

## Bound by Fate

# Fresia Lotus

Contemporary Romance trilogy with a Dark edge:

*Web of Secrets*

*Web of Lies*

*Web of Choices*

Dark Romantasy trilogy with an Historical edge:

*Bound by Fate*

*Bound by War*

*Bound by Time*

# Bound by Fate

Fresia Lotus

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A Dark Romantasy  
with an Historical edge.

# Trigger warning

The best reading experience is achieved without going through this list beforehand. Check it only if you have specific sensitivities and want reassurance. *Or do read it, if you're the kind of BookTok reader who likes to approve the menu first.*

This novel contains scenes and themes intended for mature audiences. It includes:

- Intense emotional conflict

- Explicit sexual content

- Rough intimacy

- Dominant MMC

- Possessive MMC

- Touch her and die

- Age gap

- Manhandling

- Knife play

- Breath play

- Blood play

- Primal play

- Gun play

- Anal play

- Cutting

- Biting

- Public sex

- Voyeurism

- Trauma

Death  
Choking  
Murder  
Psychological manipulation  
Graphic violence  
War  
Injuries  
Car accident  
Scars  
Grief  
Survivor's guilt  
Mental health struggles  
Selfharm  
Captivity

*Please read with care.*





They warned me about the darkness.

They never told me it would  
speak my name.

# Playlist

*Romantic side of the story:*

Dangerous - Sleep Token

Provider - Sleep Token

Eternity - Alex Warren

Some say - Adam Ulanicki

Royalty - Livingston

Figure you out - Voilà

If I had you - Chris Grey

Fire On Fire - Sam Smith

Breathe - Mellina Tey

Morally Grey - April Jai

Dangerous - Limi

Only you - Ashanti

Making good love - Avant

Iris - Goo goo dolls

Still into you - Cyril & Mario

Going on - Henri PFR

The Author - Livingston

Rain - Sleep Token

Glow - Livingston

I need you - Liloyd

Tell her - Drayce

Lifetime - Chris Grey

Tell me it's you - Aaron Pierre & Tiffany Boone

Milele - Anika Noni Rose & Keith David

*Dark romance side of the story:*

Crave the Damage – Deathly Hours  
Beautiful Monster - Henri Werner & Raene  
Molly - Dre Tamashi  
Slide - Gonedark & Dre Tamashi  
Taste - Jake Daniels  
Bad Girl - Jake Daniels  
Pain - Jake Daniels  
Favorite - Isabel Larosa  
God is a weapon - Falling in reverse  
Envy - Chris grey  
Let the world burn - Chris Grey  
Cold blooded - Chris Grey  
Make the angels cry - Chris Grey  
I'd burn the world for you - Drayce  
Say I'm toxic - Drayce  
The vultures - Chris Grey & Plvtinum  
Just between us - Drayce  
On your knees - Drayce  
Die4me - Gonedark  
Lipstick - Gonedark  
Blood Oath - Henri Werner

Cravin' - Kendyle Paige

Femme fatale - Nikki Idol

Burning bridges - Josh Lambert

Fuck - Mandrazo, Seabrazy & Kyashqo

In the shadows you'll hear my voice – Kirra47

*Mental breakdown side of the story:*

Popular Monster - Falling in reverse

Last resort reimagined - Falling in reverse

Just pretend - Bad Omens

Pale Moonlight - Dayseeker

Lifeline - Beyond Awareness

Take me back to eden - Sleep Token

Look to Windward - Sleep Token

Sympathy - To Close To Touch

Hollywood's Bleeding Numb - Conor Maynard

The kill - Thirty seconds to mars

Cradles - Sub Urdan

Shattered - Trading Yesterday

Lost Ones - Chase McDaniel

Reaper - Braeker

Manic – Layto

I feel nothing – What are you hiding

*War side of the story:*

Fire queen - Filip Lackovic

Wolf brotherhood - Filip Lackovic

War - Phix

I'm Not Afraid - Tommee Profitt & Wondra

Play with fire - Sam Tinnesz

Rise - League of legends

Legends Are Made - Sam Tinnesz

Shadow - Livingston

Legends never die - Arcane

Castle - Halsey

You should see me in a crown - Billie Eilish

You've created a monster - Bohnes

Brother Betrayed - Kelvin Harrison Jr

*Historical side of the story:*

Warrior - Filip Lackovic

Warrior - Livingston

Elegant Places · Miniotto

Gravy beats - Mugen

Bardstep - Eric Veta

Swxr - White Hanami

Indigo - Sam Barber

Live like legends - Ruelle



# Prologue

## Cyriel

The storm outside is finished.

I heard it give up.

But my hands still shake.

I count to ten the way Mama showed me.

Because if I can be still—maybe nothing else will break.

Mama's voice hums softly in the dark, her lullaby drifting with the wind. She smells like rain and lavender, like the warm press of night. Her hand strokes my damp hair and she whispers that the shadows are just stories—just echoes of Papa's tales, sneaking into my dreams like they have somewhere to be.

'Tell me a good one,' I whisper, my voice trembling.

She lies down beside me, her hand warm over my heart.

'Once,' she says, 'there were two people who loved each other so deeply that the world itself opened to make space for them.'

'And they kissed?'

She smiles. 'They did. And their love was so strong that it left a mark—a path between worlds that only their bond could open. Those who came after could feel that path in their bones. They were called Bondborn.'

'Am I one?'

She doesn't answer. Instead, her eyes drift to the small wooden rattle resting on the table near the bed—Papa's gift from when I was born.

'Do you want your rattle tonight, little one? To keep you safe?'

I shake my head, pushing away the memory of needing it. 'I'm five now, Mama. I don't need baby stuff.'

She smiles softly, brushing a strand of hair from my face. 'No, I suppose you don't.'

Then she starts to sing, her voice low and soft.

*'When darkness falls and hope grows thin,*

*When rivers break and stars grow dim,*

*When night devours the morning sun,*

*Then comes the child, the only one.*

*Eyes of gray and heart of flame,*

*Born of love too strong to name.*

*With power to open, power to close—*

*A bridge between the worlds he knows.*

*A bond unbroken, fierce and true,*

*A spark of hope for me and you'*

Her voice fades as my eyes drift closed, safe in her arms.

Outside, the rain begins again—softer now, like the storm is waiting.

# Chapter 1

## Enna

If grief had a flavor, mine would taste like lukewarm coffee and too much waiting.

I wrap both hands around the mug anyway, anchoring to its weight like it might hold me together.

The windowpane hums faintly with morning heat. The garden beyond is already bright, heavy with the slow breath of June. Inside, the house is still. The kind of still that feels like it's listening.

Noah left for work an hour ago, and the clock's been ticking louder ever since—marking the hollow space he didn't fill when he kissed me goodbye.

I should be doing something useful. Working. Folding laundry. Answering the text from my mother asking again if we've considered IVF.

But instead, I stand barefoot on the cool kitchen tile, watching two birds fight over crumbs on the garden wall. One keeps flying back.

The other just waits.

We stopped talking about babies two months ago. Stopped trying a month before that. I still mark the days, though. Still wait to bleed. Still catch myself dreaming of names.

Today is day twenty-nine.

I close my eyes and breathe through the ache. Somewhere in my body, something soft stirs. Not pain, not hope. Just...

space.

Like part of me is preparing to be filled.

I move at last, placing the mug in the sink. The heat of it lingers on my palms. My phone buzzes on the counter.

It's Emily. *Don't forget your riding lesson today! He's a great instructor. I don't mind an older guy.* She added, with a winking emoji, of course. Emily never flirted without punctuation.

She sends a picture, and I almost laugh. Almost. The man has short blond hair and eyes like storms—blue, maybe. Or gray. Or the kind that change depending on the light.

My type is quiet. Steady. Familiar.

Someone who holds my hand while the doctor says he's sorry.

Still, I reply, *I'll be there. Just to make sure you stick to riding his horse, not the instructor.*

A beat later, my phone buzzes again. *Oh, let me live a little.* And she capped it off with the smirking devil emoji, like mischief was her love language.

I smile, but it doesn't reach my chest.

I can't remember the last time anything did.

Outside, the wind shifts—soft, breathless, almost sweet.

And something inside me wants to shift too.

## Chapter 2

### Enna

The stables smell like hay, leather, and the kind of dust that never really leaves your skin. Emily's horse, Sage, is on a break—recovering from an old tendon injury—and I've been paying her to ride him when she can't. But lately, there's a new addition to the barn. Cyriel.

He boarded his gelding, Arrow, here last month. A week ago, Emily asked if we could ride him. Cyriel said yes—and added that he teaches horseback archery. One-on-one lessons.

Of course Emily signed us up immediately. Normally it would've been her turn today and I'd be watching, but she said the vet was coming for Sage.

I tug my helmet strap tighter, even though I'm not sure why. My heart beats faster, like I'm bracing for something more than a ride. I've been riding since I was nine. I'm not afraid. But today, the pressure of the helmet feels necessary. Like armor.

Still, there's a flutter in my chest I can't blame on nerves. Or maybe I can. It's been a while since I let myself feel anything that wasn't numb or quietly aching.

'Enna?' Emily's voice carries across the paddock. 'He's over there. Bay gelding. Name's Arrow.'

I nod and head that way.

Arrow tosses his head as I approach, ears flicking. A man stands beside him, stroking him with a tenderness that

surprises me. Not all riders, especially not men, really care for their horses.

He doesn't look up right away.

He's tall. Solid. His blond hair is buzzed short, and there's a scruff of beard that softens the sharpness of his jaw. There's something about the way he moves—precise, grounded, alert—that tells me he's no stranger to discipline. Or restraint.

'This one's yours?' I ask, surprised by the note of curiosity in my voice.

'He belongs to no one. But yes—I take care of him.'

But even before he turns, I feel it.

A quiet, electric pull. The kind you don't notice until it's already there, coiled low in your stomach like heat.

Then he turns. And the moment his eyes meet mine, something inside me jolts.

I don't believe in fate. But I do believe in gravity. And right now, I feel like I'm falling.

'You're late,' he says.

'I'm always late.'

He lifts an eyebrow, as if weighing the truth in that.

'I'm Cyriel,' he says after a pause. 'Mount when you're ready. We ride quiet the first lap.'

He stays on foot, one hand on Arrow's rope halter as I settle into the saddle—or what should pass for one. For a moment, it looks like he's going to help me up—his weight shifts forward, hand lifting slightly—but then he stops himself. Steps back. Like he doesn't trust what might happen if he gets too close.

This might be the thinnest, smallest saddle I've ever ridden. Practically bareback.

New horse. Total contact saddle. A man I've never met.

It should feel strange.

But somehow, it feels like coming home.

I watch him without meaning to. My heart rises to a pitch I haven't felt in months—painfully familiar, dangerously sharp.

Underneath me, the horse turns his head toward my leg, nostrils flaring like he's checking in.

Cyriel doesn't flinch or shift. He just stands there—still and steady—until I find my seat.

Arrow's breath beneath me grounds me. But the man beside us?

He unsettles me in a way I don't yet have words for.

I glance his way. 'Have we met before?'

'No.'

His answer is too quick and his eyes say otherwise.

The rest of the lesson passes in near silence, broken only by the rhythm of hooves, the creak of leather, and the occasional low instruction from Cyriel.

'Loosen your hands.'

'Don't fight the rhythm.'

His voice is deep and unhurried, but every word lands somewhere in my spine.

I follow his lead, though I hate how aware I've become of everything—how my breath shortens when he walks a little closer, how my skin reacts when his gaze lingers too long.

*I'm married*, I remind myself. Happily, mostly.  
Still, something in me unfurls like a thread being pulled.  
'You've done this before,' he says finally.  
'Since I was nine.'  
He nods. 'You ride like someone who stopped enjoying it.'

I blink. 'Excuse me?'  
'Most people ride to feel free. You ride to stay in control.'  
I should bristle. Maybe I do. But he's not wrong.  
'Maybe I like control,' I say, trying for even.  
He studies me a beat longer. 'Maybe you miss letting go.'  
I look away, focusing on the line of trees beyond the fence.

He doesn't know me. Doesn't know what I've lost, or what I'm holding together with both hands.

But his words cling. Not unkind. Just... exact. Like he's been inside that ache too.

When the hour ends, I dismount, brushing a strand of hair from my face. Emily waves at me from across the barn, grinning like she's already asking for details.

'Same time next week?' Cyriel asks.

I meet his gaze. Something flickers there, gone before I can name it.

'I think so.'

He nods once and turns back to the horse. Like whatever just passed between us never happened.

But I feel it. All the way home, I feel it. Like a chord struck low, still vibrating in my bones. Warning that something inside me has shifted. And this time, it's not grief.



# Chapter 3

## Enna

Back home, I sit on the edge of the bathtub, peeling off my boots while the faucet fills. Hot water fogs the mirror before I even step in.

I don't soak long. Just enough to let the tension in my legs ease, and the heat soothe the place between my shoulders where stress always knots first.

But my mind keeps circling.

His voice.

His hands.

That look in his eyes.

The way something inside me leaned toward him, before I even saw his face.

I rinse off and wrap myself in a towel. In the mirror, my face looks the same.

But something's shifted beneath the skin. Like the current's changed course.

Noah's not home yet.

I take my time getting dressed. Comfortable clothes. Clean hair.

As if washing away the ride might wash away the thoughts that came with it.

It doesn't.

My phone lights up with a message from Emily. *Tell me everything. He's too hot to be that quiet.*

I stare at the screen for a long time before replying.

*He's... different.*

She texts back immediately.

*Good different or bad different?*

*Different different.* I type. Then delete it. *He's... intense.*  
*I felt like he could see right through me.*

Emily sends a row of flame emojis. Then another message follows. *Next time he teaches me, you should come. Make sure I don't kiss him or anything.*

I pause.

Something flickers. Sharp and unexpected. A twist in my chest I don't want to name.

It's ridiculous. Emily flirts with everyone. This is just her way. And yet—

*Sure.* I reply. *I'll keep you both in line.* But my fingers tighten around the phone.

It's not jealousy. Not exactly. More like something old and bruised waking up too fast.

Later, when Noah walks through the door and kisses my cheek, his lips are warm, but my skin doesn't spark.

All I can think about is a man who barely spoke—and still made something in me start to burn.

That night, I lie awake longer than I should.

Emily's words sit behind my ribs, stubborn and restless.

*Make sure I don't kiss him...*

I think about his eyes. The silence. The way my pulse knew him before I did.

I don't sleep until dawn.

# Chapter 4

## Cyriel

The girl with the storm in her chest is coming back. I feel it before she arrives, before I even open the gates or saddle my horse.

Some part of me always feels her now. Like an old ache stirring to life.

It's too early. I shouldn't feel anything. Not yet.

I promised myself I wouldn't fall. Not for her. Not for anyone.

Love makes men foolish. It makes them slow.

It cost my father everything.

I need to keep my distance. Take our steps small. Controlled.

Let it bloom slowly. Naturally.

Because I can't scare her away.

*Not before we kiss.*

The sun's low, casting long shadows through the pines.

I brush my hand over the reins, grounding myself in the texture, the weight of now.

Everything is too bright when she's near. Too sharp.

I've spent a lifetime preparing for the moment I'd find her.

I never expected it to feel like this.

Emily arrives first. Loud, as always.

She tosses a joke my way and makes a show of trying to impress me.

She's harmless. Curious.

I nod, give her the same instruction I give every student.

But my focus is already slipping.

Because then she steps into the light.

Enna.

She's wearing jeans and a loose jacket. Her hair's tied up like she didn't bother styling it—but I've never seen anything more deliberate.

Her eyes catch mine for half a second before she looks away.

As if she knows. As if she feels it too.

I keep my face still. Neutral. Controlled.

I help Emily up, hand her the reins, give her a few tips.

Then I cross to Enna, where she stands at the far side of the fence.

My voice drops low. 'Watching, or joining?'

She hesitates. Just for a breath. 'Watching.'

Of course. I nod and step back.

Let my body take over. My mind might be a mess, but the training is still there—every movement precise, every command even.

I learned this discipline in silence. Years spent alone preparing for a life I wasn't sure I'd ever get to live.

But when Enna shifts—when her fingers graze the top rail of the fence—my pulse skips.

Emily flirts again. Tosses a line about how she promised not to kiss the instructor.

Enna laughs, but it's too tight. The sound doesn't sit right.

*Is she jealous?*

The thought cracks something open inside me. Not just want. Recognition. It makes it harder to wait. Harder to follow the rules I made for myself long before I saw her face.

She doesn't know what she is. Who she is. But I do.

So I breathe through it. Count the seconds. Rein in every instinct.

Because if I move too fast—if I give myself away—I might lose her before I ever really get to have her.

# Chapter 5

## Enna

It's been three days since Emily's training, and I can't wait to see him again.

I tell myself it's just the excitement of learning something new—horseback archery.

But deep down, I know it's not about riding.

It's the way I feel around Cyriel. Like he's the center of a world I don't know yet.

Emily's been trading off her lessons with me. She takes Tuesdays. I take Fridays.

Cyriel never comments on the arrangement. Never looks surprised when I show up. But something in him shifts—quietly, almost imperceptibly—when I arrive.

I feel it in the air between us.

Charged.

*Waiting.*

I tell myself I'm here for the discipline. For the borrowed horse. For the space to think.

But I woke up thinking about him.

That alone should terrify me.

I met him a week ago, and still... something in my skin aches to be near him again.

Not in a romantic way.

Not like that.

Just—to understand the feeling.

To name it.

So I can control it.

But when I round the corner of the stables and hear his voice—low, even, commanding—

I forget what I came to name.

Cyriel stands beside his horse, muscles moving beneath his dark shirt as he tightens the cinch.

He looks like someone who could command a battlefield—tall, broad-shouldered, with that coiled stillness that only training can forge.

He doesn't look like he belongs to this time.

He looks like he was built for war.

And he's older than me. At least fifteen years, maybe more. I'm twenty-nine. He could be in his mid-forties.

But it's not the age that stretches the air between us. It's something else. Something unspoken.

He's teaching Emily again. She asked for my lesson, and I let her take it.

Now I'm not sure why I came. I lean against the fence, trying to look casual.

Emily laughs, tossing her head like she's in a shampoo commercial. It sounds forced.

Cyriel doesn't laugh back. Doesn't even smile.

He corrects her form with quiet precision, his hand hovering near her elbow but never touching.

Still, the way Emily flushes, I know she wishes he would.

I shouldn't care. But something sharp prickles in my chest, and I turn away like I'm just stretching.

'Didn't think you'd come again,' Emily calls out. 'Cyriel says I'm a natural.'

I nod, keeping my eyes on the saddle. 'You always are.'  
Cyriel looks at me then. Just one flick of his eyes. It hits like a match against dry bark. My stomach flips.

'Want to try next?' Emily asks.

I hesitate. He watches me. I shake my head.

'Just here for the view?' she teases, tossing a wink.

'I'm here to supervise,' I shoot back. 'Make sure you keep your promises.'

Cyriel arches a brow.

Emily grins. 'See? She still thinks I'll kiss you.'

He doesn't respond. But I swear, for just a breath, his eyes flicker to mine. Heat curls low in my throat.

The lesson continues.

I try not to stare. I fail.

I try to leave early. I don't.

When it's over, and Emily's busy rinsing her boots, Cyriel steps beside me.

'So I'll see you Tuesday then?'

He doesn't touch me. Doesn't stand too close.

But the question hangs between us like breath that hasn't been exhaled.

I nod. 'Yeah. Sure. But it'll be Emily riding again.'

And then I add, because I have to, 'It's fun to watch. It's a good escape. From the real world.'

His eyes search mine. 'Or maybe the real world's waiting to be remembered.'

My breath catches. But before I can respond, he's already walking away.

And all he says is, 'Make sure Emily doesn't steal all your



lessons.'

## Chapter 6

### Cyriel

I notice her laugh doesn't reach her eyes when Enna arrives on Tuesday.

Emily waves to me from across the field as she leads my horse into a trot, her posture off but eager. She tries hard. And yet there is no resonance. No pull. No echo.

Enna, on the other hand—

Her presence presses against the edge of my awareness like sunlight through a half-closed curtain. She hasn't spoken. Hasn't moved toward me. And still, I feel her. Like heat before lightning.

I glance up.

There. On the fence, arms folded, hair pulled back with that same careless effort that somehow looks deliberate. She watches like she's trying not to. Like she wishes she wasn't here, but couldn't stay away.

You shouldn't have come, I think. But gods, I'm glad you did.

The lesson ends. Emily swings down, flushed and breathless. She brushes past me with a lingering look I don't return. I hand her the reins and murmur a reminder about posture.

Then I turn to Enna.

'I want to show you something,' I say.

Her brow arches. 'I'm not riding, remember?'

'Who said anything about riding?'

I gesture for her to follow me to the far end of the field, where the targets stand against the morning light. I set down a short, curved bow and a slim quiver of arrows.

'Ever shoot before?'

She shakes her head. 'Just on a fairground game. Nothing real.'

'This is real.'

The words land heavier than I mean them to. I see it in the way her gaze sharpens, in how her hands tense slightly at her sides. Like something in her is afraid of how real this feels.

I pick up the quiver and hurl it around my back and step closer. 'Take your stance. Feet wide. Knees soft.'

She obeys, and I stand behind her. The line of her spine draws my attention, but I don't reach.

Not yet.

I hand her my bow. Her skintone attracting my eyes against the dark wood.

I pick an arrow from my back and offer it to her.

'Nock it on the right side of the bow,' I instruct. 'Above this point, string firm. You can hold the arrow in place at the front of the bow with your index finger curled around it, just make sure there's tension on the string.'

She tries to do what I just said, but the arrow keeps falling loose.

So I gently guide her fingers onto the string. Her hands are soft, unsure. The moment stretches. I step back.

'Good. Now draw it like this,' I demonstrate next to her. Not daring to touch her again. 'Slavic style. Fast. Precise. Let

your index finger steady the shaft—like you're shooting a finger gun.'

She draws. The arrow flies clumsy, slow, but forward.

'The speed's in the rhythm, not the strength.'

And I hand her a next arrow.

She nocks it, carefully and I try not to stare at her hands.

But fail.

It flies harder this time, but far off from the target.

'Again,' I say.

She does. Focused. Determined.

We repeat. My corrections lighten. Her confidence grows. When I nod approval, she smiles.

That smile hits like a crack in armor.

I close my eyes for a breath too long. Recenter.

'One more thing,' I say.

She lifts a brow. 'More?'

I nod. 'Yes. Stillness.' I keep my hand open in front of her so she can hand me my bow back. Put it around my back, the string over my chest.

I step into a wide stance—knees bent, hands low. 'Horse stance.'

I guide her posture. One hand grazing the front of her shoulder, the other the small of her back. Only for a second. Only enough.

'Place you hands in front of you, just in front your belly, palms facing to the earth.' I demonstrate and wait for her to follow my example.

'Now close your eyes.'

She hesitates, but I just close my eyes and go on.

'We're going to breathe in. And going to envision drawing the string. Feel the tension. Then let it go. And breath out.'

I hear her breathe in. And I try to remember to breathe myself. I fall in a bit after her.

'We do this until you feel your hands start moving away from each other breathing in and towards each other breathing out.'

She moves with me. Our breath synchronizes.

I repeat the exercise. More for myself as for her as I feel my attention slip towards her. 'Imagine the arrow. Draw as you rise. Let go as you fall.'

I open my eyes and watch her and I feel a pull on me, like there's a string from her center to mine.

Her lashes flutter. 'I can feel it.'

She reaches, not with hands but something deeper. Something old.

I step closer. Don't touch. Can't.

The bond stirs. God, it's really her.

I pull away before I can't hold back anymore.

'That will be all for today,' I say, voice tight.

She's still bathed in gold. Still. Quiet. Perfect.

And I want her. Damn, I want her.

'Next lesson's Friday,' I add. Casual. Controlled.

Then I walk away. Steady. Unshaken. At least on the outside.

\*\*\*

Back home, the walls feel too close.

I lay down the mats. Open the windows. The air smells like pine and summer dust.

I sit. Try to forget how she felt beside me. How something inside me shifted.

And how easy it would be to fall.

But I can't. I made myself a promise.

Love weakens. Love distracts.

It cost my father his life.

And I need my life. To cross. To finish this.

The ache hums just beneath my skin. A wound I can't let fester. I give in.

Just once. Just enough to reclaim focus.

Her face floods my thoughts. Her voice. Her scent. Her breath against mine. I let the fantasy rise—her hands in my hair, her mouth on my skin. Her body arching into mine.

It's wrong. It's reckless. And it's everything I want.

After, I lie in silence. Empty. Calmer.

Disciplined again. Not clean. But contained.

I gather what matters. The small wooden box under the bed. My father's map of Sunderra. His journal. The drawing of my tattoo. My knives. The weight of legacy.

I train until I break bark and breath. Until I'm nothing but will.

Then I study. Fire. Water. Blood. Bone.

Because when I cross—there will be no second chances.

The Queen might not remember my family.

*But I will remind her.*

And if Enna is truly the one?

Then I will protect her.

*Even from the part of me that longs to claim her.*

# Chapter 7

## Enna

Noah's hand finds my waist while I'm rinsing out the coffee pot. It's late, almost time for bed. He does it like he always does—without hesitation, like he belongs there. His palm settles against my hip, his thumb brushing a slow arc over the fabric of my T-shirt. He leans in, kisses the side of my neck, and lets his chin rest against my shoulder for a second too long.

'You smell like coffee and lavender,' he murmurs.

I smile, small and automatic. 'That's probably the detergent.'

'Then we're buying more of that detergent.'

He grins into my skin and says something about the neighbor's dog again, the one that barks at butterflies. It's sweet. Familiar. The kind of moment I used to wrap my mornings in.

I nod. Say something back. I think I even laugh.

But whatever I said, it doesn't stick.

What sticks is how easy it is to slip into routine.

And how far away I feel while doing it.

I think of the way I felt while breathing next to Cyriel this morning. Three more days and I'll feel alive again.

\*\*\*

Next morning, I sit on the edge of the bed with a heating pad pressed to my lower back, watching the light crawl across the



wooden floorboards. Noah's already left for work and I have the night shift today. I should be reading. Or folding laundry. Or texting Emily back.

Instead, I'm remembering the way it felt to breathe beside him. Cyriel.

How the silence didn't weigh—it lifted. How his breath aligned with mine so easily it felt choreographed. How my body recognized something before my brain had words for it.

He didn't say goodbye. Just, 'Next lesson's Friday.' Like it hadn't happened.

But something did. I felt it in my skin.

So why does it feel like he wasn't planning on another lesson. *Like he was ready to vanish from the earth.*

\*\*\*

That evening, I'm at the hospital. My binder is open in front of me, a screen glowing beside it with patient vitals, but I'm not really looking.

Officially, I'm a certified midwife. But here, in this hospital, it's the doctors who deliver. I monitor. I chart. I hold hands and offer comfort when I'm allowed to. And sometimes, I just sit here, waiting for someone else to be needed more than me.

Most of the time, I feel like a visitor in the very place I trained to belong.

Sometimes, that's a comfort. Other times, it makes me restless in a way I can't explain.

I usually feel calm in this quiet. But tonight, the stillness

makes me itch.

Nothing's wrong. And still—everything feels off.

My mind drifts to his hands again—his body, his silence, the way he made stillness feel like control instead of absence. I want to hold on to that image. Not to feel powerless beneath it, but to feel equal. Certain. Like I could command that kind of presence too.

Maybe I won't go back.

Maybe nothing happened.

*Not yet, anyway.*

But the next training is in two days.

And I can't stop checking the clock. It moves too slow.

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A day later, the silence stretches long enough that I almost believe he meant it—Next lesson's Friday. That he'll show up again like nothing's changed. Like I didn't feel what I felt.

I haven't heard from him yet. That's good. He hasn't cancelled.

Emily's message comes at the worst moment. I've just dried off from my evening shower, towel still knotted around my chest.

Emily texts. *He gave Arrow to me. Said he couldn't take him where he's going. He's leaving soon.*

I blink at the screen.

*He just gave his horse to you?*

I type it. Then I send it.

A few seconds later, the reply comes. *Yeah. He said Arrow needs someone steady. Someone who won't ride with*

*ghosts in their blood. His words, not mine.*

I type the words fast. My heart beating rapidly. *Why not sell him? He's worth something, right?*

Emily's answer comes in when I'm already in my pajamas. *Arrow's the kind of horse you don't sell. He's soft. Loyal. Responds to a whisper. Cyriel's trained him like he's part of himself. I don't think he could've handed him to a stranger.*

My fingers hover over the letters. I type. *Leaving where?* Then delete it. I type. *Why didn't he tell me?* Then delete that too.

In the end, I just stare at the message until my screen goes dark.

A strange ache settles under my ribs. Not just because he's leaving, but because he gave Arrow to *her*.

*Why not me?*

I know it's irrational. I haven't earned that kind of trust. But still—it stings.

Arrow was his. Gentle, powerful, trained with precision. Giving him away wasn't just a decision, it was a goodbye. And he gave that goodbye to Emily.

Not me.

He must've told her when she was taking care of her horse Sage yesterday. He probably talked to her with that calm finality he wears like armor.

I keep replaying his voice in my head. The last words he said to me.

*Next lesson's Friday.*

Did he mean it? Was it just habit? Or was he already

planning to disappear?

That night, Noah pulls me toward him in bed, warm and gentle and certain. His fingers slide beneath the hem of my shirt like he's done a hundred times before. I let him.

He kisses my collarbone, slow and familiar, like he's reading a language we both helped write. His hands are reverent. Loving. Safe.

I want to be here. I do.

But while his body presses close, my mind drifts.

It's not Noah's fault. It never has been.

He whispers my name, brushes my hair back, rests his forehead against mine. His breath is steady. He waits, patient, giving me space.

I kiss him. Try to mean it. Try to pull myself into the moment.

But when I close my eyes—

I don't see Noah.

I see hands that haven't touched me. A voice that barely said a word. Breath and stillness and control wrapped so tightly I could barely think.

I feel guilty for the ache that follows.

It's wrong.

It's wrong, and I can't stop.

Maybe I shouldn't go tomorrow. He probably just forgot to cancel our lesson.

But what if he didn't and wanted to see me one more time?

Maybe I'll go, *just to say goodbye...*

# Chapter 8

## Enna

The parking lot is half empty when I pull in. The sun's not even high yet, and already my palms are slick against the steering wheel. I sit with the engine ticking, like the car might tell me what to do.

I wasn't supposed to come.

That was the plan. Stay home. Let it fade. Let him go.

But I couldn't shake the sound of his voice—*Next lesson's Friday*—it carried the edge of a command, not an invitation.

So now I'm here, heart racing, stomach twisted, and I don't even know if he'll show.

I press my forehead to the steering wheel and exhale slowly.

What am I doing? Saying goodbye. That's what I told myself. But it's not true. Not really.

I get out of the car before I can talk myself into leaving. The air is sharp with the scent of grass, morning dew, and horse sweat. Familiar in a way that curls under my skin. Too familiar.

I follow the paddock fence, scanning the vast track system that curves around hillocks and cuts through tall grass fields. The place is quiet, too quiet, and it takes me longer than I want to admit to realize I'm looking for movement that isn't there.

No Arrow. No Cyriel.

Just swaying grasses and the distant shapes of the herd, scattered and grazing.

I check the corners, the slope near the creek, even the long stretch of shade where the horses sometimes nap in clusters.

Nothing.

My chest tightens. Maybe he already left. Maybe he didn't mean it—*same time next week*—or maybe he did, and this was the most merciful way to break it.

Still, I keep walking. I just need to know for sure.

I follow the track as the horses would. I see the herd on one of the meadows. They open a field of grass almost every day in spring and summer; and everything is connected through tracks. I walk past a big open stable they normally use for shelter and shadow. It's empty. I pass one of the multiple hay-points, but clearly the horses choose grass right now. Arrow must be somewhere over there, and I march forward to make sure he's still part of the herd. A quick scan of the field tells me Cyriel isn't here. Maybe that's a good thing. But I hope he's still coming, and he'll probably check on Arrow when he does stop by.

They barely glance up, but I see they noticed me in small ways. Some have an eye on me, others an ear turning toward me. They think I'm safe enough to keep grazing, but stay alert in case I request space.

I move through the herd like I'm one of them, weaving between sleek bodies and flicking tails, making sure I acknowledge their personal space. No need to enter it, as I'm not in a hurry and don't want to disrupt the peace. An

assertive chestnut moves toward me, curious. I hold my hands up slightly, palm toward him as if to say, I'm not here for you. A gentle but clear don't come closer. He stops and looks away. I go further and look for Arrow, but don't see him yet. A gray mare watches me, ears swiveling as I pass and breezes before she turns and walks farther away to graze. The ground is dry and the grass short here. The air is thick with the earthy scent of horse sweat and a dusty track nearby. And then I see Arrow, at the end of the meadow, more uphill where the grass is just a tad longer. Sage is with him, Emily's mare.

I walk up to Arrow until he lifts his head. Then I stop and nod. 'Hey, boy,' I murmur. He goes back to grazing, so I continue toward him. His focus partly on me, partly on the grass. When I'm at arm's reach, I put my hand out slow and he steps in one step to sniff my knuckles. I feel his warm breath brushing across my skin. I don't stroke him on his head—that would be intrusive and dominant—instead I move toward his shoulder and stroke just behind his mane. In a soft and gentle way, with a flat hand to soothe him. Or am I soothing myself because I didn't find what I was really looking for? Arrow's calmness seeps into me like warmth I didn't know I needed.

Then I hear a voice—*his voice*, 'You're good with them.' I glance left, startled.

Cyriel is crouched near the fence, maybe five or six meters off, one knee bent, the other foot planted, arms resting loosely on his thighs. A black watch on his wrist. A bow is strapped across his back, the quiver beside it. A black satchel

hangs low on his other side, worn and strapped tight against his ribs—the kind you carry when you’re not planning to return. His shirt—dark green and fitted—clings to his back where the strap of the satchel crosses over one shoulder and down. He wears dark jeans, dusty at the knees, like he’s been here for a while. He’s not pacing. Not hiding. Just... watching. His posture is coiled, like he’s halfway between readying to move and refusing to. As if he’s not sure if he should run, or stay perfectly still.

I start to move toward him. His eyes stay on me the entire time, unreadable.

I don’t know how close to get. There’s no line drawn for me—not with him. But there must be one, somewhere, so I force myself to stop a pace away, even though every part of me wants to keep going.

As I slow, his hand lowers toward the grass, fingers grazing the blades like he’s grounding himself. Not bracing. Just anchoring.

Then he rises—slowly. Like he’s shedding stillness, not breaking it. He doesn’t rush it. Just unfolds, steady and sure, until he’s standing right in front of me. Looking down. One breath, one arm’s length between us.

‘Emily told me you’re leaving,’ I say. It comes out sharper than I meant, accusation bleeding in before I can stop it.

He exhales slowly, like he’s been carrying that possibility in his chest all morning.

‘I think I am,’ he says. There’s something in his voice—uncertainty. Or is it *longing*?

He holds my gaze with ease. Not slipping to my revealing