumb into my throat.

“You need to learn some fucking manners, Zee.”

“Please,” I said, which wasn’t what I felt at all. “Don’t say anything in front of him.”

When Toby let go of me, I opened the door and lifted Marcus into his car seat. After I shut the door, I turned back to Toby with my arms crossed, so he wouldn't see me shivering. There was a reason Toby couldn't do the run to Colorado himself. He looked exactly like what he was: a drug-dealing thug with a neck tattoo and a squirrely eye. He also happened to be one of the scariest people I knew. Him and Asher. Any time I got tempted by those blocks of cash, that was all I had to think about. Two hundred grand would pay off all my debts—hell, the debts of everybody I knew—but it would also get me killed.

“Jesus,” Toby said. “I was gonna offer to make things easier for you with Asher. Smooth things over.”

I knew what he had in mind for payment for a favor like that, and I really wanted to be done paying for things with sex. I hoped I was never going to be that desperate again.

“Anyway, doesn't matter now. Asher told me to tell you you're cut off. You don't call him. You don't text him. He'll call you after this shit quiets down.”

I probably should have got in the car and left, but I had bills to pay.

“My money?” I said.

Toby snorted, but he reached into his back pocket and took out an envelope. He held on to it for a couple seconds after I reached for it, but he finally let it go. I stuffed the money into my pocket and walked around to the driver's side of my car. When I opened the door, Toby was still watching me.

“Tell Asher he owes me for those suitcases,” I said. “They weren't cheap.”

CHAPTER 2

Zee

When we were in grade school, LaReigne and I walked to and from school every day, separated by about ten feet or so, because she was too cool to walk with a *baby*. One day—I was in third grade and LaReigne was in sixth—when we got to our block, there were half a dozen cop cars parked in front of our house. I remember crying, even before I knew what had happened. I don't know when I learned to be afraid of the police, but I was. We all were. That day, LaReigne took my hand, and we walked down the street to our house together. Mom stood on the front porch, screaming and sobbing, with a cop on either side of her. Dad was locked in the back seat of a police car, with his head turned so he wouldn't have to look at his wife or his daughters.

Now, driving past our apartment building and seeing a police car and a police van parked outside, I felt eight years old again. Afraid and angry, but not ignorant or innocent anymore. I didn't dare stop. I had five ounces of weed in my backpack and a bunch of drops and edibles. Probably the smart thing to do was ditch the weed, but I couldn't afford to. I needed the money, and it was the only thing that really worked for my pain that didn't require a prescription.

I kept driving.

“You missed our turn,” Marcus said. Five years old and he was already a backseat driver.

“We’re not going home yet.” I pulled up to the light at Central, white-knuckling the steering wheel to keep myself focused. In my side-view mirror, I could still see the cop car parked in front of our apartment.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“Grandma’s house.”

I should have gone somewhere else. Anywhere else. A motel. A park. A fucking church. Even going to Marcus’ other grandparents’ would have been a better terrible choice, if I was going to make a terrible choice. My mother’s house was on a cul-de-sac that dead-ended where they had widened Kellogg into a six-lane highway, so when I turned down the street, I was already stuck. There were three news vans, plus half a dozen other cars. Once again my family was newsworthy.

Reporters didn’t scare me the way cops did, so I pulled up at the end of the line of vehicles and parked. I got Marcus out of the car and led him across the neighbors’ yards, but as soon as we reached the weedy edge of Mom’s yard, the reporters saw us. Holding Marcus’ hand tighter, I walked faster, keeping my eyes focused on Mom’s front porch, which was piled up with old furniture and lawn tools.

“Are you a member of the Trego family?” said the first reporter that reached us.

“Do you know the family?” said another one.

A TV cameraman cut me off at the sidewalk, while more reporters shouted, “Do you know LaReigne Trego-Gill?”

Marcus started to cry, and then his hand slipped out of mine. My heart stuttered and I turned around, thinking it would be a reporter or a cop or . . . I didn’t know who might grab Marcus.

Standing there, next to Marcus, was Gentry. Where had he come from? Had he followed me there? Of course; he followed me everywhere. Before I could think of what to say, Gentry picked Marcus up. What I would have done if my hip hadn't been hurting so much. Then Gentry reached past me and used his arm as a barrier between me and the cameraman who was nearly in my face.

"Let the lady pass!" Gentry bellowed. The cameraman backed up.

I ran the last ten feet to the porch, with Gentry behind me carrying Marcus. The screen door was only attached at one hinge, so you had to be really careful with it, and I wasn't. I was so freaked out, I jerked it open, and the glass panel on the top rattled into the bottom and almost fell out. I managed to shove the whole thing out of the way, but the front door was locked. I pulled my keys out of my pocket and got the deadbolt turned. When I pushed, the door opened, but only a few inches. For a second, I thought, *Mom has finally managed to block both doors. She's going to die trapped in there.*

"Has the family heard anything from LaReigne? Do you have any news? Has there been a ransom demand? Are the police negotiating?" Reporters were shouting behind me, Marcus was sobbing, and I could hear Gentry breathing hard.

"Push," I said to Gentry, and I stepped as far off to the side as I could. Still holding Marcus, he put his free hand on the frame and leaned his whole body into the door. There was a thump and a crash inside, and the door opened wide enough for us to squeeze through.

Inside, there was no room for us to do anything but stand packed together. Gentry slammed the door closed and set Marcus down on top of a half-collapsed stack of newspapers. I hugged Marcus tight, feeling his whole body quivering. I wondered if he understood why those strangers were shouting his mother's name.

“It’s okay, buddy. I got you,” I said. With this sick lurch, I realized that I was LaReigne now. Not just for Marcus, but for me. After Dad went to prison, right up until she left for college, LaReigne had been the adult in our family. After that I had to be my own adult, but now I would have to be one for Marcus, too.

“Zhorzha? Is that you, Zhorzha?” Mom yelled from the front room.

“Yeah, it’s me. I have Marcus with me.”

“What was that crash? What did you knock over?”

“I don’t know. Whatever was behind the door. I almost couldn’t get it open.”

What had fallen over was a cardboard box full of ballerina figurines, too high on the stack to be the ones LaReigne had as a kid. There was also a tumbled-over pile of romance novels, a broken laundry basket with a half-finished quilt in it, and two wooden boxes that maybe were for silverware. I knew she got stuff off Craigslist and eBay, but I didn’t have a clue where most of the new stuff came from.

I turned around, intending to make sure the door was locked, and there was Gentry, looking the way he always did. Like one of Marcus’ Lego people. Not very tall, but a solid block, dressed in a black T-shirt, cargo shorts, and Timberlands. He had his back pressed against the door, his head down, and his hands resting on the back of his neck. He didn’t look at me—he never looked me in the eye—so at least I didn’t have to hide the horrified look on my face when I realized what I’d done.

I’d invited my stalker into my mother’s house.

CHAPTER 3

Gentry

I brought Lady Zhorzha and her little page safe through the throng of knaves, but 'twas no great task for the many months I was set to watch over her. To guard the threshold like a dog would give me joy, but my lady needed me carry the boy.

I set him down, and my lady embraced him while I made fast the door. I saw no clear path from that place, and I would not give offense, so I waited to hear my lady's bidding. I felt her gaze upon me, but knew not how to meet it. 'Twas rare I kenned her, nor she me.

From deep within the cottage, the air rumbled with a great voice, heavy and coarse with age. It called my lady's name and stirred all the voices in me.

"Come in," Lady Zhorzha said. "Come in and meet my mother."

Marcus led the way, clambering like a goat down narrow passages. On all sides heaped up weren manuscripts and folios, and great cupboards filled with platters and goblets. Our footsteps set them to rattle.

"How long has it been like this?" Lady Zhorzha called.

“They’ve been here since yesterday. And calling and calling. I had to unplug the phone.”

“Oh my god, Mom. I tried to call you a bunch of times. Why didn’t you call me if you were going to unplug the phone?”

First Marcus and then Lady Zhorzha withdrew through a doorway, flanked upon each side by mounds of chests and baskets. I followed, and at last, I found the answer to the question I asked of the Witch many a time. ’Twas my bounden duty to protect Lady Zhorzha, for she was descended of dragons.

There, in the inner chamber, reclined upon a throne of red leather that scarce contained her serpentine hugeness, was the dragon Lady Zhorzha called Mother. My lady was blessed with a great mane of fire that ne comb ne blade might tame. Mayhap in the dragon’s youth, she had worn such a mantle, but in her age, her hairs weren grayed.

Fearless, Marcus approached the throne and flung himself upon the lady dragon. For a time, there was kissing and lamenting, for they weren greatly distressed with the fate of my lady’s sister. The dragon clapped the little boy to her and succored him. Then she raised herself upon one red-scaled elbow and with a plume of white smoke spake: “I was calling you all day yesterday! I was about to report you and Marcus missing to the police.”

“I had my cellphone on all day yesterday. What number were you calling?”

“Your apartment number.”

“We don’t have a landline anymore, Mom. You have to call my cellphone. And you can’t smoke around Marcus,” Lady Zhorzha said, but the dragon exhaled another blast of smoke.

“Who is this?”

I felt the dragon’s gaze fall upon me.

“Hark, little knight,” Gawen said. “She would eat thee.”

“Filth and the Mother of Filth,” Hildegard said.

Tho none but I could hear them, I would not support their un-courtesy, and heeded them not.

“This is Gentry,” Lady Zhorzha said.

“Gentry, I suppose we’ll have to introduce ourselves, since she can’t be bothered to.”

“I’m sorry,” Lady Zhorzha said. “Gentry, this is my mother, Dorothy Trego. Mother, this is Gentry Frank.”

The dragon offered one sharp-taloned hand to me, and I took it. I would go upon my knee, but the dragon’s hoard was too close upon her. I bowed over her hand to show my admiration.

“And who are you, Gentry?” she said.

“My lady, I am thy daughter’s champion.”

The dragon laughed like a clap of thunder and pressed my hand.

“Oh, he’s charming. Nicholas was good-looking, but he had no sense of humor. I never could—”

“Seriously, Mom? That’s what we’re talking about right now? Because I can think of a few things that are more important than my ex-boyfriend.”

“Little pitchers have big ears,” the dragon said.

“You’re thirsty, aren’t you, Gentry? Don’t you need a drink?” Lady Zhorzha said, but I kenned not her intention. “Marcus, why don’t you take Gentry and get him a pop out of the fridge?”

“Okay.” Marcus came down from the dragon’s throne and led me further into the maze. The dragon’s hoard trespassed even into the scullery, platters and goblets piled upon the cabinets until the cupboards above opened not. So high weren the things heaped up there, I saw not the spigot.

We passed through another door and into the garage, where great towers of chests and crates rose to the rafters. In the midst of them was a small icebox with a small oven stacked upon it. Marcus

opened the door and shew me what was within. I wished not for a sweet drink, but would do as my lady bid.

“What do you want? There’s Coke or orange,” Marcus said.

“I would have an orange drink, Master Marcus.”

“You talk funny,” he said.

“’Twas always thus.”

“Are you Aunt Zee’s boyfriend? You always park outside our apartment.”

“I am her champion. I watch that I might her serve.”

He brought from the icebox two cans, and we sat upon the threshold to the house and drank.

“Do you know where my mommy is?” he said.

“Nay, I know not.” Yet I knew what caused my lady’s distress.

Always in the hall where we ate what was our midday meal, the Duke of Bombardier allowed his vassals to see the news. The night past, I had seen the visage of my lady’s sister. I knew her straight away, for oft I saw her with my lady and with Marcus. *Taken*, the news had said of the lady LaReigne, by knaves locked up in the gaol at El Dorado. Certs they weren men of ill intent, but mayhap my lady’s sister still lived, tho there was no word of her fate.

When the hour of my leaving Bombardier had come that morning, I went not home, but to my lady’s house. There I saw the sheriff’s men. I perceived not their task, but as I kept watch, Lady Zhorzha had passed and stopped not.

“Soon,” the Witch had said for nigh two years. “Soon Lady Zhorzha shall have need of thee.” As I sat beside young Marcus, the Witch spake again, saying, “They aren under thy protection now. Take them to thy keep.”

“To my father’s keep?” I asked.

“Nay, to thine own.”

I kenned her not, for my keep lay in chaos, a field of stones, and

no fit place for my lady, tho oft I dreamt it.

“I don’t like being out here,” Marcus said.

“Dread thee nought. Thine aunt and thee, ye aren under my protection.”

The boy put his hand into mine and I took it as the Witch’s surety. She oft spake in riddles, but I trusted her. If she said ’twas to be, it was.

CHAPTER 4

Zee

Have you heard anything from your sister?” Mom said, as soon as we were alone.

“Not since Monday.” I took out my phone, meaning to show her the texts, but then I looked at them and changed my mind.

Remember you’re getting Marcus from school today. LaReigne had texted that at one forty-five, when I was still at the restaurant.

I remember. She acted like I didn’t have a calendar on my phone to remind me.

Please don’t get high tonight ok? She sent that with a little sad, disappointed emoji, which wasn’t even fair. Who kept all the bills paid? Good old stoner Zee. So why did I get the sad, disappointed emoji?

I never get high when I’m watching him, I’d answered.

Right it’s for “pain relief” but you won’t even TRY the guided meditation I use. You know I had Marcus through natural childbirth using that. No pain meds, no spinal block.

I know. Because she never got tired of telling me.

Just please don’t get high tonight.

It was useless explaining to LaReigne that there’s no natural

childbirth equivalent to hitting a highway at sixty-five miles an hour, dislocating your hip, and breaking your leg in two places. Lamaze won't get you through that.

"The last time she texted me was at like six o'clock on Monday," I said. "She always lets me know when she gets to the prison, and when she's leaving, but she didn't."

I'd texted her at ten to see where she was, but she never answered. Same at midnight, and, by then, Asher had told me to make the trip to Colorado.

"Well, where have you been?" Mom said, like an accusation.

"I had to do a favor for a friend of mine, so I took Marcus with me, and I thought LaReigne maybe just flaked out. Only she didn't come back."

Saying it out loud, it finally hit me. LaReigne had been kidnapped. Taken hostage. Whatever you called it, I didn't have any idea if she was safe or if they were going to hurt her or when I was going to see her again. Maybe we didn't always get along, but she was my sister. She was the person who held my hand on two of the worst days of my life.

"Oh, baby, I know." Mom opened her arms and I went to her the same way Marcus did. I put my knee up on the reinforced arm of her chair, and leaned against her to bury my face in her shoulder. I couldn't remember the last time I'd hugged her. Not put my arms around her to leverage her in and out of her chair, or the toilet, but to hug her.

"What do we do? What's going to happen?" I said. Mom's hand was warm on my back, rubbing slow circles, while I cried all over her shoulder. I wanted to stay there, but I knew I couldn't. That was even more true than it had been when I was sixteen. I pulled myself together and stood up. "Should we call the police? They have to tell us something, right?"

“They’ve come by twice now, but I couldn’t answer the door.” *I couldn’t* meant a lot of things to Mom. Maybe she’d been too scared to talk to the police. Maybe she couldn’t get out of her chair and answer the door. “Now that you’re here, though, we’ll call them. And they’ll tell us whatever they know.”

I got the phone plugged back in, and Mom dialed. She was put on hold three times, and every time she had to tell someone new who she was. Then she finally got someone on the line who knew something, because she listened and nodded.

When she started crying, I had to sit down on the arm of her chair. The worst, that was what I expected. The very worst. After a minute Mom went back to nodding, and then she said, “Yes, I understand. That’s fine.”

“What did they say?” I said after she hung up.

“They’re going to send someone to talk to us.”

“What does that mean? Do they have any news?”

“They didn’t tell me anything.” Mom started crying again.

“Have you talked to Emma or Aunt Shelly?” I said. They were practically the only family we had left. Aunt Shelly had been married to Mom’s brother, Tim.

“Not Shelly, but Emma. I talked to her yesterday, just for a minute. Before everything got so crazy.”

“And?”

“We had a little fight. You know, in their minds this is somehow your father’s fault. Or LaReigne’s fault, which is ridiculous.”

“Well, not like she’s completely innocent, either,” I said.

Not that anybody would take me as an example of how to be a good person. Like Toby said, *What kind of person takes a kid on a drug run?* But what made LaReigne want to do something goody-goody like volunteer at the prison? Hadn’t we already put in our time? Before he died, our father spent twelve years in prison, and we

went to see him almost every single week. Wasn't that enough for LaReigne?

The door to the garage opened, and I heard Gentry and Marcus coming up the steps into the kitchen.

"Yea, I am a knight," Gentry was telling Marcus. He said it with the *k*, *k*-night, and Marcus parroted it back to him that way.

"But *k*-nights have swords. Do you have a sword?"

"I have more than one sword."

"You do?" Marcus said.

"What does that mean? *Not completely innocent?*" Mom said.

"Shh." I didn't want to get into it with her when Marcus might overhear us. "There goes my plan to ask Emma to watch Marcus for a little bit. The police were up at the apartment, so I don't know if we'll be able to stay there."

"You should stay here."

"How? There's not even any place for us to sit down, let alone lie down."

"That's not true. You know there's a sofa bed in the sunroom."

The way Mom said it, so sure of herself, it gave me goosebumps. Even if you could get in the sunroom—you couldn't—I doubted there was a sofa you'd want to sleep on. I stood up, because the whole house was quicksand, and I could feel it sucking me in.

"Probably we'll get a motel room tonight," I said.

"That's silly to spend money on a motel. We can figure out something here."

"No, I think it'd be better to take Marcus somewhere else. I don't like all those reporters out there."

"My lady," Gentry said from the kitchen doorway. "I offer thee and thy page sanctuary at my father's keep."

"Okay." I didn't hesitate, because I had to get away from the quicksand. After I escaped, I could figure out what to do.

“Are we going?” Marcus said.

“Not yet, buddy. Grandma has some people coming over who need to talk to her.”

Marcus crawled up into the spot on Mom’s chair I’d just pried myself out of. He kissed her cheek and said, “When’s Mommy coming?”

“Soon, sugar pie. Soon,” Mom said. How many times had she told us that lie about Dad? *Soon*, when what she really meant was *Never*.

“Do you want to watch a video?” I asked Marcus. He didn’t move from where he was lying against Mom’s side, but he nodded.

“Gentry, do you mind taking Marcus back out to the garage? Just for a little while?”

“Nay, my lady,” he said. “’Tis my honor.”

“It’s not too warm out there, is it?”

“Nay, ’tis pleasant enough.”

Whether it was pleasant or not, I didn’t want Marcus there when we talked to the police. I got the iPad out of my backpack and gave it to Marcus, who followed Gentry out to the garage, even though he didn’t look very happy about it.

“He’s very charming,” Mom said.

“Who?”

“Gentry. He’s very charming. Where did you find him?”

“Oh god,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

CHAPTER 5

Zee

Where did I find Gentry?

At a physical therapy clinic about three months after Nicholas and I had our huge fight, and I laid his Harley down in rush-hour traffic on Kellogg.

Right after the wreck, while I was still in the hospital, Nicholas had moved home to his parents' in Merriam. I couldn't go back to our apartment by myself. Hell, I couldn't even afford it by myself. I couldn't move in with Mom, because you could barely walk through her house *without* a cast on your leg. I was back to being the kind of homeless I'd been since I was sixteen.

LaReigne rescued me. She had come to the hospital while my leg was still in traction. She took my hand, just like when I was little, and she'd said, "I'm taking you home." So I'd moved in with her and Loudon, which was so delightful I used to fantasize about falling down the stairs and breaking my neck. Marcus had been only two and a half then, and I was sleeping on the other twin bed in his room and listening to his parents fight nonstop.

Two months after the wreck, I was out of my leg cast, but still in a brace and walking on crutches. Twice a week, LaReigne had

dropped me off for PT and picked me up after, because I wasn't cleared to drive. Even if I had been, my car got repo'd after the wreck, because I lost my job and stopped paying on the loan.

The day I met Gentry, LaReigne didn't show up after my appointment. Every time I texted her, she'd said, *I'm sorry, I'll be there in a little bit.* After I'd been sitting in the clinic lobby for three hours, I got the text I'd known was coming. *I'm sorry, Z. Loudon took the car and I don't know where he is. Can you get an Uber or something?*

I didn't have money for a cab, so I'd looked up bus routes on my phone, but the closest the bus could get me was two miles from the condo. Two miles on crutches. I went out to the parking lot, and there was a guy standing next to his truck. I'd seen him in the waiting room a bunch of times. In the beginning, he'd had his arm in a sling, but at this point he just had athletic tape on his arm and shoulder. He was a nondescript white guy. Cargo shorts, tank top, stocky, medium height, dark hair. I never would have recognized him, except he had the worst haircut I'd ever seen on another human being. Not like he'd cut it himself, but like he'd let a toddler cut it with a pair of garden shears, repeatedly.

As I came down the sidewalk, he stepped away from his truck and bowed to me. I will never forget what he said: "My lady. Thy servant."

I stopped, because there was nobody else he could be talking to, but I had no idea what he meant. He straightened up, but kept his eyes down.

"My lady. If thou wilt allow me to help thee," he said. When I didn't answer, he got down on one knee, like he meant to propose to me. "'Tis my honor to carry thee whither thou desirest."

I was staring at him, but he never looked up. He stayed there with his bare knee on the asphalt, one hand over his heart and the

other offered to me palm up. Was I supposed to take it?

He looked off to his left and nodded.

“Yea. I see, man. I am not blind,” he said. Then he went back to looking at my legs. “Thou art wounded, my lady, and I would thee serve.”

I almost kept walking, because the level of crazy there was so high, but then I’d remembered my fantasy about falling down the stairs. If this guy was a serial killer, it would save me the trouble of breaking my own neck.

“Is this your truck?” I said, because I didn’t speak *whither thou desirest*.

“My lady, ’tis.” He stood up and opened the passenger door for me. Even though he offered his hand for me to get up in the cab, he looked shocked when I put my hand on his shoulder for leverage. Once I was in the cab, he tucked my crutches behind the seat and closed the door.

When he went around and got into the driver’s seat, I snuck a picture of him and sent it to LaReigne. *If I get murdered, this is the guy who gave me a ride.*

“What’s your name?” I said.

“I am called Gentry Frank.” He glanced over at me for about half a second.

“I’m Zhorzha. Rhymes with Borgia,” I said, like always. “You can call me Zee.”

“Lady Zhorzha, whither goest thou?”

“Okay, you’re cracking me up with that. I need to go past Twenty-ninth and Rock, if that’s not too far.”

I guessed it wasn’t because he took me all the way home. I would have had him drop me off at the front gate of the complex, but I was so tired I didn’t care. I told him the gate code and had him drive me up to the building. He pulled in and parked next to

LaReigne's car. Either she'd lied to me about Loudon taking the car or the dickhead had just come home.

While I was trying to get myself out of the truck, Gentry came around and got my crutches out. He held out his arm for me to take, but I used the doorframe instead, because he'd seemed so freaked out about me touching him.

"My lady, shall I help thee?"

"No, my good sir," I said, trying to get into it, to be nice. "Thank you, though. I appreciate it."

"If thou needest aught." He'd bowed and held something out to me: an appointment card from the PT clinic with his phone number written on the back. I turned it over and looked at his appointment time. Half an hour before mine. So he'd waited all that time for me to walk out of the clinic. Waiting to give me that card? The corners were damp and worn down like he'd been worrying it in his hand.

"Um, thank you," I said, but I'd put the card in my back pocket, thinking like hell was I ever going to call him.

In the condo, LaReigne and Loudon were having a shouting match while Marcus hid in the bedroom. As soon as I walked in, the fight turned into *Your fucking sister here all the time and she doesn't even pay rent!* Which was pretty goddamn rich coming from Loudon, who didn't pay rent, either. His parents paid for everything.

"Don't you talk that way about my sister!" LaReigne always said, and I'd end up offering to leave, even though there was no place for me to go. Sometimes I'd spend a night at my cousin Emma's, and sometimes with my high school buddy Shelton, but he was homeless about half the time, too. I always ended up back with LaReigne and Loudon.

The next week, I'd seen Gentry at PT again. Waiting for me. I didn't waste any energy pretending I didn't need a ride. After all,

that's why he was hanging around, and it saved me the trouble of getting LaReigne to pick me up. The week after that, Gentry had started taking me to my appointments, waiting while I did PT, and then taking me home. By then he wasn't even doing PT anymore, and I felt like a mooch. Not that I wasn't used to feeling like a mooch, but I was always trying to start over being a better person. So I offered to buy him lunch before he took me home. I thought he'd relax, and I'd feel better about the whole situation. Except we didn't talk much and he ended up paying for lunch.

Next week, same thing. Him sitting in the waiting room with his head down over a book, then lunch again. I forced myself to make small talk.

"Are you in school?"

"Nay, my lady."

"Where do you work?"

"I am a vassal of the Duke of Bombardier," he said.

"Wait. Bombardier?" I got the giggles, and even though it was probably wrong, I said, "Verily, thou doth build flying machines?"

Some little light went on in him. He smiled and looked at me. Just for a second.

"Yea, my lady. 'Tis my duty to rivet wings upon Learjets."

"So how did you hurt your shoulder?"

"I was wounded in a joust," he said.

"Really? Well, obviously, really." He said so little, and I only understood part of it, so right then I'd decided to take whatever he said at face value.

The day I was officially crutch free and brace free, I did a happy dance in the PT clinic parking lot. Gentry stood next to his truck, smiling, watching my little celebration. I didn't even think about

what I was doing. I was so happy to be walking again that I kissed him. Well, I tried to kiss him. He was so surprised that he pulled back from me like I'd tried to bite him. Maybe *surprised* was the wrong word. Horrified? I got into the truck cab and slammed the door, feeling totally embarrassed. For half a minute he stood there, with a blank look on his face, and then he walked around to the back of the truck.

I watched him in the side-view mirror having a whole conversation with himself. Talking, nodding, shaking his head, gesturing with his left hand, while he rested the right one on top of his head. After a few minutes of that, he came around and got in the truck. He cleared his throat, started the truck, cleared his throat again.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry about that. Just a misunderstanding. No big deal."

"Nay, my lady. Thy kiss offendeth me not."

I'd only tried to kiss him because it seemed like the next step to whatever was going on. I never understood romance, but I knew what it looked like from the outside well enough to fake it when I needed to. I'd faked almost my whole relationship with Nicholas, because I couldn't get ahead by myself on minimum wage.

Gentry, though, he was . . . I guess the word is *chivalrous*, but he wasn't romantic. That whole *my lady, thy servant* wasn't going to turn into *my lady, thy boyfriend*.

We drove to the condo without talking, and, when we got there, I figured that was the end of things. He came around to open the door for me, even though I didn't need help with my crutches anymore.

"When cometh again thy physic?" he said. My next appointment, he meant.

"It's okay. You don't have to keep taking me. It's only a few more weeks, and I can walk to the bus now."

"Nay. 'Tis my honor—"

“I know. It’s your honor to help me. But for how long? One of these days I’ll be all healed up.” I hoped that was true. I was counting on being able to get a job and get the hell out of Loudon’s house.

“For always, my lady,” Gentry said. When I didn’t respond to that, he asked me again about my next appointment, so I told him.

I didn’t try to kiss him again, and I didn’t suggest lunch anymore. He took me to PT; he took me home. We made polite small talk. *How farest thee? Good, how was your day?* I guess so we could feel friendly, even though we weren’t really friends.

Things got worse with Loudon and, at what turned out to be my last PT session, LaReigne texted me to say, *Do you have somewhere else you can stay tonight?* I didn’t.

Sitting in the truck, waiting for Gentry to go around to the driver’s side, I started to cry. My hip still hurt, and probably it always would, and I couldn’t afford the prescription for my pain meds, and I was homeless again.

“My lady,” Gentry said when he got in the truck. “Thou art unwell?”

“I just can’t go home right now. I guess you can take me . . .” To my mother’s house or my cousin Emma’s, because I didn’t have money for a motel. I texted Emma first, but she didn’t answer.

“If thou art willing, couldst come to my mother’s keep,” Gentry said.

That was how I’d ended up meeting his family.

Ranked in order of evilness and stupidity:

Vicky, his youngest sister. Hot Topic’s Number-One Customer. Typical teenager. Bad attitude about everything and under the impression that makeup is the great equalizer. Hint: it’s not.

Miranda, his mother. An overgrown teenager. She hadn’t looked old enough to be Gentry’s mother, and when I tried to shake her

hand, she giggled and just looked at me. I wasn't surprised her other kids had such terrible manners. It was more surprising that Gentry didn't.

Marla, his middle sister. Mean. Bone mean. Even at our shittiest petty teenage worst, LaReigne and I never talked to each other the way Marla talked to Vicky.

Brand, his younger brother. Two prison tattoos short of a hate crime, and about to be too old to be charged as a juvenile. He wore a Confederate flag T-shirt, which was such bullshit because Kansas was a free state.

"Oh, holy shit," Brand said when Gentry introduced me. "Dude got himself a real live girl."

"Plot twist," Vicky said. "Lady Zhorzha turns out to be a real person. I did not see that coming."

"I thought she'd look like a princess," Marla said. "And not a—"

"Are you going to get dinner?" Miranda said.

"If it thee liketh, my lady."

Gentry went on being polite, and they went on being assholes. It's not like I'm Miss Manners or anything, but I never ordered anybody around the way Gentry's family ordered him around. To take out the trash, while the rest of them sat on their asses watching TV. To go get them dinner, from fucking Taco Bell. To get up and refill Miranda's wineglass. To get Marla a different kind of hot sauce from the fridge.

While we ate, Marla and Vicky were texting on their phones, and then Marla looked up and said, "Can I go meet Lilah at the mall?"

Miranda shrugged and said, "I'm not driving you."

"Gentry will take me." They pronounced it *Gent-ree*. He pronounced it *Gen-tree*.

"I wanna go," Vicky said.

"You're not going."

“Mom!”

“Take your sister,” Miranda said.

“I fucking hate you, zit face,” Marla said to Vicky. Then she turned to Gentry, who still hadn’t finished eating in between all his other errands, and said, “Take me to the mall.”

“There’s this word you maybe haven’t heard of,” I said. “*Please.*”

“Fuck you, Lady Thunderthighs.”

“Oh, ow. My feelings.”

“Spew not thy venom on Lady Zhorzha,” Gentry said.

“*Spew not thy venom,*” Marla said in that shitty teenage voice.

“We should start buying lottery tickets, Marla,” I said. “If we win, I can get lipo on my thighs and you can get a plastic surgeon to fix your ugly nose.”

“Fuck you!” Marla started crying, but I didn’t feel even a little bit bad.

“You think you’re so much better than us,” Miranda said. “Just like Gentry. You’ve been looking down at us since you walked in here.”

I was a guest in her house, and on another day, I would’ve kept my mouth shut and made nice. My whole existence since I left home at sixteen was built on being polite to strangers, but I’d reached the end of the line that day. I stood up and put my backpack on.

“I don’t *think* I’m better than you. I *am* better than you,” I said. Then I felt bad. “I’m really sorry, Gentry.”

“Well, fuck you,” Brand said. “You’re nobody special, you bitch.”

“Nay, I may not,” Gentry had said to the person he sometimes talked to on his left. He clenched his hand into a fist. “Truly they aren’t queds, but they aren’t kin.”

“Oh my god, Little Lord Fauntleroy and his invisible friend,” Miranda said.

His own mother said that, and the rest of them laughed.

When I walked out, Gentry followed me. We stood in the street, him scratching the back of his neck with both hands. I didn't know him that well, but I knew that meant he was upset.

"It's okay," I said. "You don't need to worry about me. I can get the bus home." Anywhere was better than there. Even a homeless shelter. It wouldn't have been the first time I stayed in one.

"Nay, my lady."

He walked over and opened the passenger door on his truck for me. I don't even remember discussing it, just that Gentry drove us to a motel. I wasn't sure what it would mean for us to get a motel room together, because that stupid kiss was still hanging over me. Whatever happened, I decided, that was up to him. Once we were in the room, he knelt in front of me where I sat on the edge of the bed.

He took my hand—the first time he'd ever touched me—and he didn't seem too sure about how to hold it. I expected his hand to be sweaty. Nervous. But it was dry and steady.

"Lady Zhorzha, canst thou forgive me? I am shamed that my family was uncourteous to thee."

"It's okay. You don't get to choose your family." I squeezed his hand, to let him know I didn't take it personally, and maybe as an invitation to something else. He squeezed back for a second, and then he let go and stood up.

"I must leave thee," he said. "For I serve the Duke of Bombardier this night. I shall see thee in the morn."

He went and I stayed. Somewhere around one a.m., LaReigne called me, not to tell me I could come home, but to tell me Loudon had kicked her out and what should she do?

In the morning, when Gentry had come back, there I was with Marcus and LaReigne, camped out in a motel room he'd paid for. Even while I was trying to let Gentry off the hook, I was dragging him in deeper. Like I was quicksand, too.

It scared me, because of how awful his family was, and how he put up with it. *My lady, thy servant* started to look like an invitation to use him, and I was afraid I wasn't good enough to resist that temptation. I knew I had to walk away after I borrowed a thousand bucks from him to pay the deposit on an apartment for LaReigne, Marcus, and me. I had mooched off so many people over the years, and I couldn't bring myself to do it to him.

That was why I agreed to do the Trinidad run for Asher the first time. Money from waiting tables got spent as fast as I could make it, but I walked away from that first run with two thousand in cash. After Toby dropped me off, I sat out on the apartment building's steps, waiting for Gentry to show up, like he did most mornings. I hadn't talked to him since I borrowed the money, and I figured that would be the last time. I walked over to his truck and, when he rolled down the window, handed him the thousand dollars. I thanked him and said goodbye. Then I went inside.

Two minutes later, he knocked on the apartment door, and handed me the cash back.

"'Twas a present, my lady," he said.

I never tried to give him the money again. I used it to buy the piece-of-shit car that was still getting me from one lousy waitress-ing job to another.

After that, I thought he would go his way, and I'd go mine. We'd never had a relationship or anything, but apparently we had something, because he kept coming around. He never tried to talk to me, but he kept driving by the apartment and the restaurants where I worked. For a while, I worked at this Cantonese place, and Gentry started coming in and ordering food to go. Sometimes for a bunch of people—his shitty family, I guessed—but usually just for himself. After I left that job and went to work at a Mediterranean place, he started getting food from there. No matter where I

went, he eventually showed up and got takeout.

If I'd been afraid of him, I would have felt differently about the whole thing, but he'd never said or done anything that seemed threatening. He'd only touched me that one time, and he'd never given me so much as a hard look. After a while, I got used to it. He became a fixture in my life. LaReigne started calling him *your stalker*, which stuck, even though I hated it. As in, "My car wouldn't start this morning, but your stalker jumped my battery."

"Maybe he'll start stalking you," I said.

"Please. He was all business. Didn't even try to flirt with me. He's in love with *you*."

She didn't believe me that we'd never had that kind of relationship, and I was sorry I'd let her joke about him. Yes, he was weird, but he'd rescued LaReigne, Marcus, and me, and never asked for anything in return.

Now he'd rescued me again, standing there in the middle of my mother's wrecked house, and all I could think of to say about him was "It's complicated."

CHAPTER 6

Dottie

My late husband was tall and handsome, the sort of man who draws women's attention everywhere he goes. Our girls both took after Leroy in their own way, LaReigne because she was beautiful and Zhorzha because she was tall. In fact, she was taller than her new boyfriend and both of the federal marshals who came to talk with us.

Mansur, who did most of the talking, was an older black man, quite stout around the middle. Smith, who didn't talk much, was a younger white man, wearing a suit like a bowl of oatmeal. They introduced themselves but didn't offer to shake hands. Not that Zhorzha gave any indication that would be acceptable. She stood there with her arms crossed over her chest, prickly as a cactus.

The marshals started out very polite, letting me know how concerned they were about finding LaReigne safe. They were polite until I started asking questions.

"There is very little information I can give out right now, because of our investigation and ongoing security issues at the facility," Mansur said.

"Well, goodness, I'm not asking you to tell me how they broke

out or where the secret tunnels are. Imagine!”

“The fact is, we didn’t come here to brief you. We’re hoping you might be able to tell us something about your daughter that will help us find her.”

“What do you think we can tell you?” Zhorzha said. “My mother just wants to know *something*. Is—is LaReigne alive?”

“We have no reason to suspect that she’s been harmed,” Mansur said.

“Well, thank you for that,” I said. Zhorzha snorted and turned her back on the marshals.

“Did she ever talk to you about the inmates she volunteered with?” Smith said.

“I asked her if it was safe,” I said. “These aren’t men like my husband. He was a good man. Of course, yes, he was involved in that robbery, but he was not a violent man.”

“Did she ever mention these men to you?” Smith asked. “Tague Barnwell. Conrad Ligett?”

“Which is the younger one? The handsome one?”

Zhorzha scowled at me, but with regards to LaReigne, it was certainly a valid question. She’d never been interested in homely men, and why should she be when she looked like that?

“Barnwell is in his thirties. Ligett is in his forties,” Mansur said. “I’m not sure I would describe either of them as handsome.”

“Well, Ligett is bald,” Smith said, which was at least useful information. I couldn’t imagine LaReigne falling in love with a bald man, and, after all, that’s what they were insinuating. Why would they question us unless they thought LaReigne was involved somehow? And why would LaReigne be involved unless there was a handsome man? That’s the kind of girl she was. She got that from me.

“Does the name *Craig Van Eck* ring any bells for you? He’s

serving a life sentence for murdering a police officer and his family,” Mansur said.

“Yes, he was a friend of my husband’s. He had flowers sent to me after Leroy passed away.” I’d never asked why Craig was in prison. He was Leroy’s friend; that was enough for me.

“What did these guys do? Barnwell and Ligett,” Zhorzha said. “Why were they in prison?”

“They’re both serving life sentences for that shooting at the Muslim student center five or six years ago.” Mansur looked at his notebook as though he needed to look that up, whereas I knew it perfectly well from watching the news. They’d mentioned it dozens of times.

“So the prison let her volunteer with murderers?” Zhorzha paced into the kitchen, and when she came back she stayed behind my chair, where I couldn’t see her. Her breathing sounded sniffly, like she was trying not to cry.

“Did she ever talk to you about these men?” Apparently that was the only thing Smith knew how to say.

“I recognize the name *Tague*. Not the other one,” Zhorzha said. “And she talked about a few of the volunteers. This woman named Molly. LaReigne stayed at her house a few times, when she had a headache and didn’t want to drive home at night. So you’re telling me you don’t know anything yet? Two prisoners can escape, and there’s no surveillance footage or anything?”

“Actually,” Mansur said. “We have surveillance footage. It shows your sister driving away with the escapees and the other volunteer.”

“So you at least know the make and model of the car they’re in?” I said.

“Ma’am, it was her own car. That’s one of the reasons we’d like to know if she ever talked about Barnwell or Ligett.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zhorzha said. “Yes, she knew

the one guy. Yes, she talked about him. That doesn't mean she helped him escape."

"Miss Trego, you understand, we have to follow all possible leads. There are—"

"That's fucking bullshit. Why aren't you out looking for my sister?"

"Zhorzha, there's no need for that kind of language," I said. "Don't be such a hothead." Just as she was about to open her mouth and spill out another heap of curses, the door to the garage opened, and Gentry came stomping into the room.

"My lady," he said. "These knaves outragen thee?"

"I'm fine. I just lost my temper," she said.

I'd thought it was charming at first, but it was really too much that he talked that way in front of the marshals. There was a time for that sort of thing, and this was not it. Still, he stood in between her and the marshals, looking uneasy but defensive. Zhorzha was overdue for a man who wanted to protect her.

"And who is this?" Mansur said.

"A friend of mine, who also doesn't know anything," she said.

The four of them stood in the middle of the living room, Zhorzha towering over the three men. She may have gotten her height from her father, but I don't know where she got her red hair or her temper.

"Mrs. Trego," Mansur said. "Like you, our goal is to get LaReigne back safely, and recapture two dangerous men. If you or your daughter think of anything that might be useful, and, obviously, if you hear from LaReigne, definitely give us a call. Here's my card." Instead of handing it to me, he tossed it onto the side table.

"We can show ourselves out," Smith said, but Gentry followed them to the door, and I heard him bolt it after them.

Once they were gone, Zhorzha went out to the garage and brought Marcus back inside.

“I think we’re going to go now,” she said. “Give Grandma a hug, buddy.”

“Who are all those people outside, Grandma?” he said, as he climbed up on my lap.

“Oh, some people who want to talk to me, but I don’t feel like talking to them right now.”

“Why not? When’s Mommy coming home?”

“Soon, sweetie,” I said, but it broke my heart to tell him that same old lie.

TITLES BY BRYN GREENWOOD
All the Ugly and Wonderful Things
Lie Lay Lain
Last Will

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