

## CHAPTER ONE

# Corrick

I've lost track of the days.

I should've kept track. Prisoners in the Hold used to scratch lines into the walls, though they rarely got more than five.

This feels like more than that.

A lot more.

The first burst of sunlight peeks between the trees that I can see from the bars of our cell. It's not really a *cell* at all, more of a cave set deep in the woods of whatever island we're on. We're a good distance from wherever the pirates live, because unless they come to us, we never hear them: no talking, no shouting, no sounds of life at all. The cave runs deep underground, until the light disappears and we can hear water, but the walls go too narrow, leaving us with no exit that way. Bars block the entrance, fixed and mortared into the stone. Lochlan and I spent our early days testing every bar, every joint, every hinge. But despite the salty sea air and

the rainstorms that drive us back below cover, the bars and mortar stand strong.

A well-constructed prison.

When I was locked in the Hold in Kandala, it felt like poetic justice.

It shouldn't feel like it now, but it does.

Footsteps crunch through the underbrush somewhere among the trees, but I don't sit up. This will be our breakfast.

I've stopped caring. I roll over and face the cave wall, pulling farther into the shadows.

The crunching stops, followed by a slide of metal against stone.

"Food, boys," a woman calls. It's Lina, one of Oren Crane's people. She whistles a few short notes, like we're caged dogs. "Come eat now."

I ignore her. I ignore all of them.

Lochlan doesn't say anything either. I wonder if he's asleep.

I don't care.

"Oren will be back soon," she says. "You'd best be ready. He'll have a plan for you, Wes. You want to keep that pretty head on your shoulders, you're going to do what he says."

Wes. The name tugs at me, reminding me of nights in the Wilds with Tessa. Her quiet smile, her quick hands, her gentle manner. Her intelligence. Her *bravery*. I fell in love with her by moonlight.

My heart clenches. I have to shove these thoughts away.

I can't be Weston Lark here. Wes was warm and kind and rarely had a harsh word for anyone.

If Weston Lark were real, he'd probably be dead already.

Weston Lark *was* dead already. I thought Tessa would never forgive me for it.

And now I'm sure she thinks I'm dead for a second time. Or is this the third? I've lost track.

I might as well be. I close my eyes.

Eventually, Lina gives up on our silence. Her feet crunch through the undergrowth again, and we're alone.

The scent of the food doesn't take long to reach me. Some kind of meat, and what smells like fresh-baked bread. They only feed us twice a day, so I should be starving, but I'm not. I stopped caring about food *days* ago. Birds chirp somewhere out in the trees, waking in the sunlight, but I burrow more deeply under my sparse blanket, pulling my jacket tightly against myself.

Not *my* jacket. *Harristan's* jacket.

I'll never see my brother again.

I try to shove this thought away too, but I'm not quick enough. My throat tightens and my eyes go hot. I hold my breath so I don't make a sound.

Maybe I'll hold it long enough that I'll suffocate and die.

"Hey."

Lochlan's voice. I ignore him, too.

"You need to eat," he calls.

A tear rolls out of my eye, making a path across my cheek.

I bite the side of my tongue until the pain chases away my emotion, and then I duck my face into the blanket and swipe the tear off.

The last time I cried, I was in a cell, too. I was on my knees, facing my brother.

"You didn't eat anything yesterday," Lochlan is saying. "Wes—you *need* to eat."

Wes. I hate that he calls me that. He started doing it when we

washed up onshore, so the pirates wouldn't know I was the prince, but the name reminds me too much of everything I've lost.

I have to duck my face into the blanket again.

"Hey." His voice is closer, right behind me. "Get up."

I don't want to get up. My throat is still tight and my eyes are hot and I want him to go away.

Lochlan pokes me in the shoulder. "*Get up. Eat.*"

I grit my teeth. "Leave me alone."

"No." He pokes me again. "Stop wallowing and get up."

"I'm not wallowing."

I am absolutely wallowing.

This time he tugs at my shoulder. "Stop being a baby," he says. "Get up, Wes."

"Stop calling me that."

"Fine." His voice drops, and it sounds like he's crouching behind me, leaning in. "Get up, *Corrick.*"

My given name sounds like an insult. "*Go away.*"

"No." He smacks me on the back of the head, *hard.*

It's so startling that I whip around, throwing the blanket back. I inhale to snap at him, but he's ready for it. He claps me on the ear like I'm a child, sending me sprawling a little. "That's right," he taunts. "*Move, Cory.*"

That does it. I growl and launch myself at him with enough force that he goes skidding into the dirt. I try to swing a fist, but he dodges most of my blows, and we roll, grappling for purchase, snarling with anger.

But he's right that I haven't been eating, and he's able to pin me to the ground a lot more easily than I'd like. He straddles my waist and puts an arm across my neck until it's hard to breathe, and he's bearing down on one arm so I can't swing at him anymore.

I have the pleasure of seeing blood on his lip, though. I strain against his hold and wonder if he'll break my neck.

He glares down at me, panting. "Lord, you fight like a wildcat. Are you ready to eat now?"

"Get off me," I grind out. Blood is bitter on my tongue.

"Breakfast?"

"Go to hell, Lochlan."

He leans close. His black hair hangs into his eyes, lank and filthy from our days locked in this cell. I'm sure I'm no better. "So this is all it would've taken to break the King's Justice?" he says. "A few days in a cage?"

I spit blood at him. "Eat shit."

"Well, that's not very princely." He reaches for something, and I try to take advantage of his moment of distraction to wrench free, but he's too quick. Lochlan grabs a fistful of my hair and twists it tight.

It's so sharp and unexpectedly painful that it pulls a yelp from my throat. I grab hold of his wrist, but his grip on my hair is too tight and I just hurt myself. "What the hell is *wrong* with—"

"Here." He holds a biscuit in front of my face. "Eat it and I'll let you go."

I stare at him like he's crazy.

He gives my hair another wrench. "*Eat*, you idiot!"

"Fine!" I bite into the biscuit and tear a piece free.

Lochlan looks at me like he's waiting to make sure I chew, so I do, glaring at him petulantly the whole time. It's not the *most* humiliating thing I've ever done, but it likely ranks among the top five.

"Good," he says. He finally lets go of my hair and climbs off me. I launch myself at him again *immediately*.

This time he ends up with a scrape down the side of his face, and he'll probably have a black eye by nightfall. Unfortunately, so will I. This struggle ends with me facedown and inhaling dirt, his knee in my back, his hand twisting my hair again.

He finds the biscuit where it fell, blows dirt off the edge, and holds it in front of my face. "Ready for more?"

I inhale to tell him something even less princely, but it's like the first bite of biscuit woke my stomach. I actually am hungry now.

"Let me up," I grind out. "I'll eat."

I expect him to force-feed me each bite anyway, but to my surprise, he lets me go. I gingerly rearrange my limbs until I'm sitting cross-legged, and I swipe the biscuit from his hand. I tear another piece free and chew, and suddenly it's all I can do to keep from shoving the whole thing in my mouth.

"Slow," Lochlan says. "It won't do either of us any good if you throw it all up."

"Shut up." I don't look at him. I shove hair back from my face and try to ignore the ache in my scalp from where he yanked.

But I force myself to take small bites, because he's right.

The sun has risen further, bright through the trees. It makes my head ache. I want to curl up in the corner again.

Lochlan rises to his knees, and I tense, ready for him to attack me again, but he just holds out a small steel cup of water. "You need to drink, too," he says.

I don't take it. "What do you care?"

"If you make me hold you down and pour it down your throat, we'll end up wasting half."

I glare back at him—but he's likely serious, so I take the cup, then take a sip.

I follow it with a longer swallow, because he was right about the

water, too. By the time I set down the cup, I'm looking for the rest of the food that Lina brought.

There are boiled eggs and roasted chicken legs and salted potatoes that have been cooked so long that the skin has gone crispy, the insides soft. Surprisingly good food for prisoners, but I suspect this is just whatever is left over from the food that Oren Crane's people prepare for themselves. I didn't get a *good* look at them in the darkness of that first night, but there were only ten of them on the beach, and it probably would've been more work to prepare us something less filling.

Lochlan sits across from me, eating his own. "And you were going to turn this down," he says, mildly chiding.

I keep my eyes on my food. I still haven't really looked at him. My pride is smarting from the way he pinned me to the ground and shoved a biscuit in my face. "You should've left me alone, and you could've had twice as much."

"I'm not watching you kill yourself."

That draws my gaze up. He's not looking at me either. His eyes are shadowed, his heavily freckled skin more tanned from our days on the *Dawn Chaser*. His sleeves are rolled back, revealing a dozen burn scars along his forearms, likely earned from working in the forges in Steel City. I broke his left wrist weeks ago, but he's long since lost the bandage he was wearing on the ship. It can't be fully healed yet, but it's not like we're getting any medical attention in this cell.

And he sure didn't have any trouble fighting me to the ground. I scowl and look back at my food.

"When we were desperate for medicine," Lochlan says quietly, "we had rules drilled into us. For . . . for when we were caught."

There's a note in his voice that draws my attention up again.

He tears a piece of chicken from the bone with his teeth. He's still not looking at me. "The most important one was to never stop eating. If food's put in front of you, you eat it. If water's there, you drink it. Wasting food only spites yourself. Being weak only helps your captors." He pauses, and his voice is grave. "If you're breathing, you're alive. If you're alive, there's still hope. Don't undo it on your own."

I stare at him.

He shrugs a little. "I should've made you eat yesterday. I forgot that a spoiled prince in the palace wouldn't have learned that lesson."

I should bristle, but I don't. He's right. I didn't learn that lesson.

I learned different ones.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're a funny one to lecture me about hope, Lochlan."

He tears another piece. "Well, I made it out of the Hold," he says slowly. "Then I made it off your stage, and that was with a hood over my head and a crossbow jabbed in my back." He shrugs. "I made it out of the Circle, when I thought your brother was going to have the army kill us all. And then I made it off that stupid ship." He looks up, his eyes a little fierce. "Still breathing."

I take a breath and tear a piece of my own chicken. I suppose he's got me there.

*Still breathing.*

Silence falls between us, and I don't like it. I'm rattled now, agitated. I don't know if it's the food or the fight, but I've woken up, and there's nowhere to go.

"What were the other rules?" I say.

"Always have fake names ready to offer, if you're questioned. If



you're running from the night patrol, grab a wheelbarrow and walk. No one stops someone with a wheelbarrow." He hesitates, and his eyes hold mine. "If you get close to the prince, use whatever you can to hurt him."

I drain my cup and pour more from the water skin. "Do you want to pull my hair again?" I say flatly.

"A little."

"What, are you six years old?" I demand. "Who fights like that?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

I scowl. He grins darkly and tears another piece of chicken.

My thoughts are turning clearer. The food really is helping. I feel less like crying and more like *doing* something. Unfortunately, we're still locked in a cell.

I have no idea how to get us out of here. Harristan won't know we're missing for *weeks*. Rian, formerly Captain Blakemore, and currently the king of Ostriary, likely thinks we're dead—if he cares at all. I don't know what Oren Crane will do with me, but he's not in power here. Even if I tell him who I really am, I don't think he'd trust me. And I don't think offering steel from Kandala would give him leverage. Not yet, anyway.

Then again, these pirates left us alive, so they must see *some* advantage to keeping us here.

*Oren will be back soon. He'll have a plan for you, Wes.*

I don't know what that plan could be. On the first night, I tried to fight Oren Crane. I tried to kill him. I tried to run.

He laughed in my face. Then he locked us in here.

I look at Lochlan again. He's the worst person I could be trapped with. I can name a hundred others who would be more convenient than a man who spends every hour of his life *hating* me.

Then again, he cut me loose on the ship when Rian had me tied to the mast. And he was smart enough to give me a false name in front of Oren Crane. I might be in a cell, but as far as the pirates are concerned, I'm just a servant. A potential source of information, nothing more.

A prince of Kandala would be a source of leverage. Against Harristan for sure—and potentially against Rian, too, considering what he needs. A political prisoner. Whatever the pirates do to Weston Lark, it's not going to be half as bad as what they could do with Prince Corrick—and I have Lochlan to thank for that.

I strip the last piece of chicken from the bone.

Lochlan made me eat, too.

*I'm not watching you kill yourself.*

No, it's more than that. I study him, trying to figure out his angle.

He peers at me from under a fall of hair. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he says.

"I'm trying to figure out why you care if I live or die."

He shrugs and says nothing.

"I was tied to a mast on the ship. You could've killed me and all your problems would've been over."

He spreads his hands, gesturing around the cell. "Really? You think so?"

Well, no. Maybe not. I sigh and turn my attention back to the food.

But then my hands go still. Lochlan once figured out that Prince Corrick and Weston Lark were the same person, and he was savvy enough to find my workshop in the Wilds. He trapped me and Tessa, then led a mob to attack me. And as much as I hate him, Lochlan was also smart enough to lead rebels into

the Royal Sector and imprison the consuls. That took strategy and planning.

He also spoke up for me on the ship, when I worried things were going to unravel with Rian. Things could have gone very poorly, and he saw a chance to help defuse the tension.

I remember sitting around a table in the palace during one of the few meetings between the rebels and the consuls that resulted from the attempt at revolution. Consul Sallister was speaking with nothing but disdain, while Lochlan was sitting there seething. On the ship, Lochlan confronted me about the way Sallister committed far more egregious crimes than Lochlan ever had, but the consul faced no penalties at all—just because he was a man of wealth and power. There was more to it than that, but at its base level, there was truth to it.

Everyone sat at that table and treated Lochlan like an uneducated fool. He was belligerent and angry, but now, looking back, I can't really blame him.

He wasn't a fool, though. We were, for underestimating him.

I can't imagine he wants me for an ally, but maybe he sees no other choice.

"We need to get back to Kandala," I say quietly. "But if we get out of this cage, I'm going for Tessa first. I'm not going back without her."

"Me too. Karri would never forgive me if I left her here."

*Oh.* He keeps surprising me.

"Rocco as well," I add. *If he survived.* But I don't say that. I hope he survived. I hope Tessa isn't alone.

Lochlan studies me anyway. "He was badly injured."

I frown, remembering the stab wound in my guardsman's waist. "If they die . . ." My voice trails off, and I feel a clenching in

my belly. Rian was responsible for all of this. I think of all his lies, the way he judged *me* for my crimes, while ignoring his own. I think of the way he stood on his ship and told me that the people in Kandala weren't sick from a fever at all, but that they were being poisoned somehow. Rage surges in my belly, hot and sudden. "I'm going to kill Rian."

"Good. I'll help. But go back to the part about us getting out of here." Lochlan glances at the bars. "Lina said Oren would be back soon, so we don't know how much time we have."

"If Oren is coming back," I say, "it might be our only chance out of this cage. We need to make a plan."

"Well, we have no weapons, and we're clearly outnumbered. What else do you have in mind, *Weston Lark*?"

For an instant, my chest tightens. There's so much at stake, and panic threatens to overwhelm me. But I think of Harristan and Kandala, of everything that's gone wrong. Of every promise I've ever made to Tessa. Of wanting to do better. To *be* better. Of everyone and everything I might never see again. Of everyone I've failed—including the man in front of me.

I've had to play a thousand roles to help my brother hold Kandala together. I can play one more.

I take a breath. *Still breathing.*

"His daughter, Bella, was on that ship," I say. "So he's going to hate Rian as much as we do. We'll need to think of something to offer him. Something that will grant us a little freedom."

Lochlan's eyes light with surprise, and then he smiles a little dangerously, a little ruefully. "I've been waiting for you to wake up."

I don't smile back. "Maybe you should've picked a fight days ago."

"Welcome back, Your Highness."