

CHAPTER 1

A MAN'S CURSE

COLE

A soft whimper sounded from the corner of the room. A flash of eyes followed. Eerily human in a way that made my mouth dry and sent a trickle of cold sweat down my spine. The image on the TV flickered casting blue light over the wood paneled walls of my living room. The narrator's smooth voice, speaking passionately about whales, was barely audible over the hammering of my heart. My chest rose and fell in uneven bursts as I tried to force air into my lungs. Lungs that seemed to have forgotten how to work.

The eyes blinked, watching me. "Come here, boy," I patted the couch and the black dog jumped into action. The soft clicking sound of his paws against the floor was something real, something to ground me. The familiar feeling of his weight against me pushed the nightmare back. Screams, gunfire—a song of the dead—faded. But the nightmare of blood, shadows and the men I'd failed lingered. It would never truly be gone—just pushed aside—until I shut my eyes again.

I tried to drown out the sounds still lingering in the back of my mind and concentrate on my breathing. Faceless men, their mouths open wide in silent screams flashed before my eyes whenever I blinked. Indistinct shadows of people I once knew.

It was always the same fucking dream that woke me up with a jolt, drenched in my own sweat.

With a groan, I slouched back into the couch, rubbing a hand over my face, wiping away the clammy dampness clinging to my skin as I tried to get rid of the icky feeling of fear that had haunted me for almost five years now.

The first two years were the worst, but I found ways to exhaust myself enough to get a few hours of dreamless sleep.

The human body could only go so long without sleep before either losing its mind or dying, so I came up with a system. It was anything but ideal and probably not very healthy, but it was the only thing that worked for me.

Boots, my black German Shepherd, started licking my arm as if he was trying to sooth me. My mother got him for me when I returned home from Afghanistan to keep me company. It took me a minute to get used to him, but she was right, and in a way, that dog saved me from completely losing it.

I had something to take care of. Someone who depended on my sanity. So, I got my shit together and raised that puppy to be my four-legged best friend. That dog knew me better than anyone. It was easier to be myself around him and not feel the constant pressure of being okay when I was not.

I took a deep breath and ruffled his floppy ears. “I’m okay,” I lied. It was one of those lies I kept telling myself and everybody else until I believed it. A white lie. Something I hoped would eventually become true.

Boots sat up, tilting his head to the side, his bushy tail wagging expectantly. “How about I get a cup of tea, and you get some breakfast before we go for a run?” I suggested, not sure if he understood more than the word ‘*breakfast*.’ As soon as it left my lips, he was off the couch and in

the kitchen, waiting impatiently in front of the container where I kept his kibble.

It was the crack of dawn, barely light outside. A little too early to feed him, but what the hell. His nights were just as short as mine.

I let him eat while I stepped outside with my steaming cup of tea, inhaling the clean air that always had a cleansing effect on me. It was like with one deep breath, I could wash away all the ickiness and tight knots in my body. Of course that was only momentarily, but it gave me hope that I would feel better in just a minute.

My nights usually bled into days, and it was hard to keep track of time. My routine was anything but normal, anything but healthy. I tried. But it was hard ever since I landed on US soil. Home. My body battered and bruised. My body had healed, but my mind never fully recovered.

I sipped the tea, letting it burn my tongue so my mind couldn't wander too far. I needed to stay in the moment and remind myself that I was alive and—all things considered—well.

The scent of wet soil and vibrant fauna filled my nose. It was peaceful out here. Life in Glasswater was slow, easy-going, and no one dared to ask too many questions. Most of them were curious about my time abroad, but now they knew better than to ask.

When I first came back, they just asked away, which was when my PTSD kicked in. Hard. It either ended in a panic attack or me yelling at people. After that, they learned to leave me alone.

Now they would just tell me that I had changed. No surprise there. I was eighteen when I left to join the army. I was a fucking idiot back then. A careless shithead with no idea how the world worked. For most of my

career, I enjoyed it. It gave me a purpose, but then, within a day, everything changed.

The man who came back from that hell was broken and ruined by his choices. Ruined by what life had put him through. In retrospect, I wish I could tell myself to stay home. Go to college. Become a lawyer or whatever my mother wanted me to be. Anything but join the Forces and let war ruin the person I could have been.

I rolled my shoulder to shake off the stiffness. Falling asleep on the couch always came with consequences, such as sore muscles and a stiff neck. I welcomed the pain. It reminded me I was still alive. God had given me a second chance at this weird little thing called life. I just didn't quite know what to do with it, but I was figuring it out one day at a time.

Leaving my mug outside on the porch, I headed back inside to change into my running gear. A morning run was the first step towards exhaustion in my daily routine. Aside from the obvious benefits, I enjoyed morning runs—the inherent peace of it, with most of the town still fast asleep. Step two was a long day's work.

I wasn't sure what it was about working at a carpentry shop. It was loud and anything but tranquil. But the harsh sounds of machines cutting and sanding wood didn't leave any room for phantom sound that haunted my sleep. The hard physical work sucked the energy right out of me so that by the end of the day, I could get my two—if I was lucky, three—hours of sleep.

I was grateful to Violet for hiring me. She gave me a shot despite the state I was in. My temper. The lashing out when the anxiety got the better of me. But she didn't give up on me. Violet set me straight and put me to

work. It was then I'd learned exhaustion helped with the insomnia and the frequent panic attacks.

I got better with time. Not good, but better.

The day passed quickly. I hadn't even noticed until someone yelled my name.

"Diver!" The voice was drowned out by the ear defenders I was wearing while working around the machines. It was a voice I had known for most of my life. Wylder Morris and I grew up together. Caused a lot of trouble, too. He'd been my friend for the longest time—my best friend. Hell, he was probably my only friend.

"Checked that thing on your wrist lately?" He pointed at the watch I'd inherited from my uncle just before my deployment. Despite being scratched and battered, it was still running. Like me. "Or did you simply forget how to tell the time?"

Being on time could be tricky. Especially when I was working. It was hard to explain, but since I didn't exactly live on a regular schedule, time was a fluid thing to me. There was no real end and no real beginning.

"I haven't." I took off the ear defenders and brushed the sawdust from my hands onto my already-dirty jeans. Wylder knew me well enough to come straight here instead of waiting for me to show up late, or not at all.

"No worries," he smiled while greeting me with the usual handshake. It was silly, but we started it when we were thirteen, and twenty-two years later, it was still a thing.

"I lost track of time. Let me change and I'll catch up with you in a minute."

"Don't take too long." He pointed his finger at me, walking backward before turning around and heading toward the bar only a few minutes away.

Almost everything in Glasswater was within walking distance. At least on Mainstreet. The convenience made Glasswater deeply attractive to tourists. From the town center you could easily reach all the hotspots. The Park, Mainstreet, with its quirky shops and cafes, the farmers' market, and of course the docks along with *Buster's Roadhouse*, which basically was just an old fishing hut Buster's great grandfather turned into a restaurant. It was one of the places where you could enjoy good food as well as the breathtaking view over the lake.

There were a couple of bars in Glasswater. *The Timberline Roundup* was geared up for tourists. They were attracted by the fun activities and didn't seem to notice the watered-down liquor.

However, the *Howling Oak Bar* was a place mostly locals hung out. It wasn't attractive to tourists, which made it attractive to us. Not that we hated the tourism around here. It kept the town running, but drunk tourists were a whole different story.

After I'd changed out of my work clothes, I made my way to the bar finding Wylder seated in our usual spot by the window. He liked to people watch, while I liked to drink. I tried not to, but sadly I have discovered that exhaustion combined with alcohol would enhance the chances of a dreamless night.

"How was your day?" he asked as I sat down opposite him.

"Same old," I shrugged, and he nodded. I could tell he wanted to talk about something, but didn't know where to start. It was the way he nodded his head, how his gaze shifted from me to his beer to the street outside. He was following a couple walking hand in hand as they passed the bar.

"What's up?" I asked, waving at the bartender for another round of the usual.

“Nothing much.” That was a lie. “Remember the house near the Honey Bee?” A very popular B&B by the lake. Not far from it was a rundown house that belonged to an old lady. She moved to a nursing home in her early sixties after she injured her hips and wasn’t able to take care of herself anymore. Even though she was no longer able to live in the house, she hadn’t wanted to sell it. Despite some very lucrative offers, Mrs. Mitcham just couldn’t bear to part with her home and the history it held for the many generations of her family that had lived there.

“I know the place,” I nodded.

“Apparently Mrs. Mitcham passed away some time ago. No children to inherit the house, so...” he trailed off.

“Oh? You want to buy the house?”

“Carolina loves it. She’s been talking about it ever since we met. How beautiful it was when she was a kid. How her grandmother knew Mrs. Mitcham. So, when I heard that she passed—bless her soul—I thought that maybe it was a sign.”

“I didn’t know you two were talking about moving in together. About time, if you ask me.”

“It is,” he agreed with a careful smile. There was more to it though.

“But? What’s wrong?” I chuckled just as my beer and shot arrived at our table. “You don’t want to move in together?”

“Of course I do. I mean, we live together anyway, so—” he shrugged. It was true. It wouldn’t make much of a difference.

“Uh-huh, but something is bothering you.”

“Well...” he trailed off for a moment, looking out of the window as if he was hoping for a distraction outside. “I did something,” he said without looking at me. I frowned, not entirely sure whether this would turn into a

confession or my best friend seeking advice. I would listen, but I wasn't sure my advice would count for much. I hadn't been in a proper relationship since before I was deployed. Not for a lack of trying, but they just didn't work.

"What did you do?" I asked when he didn't continue. Wylder leaned back and pulled out a small, velvet box from his jacket. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Probably," he sighed. "The thing's been burning a hole in my pocket since the moment I bought it. I thought I had this all planned out. I knew exactly how to do it, but now I'm just scared."

"Scared of what? She is perfect for you!"

"I know. It's just that she told me the other day that her friend is getting divorced, and talking about it made me nervous."

I looked at him as if he had lost his mind. There was no way he and Carolina would ever split. They loved each other. Wylder sighed and shrugged at me, just as the deputy sheriff passed our table and we both greeted him—as you did in a smalltown where everybody knew everybody.

"Don't look at me like that. I know I'm being stupid." He said as soon as the deputy sheriff was out of earshot.

"At least you admit it," I agreed. "Buy the house and marry her!"

"But—"

"No but! You know she'll say yes. She's been waiting for you to pop the question for at least two years now."

He grinned at that. "So, if I buy it..." he trailed off. "The house."

"Yes?" I waited for him to continue.

"It needs a lot of work."

“Ah,” I laughed and took a sip from my beer. “Is this the part where I come in?”

“Well,” he smirked, “I know you love to fix things. I’m not asking you to do this for free, but buying the house will put quite a dent in my finances. It’ll be okay, but adding a wedding to the equation might be a little bit too much to handle right now. So, if you would want to do me a favor and save me from living on the streets, I could use your help.”

“No problem. I’d love to. It’ll also get me out of getting you a wedding present.”

“It sure as hell would,” he laughed. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“It is no problem at all,” I said. He knew it wasn’t. I needed to keep busy, and fixing stuff was one of the things that gave me purpose again. I liked it.

“This is good, right? I’m doing the right thing?”

“Yes, buddy, you are. I can’t even remember a time you haven’t been with Carolina.”

Wylder nodded his head slowly, finally downing the whisky he’d been nursing. “I tried calling Savannah to ask her opinion on it, but she didn’t answer her phone.” One topic settled, he moved on to the next thing that was worrying him.

I’d not seen Savannah, his little sister, in years. She rarely visited Glasswater, and if she did, she was in and out within a heartbeat. Savannah had always been a wild child, the kind of kid you knew wouldn’t stay in a lazy small town like Glasswater. She wanted more, so eventually, she moved to Chicago. From what I’d heard, she was doing great in the big city, and it made sense. It suited her.

“What do you mean, she didn’t answer her phone? You can’t reach her at all?” I asked, with raised brows.

“She usually calls back, but she’s been acting strange lately. *If* I catch her, it’s for barely anytime at all. She doesn’t call back. She doesn’t really want to talk. It’s odd. You know how she loves to talk. I’m just a little worried about her. That’s all.”

“You think she’s in trouble?”

“I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling.” Despite the distance, Wylder and his little sister had always been close. “I wanted to tell her about the ring. She’d get all excited. I needed that, but—” he shook his head.

“She’ll call,” I reassured him. “Maybe she’s busy.”

“Maybe,” he sighed. “Wanna bet she won’t make it to the wedding?” he laughed, knowing his sister would find a reason not to come back home.

“Because she forgot what date?” I joked.

“Probably,” he laughed and reached for the shot I’d ordered. I watched him with raised brows.

“How worried are you?” I asked.

“Moderate,” he answered. “She’ll call!” It sounded like he needed to tell himself that in order to believe it. “Or I’ll just have to go to Chicago and get her. Then again, with how easily she gets distracted, she probably just forgot about me. I wouldn’t put it past her,” he chuckled. “It’ll be fine.”

If push came to shove, he would go and look for her. That was something I admired about him—his compassion for his family and friends. We drifted apart after school. He went on to be a veterinarian, and I became something else—a veteran of the United States Army. The second I set foot back on American soil, he was there for me as if none of us ever went away.

It was one of the many reasons why he was my best friend. He didn't care if I was too grumpy to talk to or if I was just sitting there staring into my beer, lost in my thoughts. He cared and did his best to be there for me when I needed him. Not that I was very good at accepting his help. Even so he wouldn't leave me alone. Wylder did everything in his power to help me. He made sure I got the job at Dumond Carpentry, and I even think he told my mother I needed a friend, resulting in her getting me Boots. He looked out for me when I couldn't, and I would always be grateful for that.

"So? When are you going to ask her?" I jerked my head at the velvet box in his hands.

"Soon," Wylder smiled. He always got that dreamy look in his eyes when he thought about his girl. "Crazy how time flies, huh? I feel like it was just yesterday when we tried to blow up fish in the lake. And now it's about buying houses, getting married, and starting a family of our own."

"Is it?" Not for me. I was the perfect bachelor, and I didn't see myself having a family anytime soon. Hell, I didn't even see myself with a woman. At least not one I could keep. I wasn't very good at letting people into my life. When all you had to offer someone was excuses, they didn't stick around for very long.

"You never think about it?" Wy asked, watching closely.

"Not really, no."

"Because you don't want it or because you're too dumb to date?"

"Both," I smirked. I still needed time to heal. To be the man who could make a woman happy. Someone who could give her everything she deserved and not just half-assed excuses as to why I didn't want to stay over,

or why I woke up screaming every other night. It was all or nothing for me, and right now, I didn't see any point in even trying.