

Chapter One

She didn't want to die.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Gemma had no idea where she was. Her head was fuzzy, and she couldn't think.

She slapped some branches out of her way, running as fast as she could.

Darting between some trees, she ignored the pain in her bare feet. She'd stepped on something, and cut herself. Where were her shoes? Panic and fear hit her like bricks.

She had no shoes on.

She didn't know where she was.

And someone—several someones—were chasing her.

Air sawed in and out of her lungs. She looked around. Nothing but trees as far as she could see. She sagged briefly against a tree trunk, trying to catch her breath. Trying to think.

In the distance, she heard shouts.

They were looking for her.

Hunting her.

Fighting back a sob, she pushed off the rough bark and kept running.

"I'm not going to die." She bit her lip. "I'm *not* going to die."

Her head throbbed with every beat of her heart. She couldn't remember anything. It was like

there was fog wrapped around her memories, filling her head, obscuring her thoughts. And she was so thirsty.

More shouts.

Keep moving, Gemma.

She had to find a way out of these trees. No one would be coming to help her. She frowned.

Her family...

God, she couldn't remember them. Why was she so sure they wouldn't be looking for her?

Suddenly, she tripped and slammed into the ground. The air rushed out of her lungs, and she whimpered.

Despair wrapped around her like rope.

She was so alone.

"Get up, Gemma." She pressed her hands to the rotting leaves on the damp ground. "Get up."

She pushed to her feet, and the world swam drunkenly. There were colored leaves all around her, which, if she wasn't running for her life, she'd think were gorgeous. She turned her head, trying to find a path, but everything became a whirl.

She sure wasn't in LA anymore. She rubbed her forehead. That was home. Her heart thumped against her chest. She should be in LA.

This damn forest wasn't home. Or were they woods? Wait, what was the difference between a forest and woods, anyway?

She bit back a whimper and shook her head. *Focus, Gemma.*

A twig snapped nearby.

Close.

Too close.

Her already laboring heart lodged in her throat, her pulse thundering in her ears. She took off running.

“She’s over here!” a man yelled.

No. *No.*

Fueled by fear, she ran faster. Branches hit her face and body, her breathing sawing in and out in frantic gasps. Running was not something she did often, she remembered that.

If she made it out of this, she’d swap a few yoga sessions and lattes for running and green smoothies.

All of a sudden, a man dressed in black appeared to her left from behind a tree.

She gasped. It was one of them. Black cargo pants, hard face, mean eyes.

“You have nowhere to go.” His voice sounded like gravel. “We’ll drag you back to the car, and I’ll make sure you don’t get free of your ropes again.”

Dizziness hit and Gemma bumped into a tree.

The man smiled. “The drug is still slowing you down. Just give up. You aren’t getting away.”

She stepped back, and a stick crunched under her bare foot.

She looked down. It was a decent-sized stick, with a sharp point on the end.

As her captor advanced, she crouched, and her fingers closed around the wood. She’d learned that you didn’t always get what you wanted from life, but the chances increased if you took action yourself.

When you fought for yourself.

With a grunt, she surged upward, swinging the stick.

Right into the asshole’s face.

“Fuck!”

He toppled backward, and Gemma leaped over him. She took off running again.

She didn't stop. She didn't look back.

Her heartbeat echoed in her head.

Run. Escape. Run.

She heard water running nearby and tilted her head. A river, maybe?

A gunshot echoed through the trees.

With a garbled cry, she took off like a sprinter. She raced through some more damn trees, then she tripped once again. She hit the ground hard.

Pain throbbing through her, she tried to regroup. Were they going to shoot her? Her vision swam, her fingers digging into the dirt.

She needed a plan, but her head was too heavy. It was too hard to think.

She was a baker, for God's sake. Her best skills were caramelizing sugar and making perfect macarons. Not self-defense or hand-to-hand combat.

Just keep moving.

That, she could manage.

Pushing to her feet, she took off at a jog. Her left leg hurt now, and she was half limping.

There were more gunshots, and she flinched. Raised voices echoed through the trees.

Were they getting closer?

A sob tried to escape her, but her chest was too tight, her heart was racing too fast.

"Found her trail," a man yelled. "This way!"

No. She bit her lip hard enough that she tasted blood, but she ignored it and pushed for more speed.

How much longer could she keep running?

Gemma shoved through some more trees...and came out at the edge of a river.

Oh, God.

One second the ground and trees were right there, and the next, her foot hit nothing but air.

She windmilled her arms, trying to stop her momentum. She had a brief moment to take in the tree-lined river and all the colorful leaves, then she was tumbling down the riverbank.

She might've screamed, she wasn't sure. Something hit her head, and pain exploded through her skull.

She hit the water. It was a shock of cold.

After that, there was nothing but blackness.

“Okay, you stay in the truck.” Boone Hendrix turned off the engine and pulled out his keys. “I won't be long.”

A low whine sounded from the seat beside him.

He turned to face his dog.

“I'll be quicker by myself. We only need a few things. If you come, you have to flirt with everyone and explore. I want to get home so we can maybe do a bit of fishing before it gets dark.”

Atlas, his German Shepherd, whined again and edged closer. He butted his head against Boone's side.

Boone let out a gusty sigh. “Fine.”

Atlas lifted his handsome head, his tail wagging.

“Manipulative, you are.” Boone opened the door and slid out. He held it as Atlas jumped down.

The German Shepherd was big, fit, and well-trained. He'd worked as a military dog until his handler had been killed in combat. Atlas hadn't coped well and couldn't go back to work.

Boone understood that feeling.

Atlas had come into his life just as Boone had left the military. When an Army friend had called, asking if he was interested in a dog, he'd said no. At the time, he hadn't been interested in anything.

But he sure as hell hadn't been able to let a dog—who'd served his country, no less—be put down.

So here he was, several years later, getting bossed around by the big furball. His boots crunched on the gravel as he walked toward the stone building that housed the local general store.

Haven, Vermont was tiny. It had one café, one hardware store, an auto shop, and the general store that sold a little bit of everything. That was about it. The best thing was that there weren't too many people, and there were no reasons for tourists to venture this way.

It was a pleasant fall afternoon. It wasn't too cold yet, but the evenings were starting to get chilly. Last night, Atlas had snuck into Boone's bed. Something the spoiled dog tended to do in winter.

Boone pushed open the door, and a bell rang. The store was filled with shelves. There was a display of some baskets up front by the counter, filled with local produce. This time of year, it was pumpkins and apples.

An older man sauntered out of the back room. "Boone. How ya doing?"

"Good, Frank. Just needed some bread and milk."

The man nodded.

“Is that Boone? Did he bring my one true love?” A woman bustled out, a frizz of gray curls around her makeup-free face.

“I thought I was your one and only true love,” Frank grumbled.

“Sure, sure.” May patted Frank’s arm absently as she skirted the counter. Her face lit up.

“There he is. Atlas. As handsome as ever.”

Boone’s dog bounded over to shamelessly lap up the pats and affection. Boone rolled his eyes and went to grab the things he needed. He set them on the counter as Frank rang them up.

“Boone, I baked some bran muffins today.” May held up a plate. “Want one?”

He didn’t need Frank’s quick head shake—out of view of his wife—as a warning. Boone had already learned that May was a terrible cook. Her baked goods might look okay, but they tasted horrible.

“No, thanks, May. I’m fine.”

“You can’t be watching your figure.” Her gaze scanned Boone’s body. “You haven’t got a lick of fat on you.”

He might’ve left the military, but he still did a few freelance jobs. It meant he had to keep in shape. He ran, worked out, and chopped a lot of wood. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when the demons didn’t let him sleep, swinging an axe was the only thing that helped.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” She grabbed a muffin. “Atlas, I bet you’d like a treat.”

Oh, Boone’s dog loved treats, but he wasn’t dumb. He’d learned his lesson as well.

Atlas quickly padded in behind Boone.

Coward. Boone rubbed the top of the dog’s head. “Ah, I fed him a little while ago.” He handed his credit card to Frank.

May huffed out a breath. “No one will humor an old woman.”

Frank grunted. “Everyone wants to keep their teeth and stomach lining intact.”

“Francis Harris.”

Frank circled the counter and slid an arm around his wife. “You have other skills. I didn’t marry you for your cooking.”

May’s wrinkled face softened.

“Which is lucky for you,” Frank continued. “Or you’d be an old spinster.”

May elbowed her husband.

“I’ll see you two later.” Boone grabbed the paper bag and headed out of the store.

He didn’t know many couples like Frank and May, committed for so long. They clearly loved each other, flaws and all. He knew relationships worked for some people, but he figured there had to be a whole hell of a lot of luck involved.

He reached his truck. Relationships weren’t for him. Opening up, trusting, sharing. No, he preferred being alone.

There’d be no one to see the jagged mess of his soul. To wake up with his nightmares. To look at him with confusion and pity.

Learn to like being alone, son. It’s the best advice I can give you.

His uncle’s voice echoed in his head. The old, cantankerous bastard had raised him after Boone’s parents had been killed when he was twelve. Uncle Ben had never married. He’d been a loner, through and through.

Boone whistled for Atlas, who was sniffing around the truck’s tires. The dog leaped inside.

Sliding in, Boone started the truck and headed for home.

As he drove down the winding road back to the farm, he took a moment to admire the leaves

and all the colors. He had to admit that he loved fall in Vermont. He turned onto his gravel driveway.

Beyond the drive there lay rolling, green fields, and patches of thick trees. He pulled up in front of the cabin.

There was a larger building farther down the driveway. He'd boarded up most of the windows to keep the critters out. The main house was too big for him, and needed a lot of renovation—new plumbing and electrical, to start. His uncle had never bothered with it after he'd bought the farm.

Boone climbed out and grabbed his shopping bag. Atlas leaped down and headed for the smaller groundskeeper's cabin. It was a one-bedroom, cozier and a lot more rustic. It had been Uncle Ben's place and now it was perfect for Boone. The structure also had a small loft that had once been where Boone had slept as a kid. Now, it was where he stored his books, but Atlas had also claimed it. His dog bed—that he didn't always use—dominated the space.

Boone passed the woodpile, eyeing his axe stuck in a log. Soon, he'd be lighting fires every night. He had plenty of logs split, but he always prepared extra, just in case.

Look at you. Farm, dog, firewood. You came home to your cozy farm, but the others didn't. Miles, Charlie, Julio. They had kids, wives, families.

You have nothing.

You should've died, not them.

The muscles in his jaw tightened. That ugly voice always whispered to him. Intruding when he least expected it.

Dragging in a deep breath, Boone opened the cabin door. He dropped the groceries in the kitchen and put the milk in the fridge.

The walls seemed to close in.

He'd just had a job in Louisiana recently, working personal protection for a wealthy businessman. He hadn't planned another one, but maybe he should.

"Fuck." He stomped out of the cabin. He had to get out.

Outside, the air was cool and fresh, and his pulse settled a little. He used the breathing techniques that he'd learned to calm himself down.

Scraping a hand through his hair, he whistled, and Atlas appeared. Like his dog knew, Atlas brushed against Boone's leg.

"There are a few hours of light left." He gave the dog's head a scratch. "How about we go fishing?"

Atlas gave a low woof.

Boone grabbed his fishing gear from the mudroom and headed for the river.