

Chapter 16

ABBIE

"Is Ester being troublesome?" Clarice asks, wandering back over to the sink. She grabs a dish towel and starts drying the dishes on the rack, and Gannon grunts in answer and Clarice sighs.

"Well, since you are free then, Abbie, you might as well come into town with me," Clarice says, and I stop mid-bite.

"Is that allowed?" I ask her, shocked that I can leave the castle grounds.

"Yes, why wouldn't it be? You're not a prisoner here," Clarice laughs, shaking her head while I stare at her in confusion. Wait, I can leave the castle grounds? It makes no sense that rogue servants can come and go as they please.

"I am off for a few hours. I will come with you," Gannon says with a shrug, and Clarice looks at him, her eyes narrowing slightly. She lifts a finger, pointing it at him accusingly.

"You want to grocery shop with us?" Clarice asks, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Or you can give me the list, and I will take her," Gannon says, finishing the last bite of his sandwich before taking his plate to the sink. Clarice watches him for a second, then shrugs. "Works for me. I wanted to send Ester, but seeing as she is now preoccupied and you're willing, you can go with Abbie."

I watch as she retrieves a pen and paper; she scribbles on it and hands it to me before handing me a keycard. I have seen one before but never used one. Mrs. Daley usually sent us with a list into town but never gave us money. The townspeople would just take the list and bill her at the end of the month.

"Just grab these things. They weren't on the delivery," Clarice says with a sigh. She holds the list out to me, and I take the list and glance at her cursive writing, and gulp. I chew my lip, wondering if I should tell her I can't read it, yet I don't want to embarrass myself either. So I remain quiet, and I figure I can just ask the clerk at the store. I put the list in my apron pocket as Gannon walks off toward the doors then stops, waiting for me.

"Are you sure I can leave?" I whisper to Clarice, not wanting to get into trouble with the King.

"Gannon is with you. And as I said, you're not a prisoner here, Abbie. If you want to go to town, you only have to ask," Clarice says, confusing me further. Ask? Is it possible for me to request to leave too?

"Abbie," Gannon says, and I hurry over to him, not wanting to anger him. Gannon leads me out of the castle, and I follow a few steps behind him so I don't get in his way.

"I'm not walking. Come on. I will drive us," he says, gripping my arm and leading me to some garages at the back of the stables. He rummages in a small cupboard full of keys, finding the ones he is after and shutting it.

I pause, watching as he moves toward a car. It makes me nervous about getting into the car with him. Not that he has given me any reason to fear him. He's just... powerful and imposing. And Clarice knows where I am and who I am with, yet unease creeps over me at the thought of being in a confined space with the intimidating man.

He opens the driver's side door before glancing at me. "Abbie?" he says, and I chew my lip glancing at the doors we came through. He sighs, walking over to me.

"I don't bite," he says, grabbing my hand, but I pull away from him. His brows furrow. I know these sorts of niceties, and they always lead to some repayment or expectation.

I know that better than anyone. The butcher was kind at first, then he started stealing touches, then forcibly taking them. Until one day I refused to help him unload his truck. Mrs. Daley told me if I didn't assist him in the basement, she wouldn't let us eat. She promised us food if I just helped him. Panic courses through me. Is that why he is

being nice? Clarice said to steer clear of him, so I find it odd that he is trying to be near me. What are his intentions?

"I won't hurt you, come on," he says, stepping away and toward his car. He walks around the other side and opens the passenger door.

"Abbie, please get in the car," he says, and I glance at the roller doors leading in. My mind wandered to what my chances of escape were. Yet even I knew it would be pointless. If I upset him, what if that got Ivy in trouble? So I reluctantly did as he asked.

Gannon shuts the door behind me, and I jump at the bang. He walks around the other side of the car and climbs in.

I glance around his car to notice duct tape, rope, and some other equipment that makes my heart race faster. You idiot Abbie, I should have run. My fingers tremble as I reach for the door handle as he starts the car. My movement does not go unnoticed by the man, who quickly looks at me before following my gaze to the things on the floor. Gannon leans over, grabbing the crowbar from the footwell just as I click the door handle.

His hand falls on my knee, and my lip quivers as I look at him to find him staring at me.

"Sorry, I should have checked the car beforehand," he says, leaning down and snatching up the rest of the stuff in the footwell.

My hands tremble as he gathers the things in his arms before opening his door. "Just work equipment," he says, getting out and moving toward another car where he opens the back door. He tosses the stuff on the back floor while I try to calm my racing heart.

What kind of work did he do that requires duct tape, rope, and a bloody crowbar? Gannon climbs back into the car. Yet my hand is still on the door handle when he leans over, pulling my hand away that has a death grip on it. He sets my hand on my lap and quickly leans over closing my door properly.

"You spook easily," he mutters more to himself. I watch him as he clips in his seat belt and turns his attention back to the front. I fiddle with my fingers as he pulls out of the garage while playing with the radio.

"Do you like music?" he asks, and I nod, chewing on my fingernails. I know it is a terrible habit, but I find comfort in it while he finds a station he likes.

I stare out at the scenery as he drives. The drive to town is awkward and silent, and I hadn't noticed I had chewed one cuticle from my fingertip with my nervousness until Gannon stops the car and snatches the hand I am chewing on, which makes me jump. The man curses under his breath.

He growls, holding my hand up and examining it while I gasp at what I mindlessly have done, not realizing I had chewed it entirely down to the flesh beneath. He clicks his tongue and curses and reaches into the

glove box, where he pulls out a tissue. Gannon wraps it around my fingertip, firmly pressing down on it.

"You didn't feel that you had bitten it off?" he asks. Disapproval is evident on his face. I don't answer. I hardly feel pain, especially mediocre pain like that. It is merely a flesh wound, and it will heal quick enough.

He checks my finger, and it has stopped bleeding. So he pockets the bloody tissue and shakes his head. I watch as he glares out the window and goes to speak but then climbs out of the car. We've pulled up at some kind of general store. I quickly climb out of the car just as Gannon reaches my door. I step away from him immediately, and put some space between us.

"Have you got your list?" he asks, and I nod, pulling the folded piece of paper from my apron. He nods, walking ahead and opening the glass shop door. A bell sounds as we enter, and I see aisles of stock lining the store and a friendly enough-looking woman behind the counter. The woman says hello to Gannon and quickly waves him over.

"Hey, Leisha," he says, nudging me toward the aisles and passing me a basket. I take it while he wanders off to speak with the friendly clerk he seems to know. She is an older woman about Clarice's age.

I open the note Clarice had given me, glancing between the paper and the things on the shelves. I try to match the cursive writing to what is written on the products. However, after a few minutes, I still haven't found a single thing that matches her handwriting when I feel a

presence behind me. The warmth of his chest seeps into my back as he leans down behind me and peers over my shoulder at my empty basket.

"What are you doing?" he asks curiously. Heat floods my cheeks as I show him the list. He takes it, looks at it briefly, then peers down at me. My cheeks burn with humiliation, knowing I have to admit I can't read it. I avert my gaze to the back of the store.

"I... I can't read," I whisper to him.

"Pardon?" he questions as he leans closer. My entire body heats with embarrassment.

"I don't know how to read," I repeat, and Gannon seems taken aback as he stands.

"Why didn't you say so? I would have helped you," he whispers, taking my basket and grabbing my hand.

Gannon looks at the list before glancing around and dragging me to a different aisle. He reads each thing out, grabbing it from the shelf and placing it in the basket. He finds everything in a matter of minutes, and we are briskly walking back to the counter. The woman scans and bags everything and tells me the total.

I go to hand the woman the card when Gannon takes it from me and taps some small box on the counter. The woman behind the counter

smiles, and Gannon hands me the card before using his own to buy smokes while I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do next.

"We just have to go to one more store, then I will take you back to the castle," Gannon tells me, and I nod, gathering up the bags, but he swiftly takes them from my hands. I wave to the woman, and she smiles softly, saying goodbye as we walk out to the car.

Gannon loads everything into the trunk and then grabs my hand, and drags me across the road to some candy store.

"Liam likes licorice, so I might as well grab it while I am here," he tells me, and I nod, following him inside the store. A man stands behind the counter with a huge smile on his face. It is clear he knows Gannon, and Gannon knows the store.

Gannon leaves me near the counter and walks off toward the back of the store after the man tells him what he's looking for is in the back.

"Are you one of the new servants at the castle?" the man asks. I nod, chewing my lips as I look at the color display of candies when he holds a jar out to me. "Try these. I made these last night," he says, but I shake my head.

Mrs. Daley would get so angry if she found out I accepted candy, I think to myself before remembering she isn't here. Still, I can't bring myself to accept the offer. Thankfully, Gannon returns. The man frowns when I refuse him.

"Kyle has won awards for his candies. Try one," Gannon tells me, and I chew my lip before taking one of the sponging red clouds from the jar. It's covered in sugar and smells delicious. After popping it into my mouth, my mouth salivates from the explosion of flavor.

"Is it good?" the man asks. He seems genuinely interested if I like his candy or not. I nod, licking my lips, and Gannon chuckles.

"Here," he offers me another one, but I shake my head.

"No, thank you, I shouldn't," I tell him. The man named Kyle seems disappointed when Gannon sets the licorice on the counter.

"And the clouds," Gannon tells him. The man nods, bagging them in little paper bags while I wait. We leave the store and return to the car. I climb in while Gannon puts Liam's candy in the trunk. Only when he gets in the car, he drops the paper bag of candy clouds on my lap.

Before I have a chance to look at him, he speaks. "They're for you," he states, starting the car.

"No, you didn't have to," I tell him, trying to give them back, but he pushes the bag back toward me.

"I know I don't have to, Abbie. I wanted to. I can tell you liked them." His words confuse me. Did he expect something in return for them?

"No, I shouldn't," I tell him, and he looks at me confused.

"And why is that?" he asks, reversing out of his parking space. I don't answer. How can he ask that? His question is stupid. He knows why. Everyone knows why.

"You didn't answer," he says, navigating around the streets.

"Because I am a rogue!" I tell him.

"What has being a rogue got to do with candy?" he asks, his brows furrowing.

"Rogues don't deserve sweets. We should be grateful we're allowed to live," I find myself reciting Mrs. Daley's words before I can stop myself. Gannon growls, making me jump.

"Which twit told you that?" he demands. His anger startles me. I lift my hand when Gannon grabs it before I can chew on my thumbnail, not realizing I am about to do it.

"Eat the candy, Abbie," he says, then lets go of my hand. I offer him one.

"Will you try one?" I ask him, feeling odd eating them in front of him as he pulls into the castle grounds.

"Are they sour?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"You haven't tried them?"

"No, I mostly go for Liam's licorice," he answers as I dig one out of the bag for him and hold it out to him. Yet instead of taking it from me, he leans over, plucking it from my fingers with his lips. He sucks my fingers into his mouth with it before pulling back. I stare at him, shocked, when he laughs, sending me a wink. I chuckle, my face heating up as I laugh at his playfulness. He chews on it before swallowing it.

"It's very sugary," he says, licking the sugar from his lips. I offer him the bag, not wanting to lose my fingers, but he shakes his head. "No, you enjoy them," he says, pulling into the garage.