

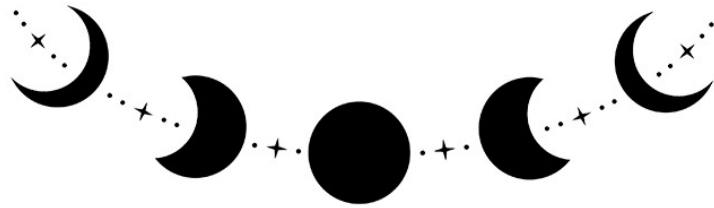


Words can be so pretty
And still have no meaning.
Why do we find such words appealing?
Empty, hollow, unfulfilling
But at the same time
Uplifting, sating, and important,
For a short while,
Incomplete again.

Some pour forth like a torrential rain,
Beautiful and cleansing,
Leaving behind a mess of mud
Shivering, cold, alone,
Damaged.

Whispered words are fleeting,
Meant for secrets or a lover's caress
But then they're gone on the wind.
Left behind are their scars,
Imprinted on the soul,
Too deep to see with the naked eye,
Too painful to bear repeating.
Unloved.

PROLOGUE



Her chest was pulled tight as her lungs begged for air. She'd been running for ages. The sun had set an hour ago, and she was in the middle of an unfamiliar forest with no recollection as to how she got there.

Pine branches snagged on her hair and shirt, while briars tore at the skin of her bare ankles. No matter what, she couldn't stop moving.

"Keep running, little rabbit!" The man's voice echoed through the trees. He was gaining on her. "I'll find you no matter where you go."

She hiccupped as a sob worked its way from her throat. It was difficult to discern where the voice of the man was coming from. Instinct was her

only guide.

The woman turned left through the thicket. The feeling that she was headed in the direction of home gave her a boost of energy. All she had to do was find the edge of the woods. There was bound to be a road...and with it, a way back to her family.

As if the universe heard her plea, a pair of lights flickered through the trees to her right. The road was so close. If she kept moving, she'd intercept the vehicle. Ignoring the full-body ache and onset of exhaustion, she pushed her aching body past its limitations and finally broke through the tree line.

Instead of a road, she came upon an open, grassy field. In the center, a large stone altar rested. Torches were placed at the head and the foot. Two figures dressed in black waited nearby.

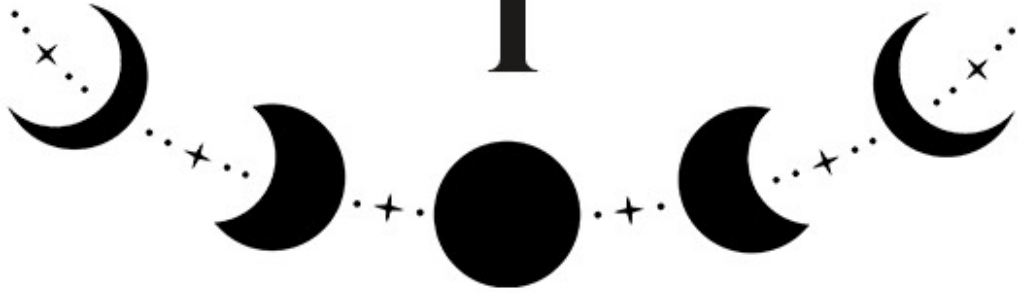
The woman skidded to a stop, then collapsed to the ground onto her hands and knees. Tears flowed in rivers down her cheeks. A wail of despair echoed through the trees as a pair of strong, calloused hands lifted her body. Her will to fight was gone.

The man tossed her across his shoulder and carried her toward the stones. When he hefted her body and dropped her onto the flat top, the back of her head bounced, causing her vision to blur.

Darkness pressed around her periphery as the cloaked figures closed in. They chanted in a language that turned her blood to ice. As her mind drifted into oblivion with only the thoughts of her family to keep her grounded, they, too, vanished until there was nothing left.

CHAPTER

I



BETH

“All packed and ready to go?” Tom asked as Beth zipped her backpack and placed it on the floor next to the bathroom door.

For Beth’s twenty-fifth birthday, Tom invited her along on his annual hiking and camping weekend with the guys. He’d been going to this place since middle school with his buddies. Every time Tom came back from one of his trips, Beth’s eyes would twinkle while he regaled her with stories of how beautiful the mountains and waterfalls were ‘this year’.

“Yep. That’s it, minus what we need in the morning.” She turned and wrapped her arms around Tom’s neck. His hands went to her hips, then slid around to her backside. He pulled her body flush against his. “How long until our reservation at the restaurant?”

“You sure you want to go out to eat?” He nuzzled Beth’s neck, nipping just below her ear. “We’re not going to have much alone time to celebrate your birthday once we get out on the trail.”

He pressed feather-light kisses into the corners of Beth’s mouth before brushing his lips over hers. The butterflies in her stomach became frenzied

as her body ignited with need. Her free hand cradled Tom's cheek as he deepened the kiss.

Excitement built in Beth's lower abdomen. When she and Tom were in high school, her parents had kept her too busy to date. She'd always had her eye on him, though. Now that they were married, she hoped the honeymoon phase would last forever. The chemistry they had was off the charts.

"Hmm." Beth broke for air, grasping at some sense of clarity. It was difficult to form sentences while Tom pushed all the right buttons. "Tempting, but we can't ditch our best friend."

"Grady will understand." Tom continued to convince her, kneading her backside while cupping her breast with his other hand. "He cancelled last minute anyway."

"What?" Beth pulled away from Tom and his head fell back in annoyance. "That's two weekends in a row he's dropped us."

"His dad's welding shop has been slammed. Louis talked Grady into helping out, even though he has his own orders to fill." Tom's features softened at seeing Beth's frown. "He's probably exhausted and catching up on sleep for this weekend."

"I hope so." Beth laid her head on Tom's chest and hugged him tight.

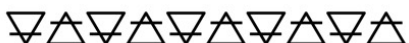
She and Grady's friendship had a rough start, but she was adamant about getting along with her then fiancée's best friend. It took a year and his mother's death for Grady to open up to her. Over the past year and a half, though, the three of them had become inseparable...for the most part.

"C'mon. We'll be late if we don't leave soon." Tom kissed the top of her head and pulled away.

"Wait." Beth grabbed his arm around his bicep. She stepped over to the bedroom door and eased it shut so her back was against the wood. "Cancel our reservation. We have other plans."

Beth pulled her shirt overhead and dropped it to the ground. Tom's eyes dilated; his hungry gaze swept over her exposed skin with appreciation and tenderness.

"I love you," he whispered before crashing his lips into hers.



Beth dreamt she was lying on the forest floor, watching the trees sway as the wind wove through them. Ancient pines, white oak, and red maple moved with quiet reverence; it was almost as if she were imposing on some intimate moment. The softly rustling leaves spoke a language she didn't understand while the rest of the woods stood silent and still.

Surrounded by moss and fallen leaves, the forest felt like home. Beth knew she'd never been in a place so beautiful, so rich. Digging her fingertips into the cool topsoil, she let out a contented sigh, her eyes fluttering shut as she inhaled the earthy aroma. Perfect serenity had found her, warming the core of her being.

Upon opening her eyes, the sunlight bathed the forest floor with its rays. Sitting upright, Beth found herself caught in one of those good stretches that left her feeling loose and relaxed. Humming in contentment, she stood and studied her surroundings. Beyond the tall trees, bundles of ferns, and a thicket of briars, Beth spotted a field of wildflowers. Compelled to go there, she began searching for an opening.

As Beth walked, the woods were cast in shadow, blocking out the sun's warmth. Her prior serenity fled, leaving the sense that someone was watching from the shadows. The pit of her stomach dropped. Heartbeat raced. Scanning the dark patches of the woods surrounding her, Beth hurried away from the eyes that bore holes into her flesh, seeking what lay beneath.

The shadows pressed in on her like wisps of smoke and an unnatural chill swept across her bare skin. Beth resisted the urge to hug herself and kept jogging. Not once did she glance over her shoulder, for fear the watcher in the woods was following. When her skin began to crawl, Beth picked up the pace; she needed to outrun the shadows. Tree limbs tugged at her clothes and whipped at her face like outstretched arms with sharp claws. The thought of the forest not wanting Beth to leave doubled her desperation to escape.

She spotted a lighted archway ahead. Shining like a beacon of hope: the entrance to her haven. Finding her second wind, Beth pumped her legs until her muscles burned. *Just a little farther.* A sudden sharp pain across her back made Beth falter for a split second, but she did not stop. Stopping would be giving up, and Beth was not a quitter.

She was closing in on the opening when something yanked her hair from behind, causing her to yelp in pain. Without looking, she fisted her

hair and yanked it back before diving through the archway. Tucking her arms and legs, Beth rolled when she landed, stopping on her back.

Lifting her head, Beth glanced over her heaving chest at the arch. A blanket of darkness swirled on the other side as if stopped by an invisible force. Two oval-shaped dark embers glared back at her. Beth blinked away the sweat dripping into her eyes. They were gone, taking the ill-natured murkiness with it.

When a quick survey of her immediate surroundings yielded no further threats, Beth's body slumped to the ground. She laughed in relief and stared up at the cornflower sky. The sun's warmth seemed to welcome her while she rested.

As soon as her breathing returned to normal, Beth pushed herself to stand despite her protesting calves. Even with the pain her body was in, it didn't distract from the sight before her. The wildflower field was a blanket of dark blue bachelor's buttons, white Shasta daisies, and gradients of pink and purple larkspur dancing with the gentle breeze. Their perfume was sweeter than anything she'd found in a store.

Wandering to the center, Beth squinted against the sunlight while the palms of her hands brushed over the tops of the soft, tall grass. Her injuries had been completely forgotten and the muscles in her shoulders relaxed as she meandered through the lush flora. It was as if time had no bearing here. The weather was the perfect balance of sunny and warm without blistering her skin. It reminded her of the Spring Break trips to Fort Polaski her parents took her on during her elementary years.

As she beheld the wonders of such a mysterious place, she noticed twin cabins on the other side of the clearing. They were too far away to make out any details besides the white chink mudding sandwiched between the wood logs. Beth wished she had a hideaway like this.

She continued toward the cabins, intent on exploring more, but her footsteps started to slow, each one like trudging through mud. The dream swirled to a gray mist, replaced by a familiar warmth and the scent of orange and cedarwood.

"Happy birthday, beautiful," Tom whispered as he swept a strand of Beth's dark honey-colored hair out of her face, waking her from her dream.

"Good morning to you, too," she groaned while managing a smile. "What time is it?"

“Time to wake up, sleepyhead,” Tom replied as he traced her jawline to her chin and down the front of her neck.

Beth’s arm shot out toward the nightstand, feeling around for her cell phone. Her fingers grazed the cold rectangular device before grasping it and bringing it to her face. Squinting, she read the time. “Six-thirty.”

Tom was grinning ear to ear as Beth shot up in bed and exclaimed, “It’s today!”

She kissed his cheek and tried to jump out of bed, but Tom hugged her by the waist and pulled her back down, kissing her deeply. Playfully pushing him away, Beth put her hand over her mouth. “I’ve got morning breath,” she giggled, taking in the handsome visage of the man before her.

Tom’s grey eyes were like an intense summer storm, ringed with the tiniest bits of blue. His face was rugged and masculine, with a chiseled chin that had a dimple she loved to kiss. He always threatened to grow a beard to hide his self-proclaimed ‘butt-chin,’ but Beth always protested and changed the subject by playing with his soft, dark blonde hair. Tom loved it when she played with his hair, so she used this tactic for getting kisses on demand. This man was the love of her life. She admired his optimistic outlook on life and appreciated his fierce loyalty. Despite his controlling nature, she could only name one other person who even came close to his goodness.

“I don’t mind.” Tom smiled sincerely. “Besides, I love every part of you.”

Each word came with another kiss on the lips, cheek, neck, and chest, ending with a raspberry on her stomach. Beth let out a raucous laugh. “Now,” he said, with one last kiss on her forehead, “let’s get out of bed before we spend the next hour getting into trouble.”

After brushing their teeth, the two rushed downstairs to make coffee and start on breakfast. Most of their stuff had been packed into the hatchback last night; they were ready to go, save for their toothbrushes, rechargeable batteries, and the more perishable food items. Beth didn’t want to waste much time. She was in a hurry to go where the boys bonded every year, to see for herself the allure of this enchanted forest.



Tom locked up the apartment while Beth waited in the car. Flashing her his pearly whites, he bounced over to the open driver’s side door. “Ready for a weekend outdoors, birthday girl?”

“Yes, please!” she beamed, practically buzzing with excitement.

Turning over the engine, Tom wiggled his eyebrows, and then they were off. This woman meant the world to him. If Beth asked him to fly her to the moon, he would build a rocket ship himself. He had almost always felt this way about her.

They both grew up in Mayes Hill, and Tom started crushing on Beth in the sixth grade when she beat him at dodgeball. The last two on the court, Tom threw the ball hard enough to knock her out. To his surprise, Beth caught it, hurling it right back for the knockout. He had been too stunned to react in time.

Unfortunately, Beth never noticed Tom until their first year in college. Both of them majored in education — Beth in early education, specializing in math, and Tom in middle-school history — so they had many classes together. Halfway through the first semester, he finally worked up the nerve to ask Beth on a date. One date turned into two and soon they were going out every Friday night and dated through college.

Tom knew Beth was special after their first date. She was smart, witty, and had a great body. Then there were her amazing eyes. Green like spring ferns, they darkened with her mood. Once Tom learned that they shared a love of the outdoors, he knew they were meant for each other. Even though she was the most stubborn person he’d met, Beth was the embodiment of perfection in his eyes. They finally married this past January.

As they traveled toward the Tennessee-North Carolina border, he squeezed her hand lightly and glanced at her with a wide grin when she returned the affection. This trip was important to Beth. Tom was glad to have her company this time.

“I’ll be glad to be in the woods again,” Beth spoke, bringing him back to the present. “I hope Grady is well-rested, because I’m ready to hit the

trail.”

“Me, too.” Tom forced a half-smile. He had covered for Grady last night, but his best friend still hadn’t explained what was so important that he had to go out of town at the last minute.

“Good.” Beth turned to face him. “Speaking of hiking, it’s been years since we hung out with Paul and Jeff. They *are* coming this weekend, right?”

Her question threw him. Tom’s knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. Fighting the urge to grit his teeth, he opened his mouth in a fake yawn, unhinging his jaw before it locked.

“Uh, we’ll see. They’ve been so busy after university that we’ve barely spoken.”

Tom didn’t have the heart to tell Beth it would only be the three of them. He and Grady had been coming out here for the past three years by themselves, ever since having a bad falling out with Paul and Jeff years ago. He didn’t want to rehash that memory on his wife’s birthday weekend.

Forcing those memories back into their box, Tom focused on the road and the feeling of Beth’s warm hand in his. He stroked his thumb over her knuckles in a soothing circle. Beth used her cell phone’s Bluetooth to skip the song playing over the SUV’s speakers.

“We’re almost there,” Tom relayed as they passed mile marker twenty-five.

Beth let out a sigh and wiped her palm on her canvas shorts. “I’m looking forward to it, but I’m nervous.”

Tom stopped stroking Beth’s hand, bringing it to his lips. “I know it’s been a while since we’ve hiked, but there’s nothing to be nervous about, hon. We’ll go your speed, okay?”

“That’s not why I’m nervous,” Beth replied before chewing on her bottom lip. “It’s just...last night I had a dream. It was pretty intense. I guess I’m still on edge.” She huffed out a chuckle, letting out a slow breath.

“Want to talk about it?” Tom asked, side-eyeing her with raised eyebrows. He watched for their turn, not wanting to miss the unmarked gravel road.

Beth nodded and cleared her throat, pulling her hand away. Wringing her hands together in her lap, she began, “I was in a forest. And it was so beautiful, like what I would imagine my happy place to be. I didn’t want to leave.”

“Sounds nice so far,” Tom replied, half-joking as he made the right turn.

“Heh, yeah. That was before everything started to get dark. Then there was something watching me,” Beth continued, visibly shuddering at whatever she remembered.

As Tom pulled into the parking area, his stomach turned sick. Jeff Putnam and Paul Larson stood on either side of Grady. The scowl on his best friend’s face deepened when Tom made eye contact. Then, dismay flashed across Grady’s features at seeing Beth. This worried Tom enough, but the sinister smirk Paul wore confirmed his worst fears.

He almost turned the car around but couldn’t condemn Grady to doing this alone. Putting on his best mask of calmness, Tom steadied his breath and parked the hatchback. If Jeff and Paul were here, that could only mean one thing: he and Grady had to come up with a plan, or else the three of them wouldn’t make it out of these woods alive.