

Cursed Ground

A sinister love story

**by
Tameka Norris**

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Foreword

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Beatrice Sumner was about to die.

It was right behind her. She was about several yards ahead, but it was much faster, stronger and her legs could only take her but so far. It was only a matter of time before the distance closed in on her.

She ran into the woods, leaving the small cabin behind, and the horror that happened there. Tossing a quick, panicked glance backward she saw the animal in its entirety. It was large, and nothing like any animal she'd ever seen before. Likely nothing like any animal *anyone* had seen before. Even in the dark she knew that much. She didn't have to see the razor sharp claws, ferocious canines or eyes that devoured prey with one look long before it sunk its teeth in into tender chunky flesh to be convinced. The vicious growl spoke volumes. The heavy leaden feet hitting the ground as it charged toward her at an alarming rate made it even clearer. The fear that it evoked in her was yet another clue. But mostly, it was the dark threatening silhouette that haunted her vision that left no doubt.

The lungs in her chest burned, but she knew it was nothing compared to the pain that was yet to come. It was a mere prelude to an inevitable end. The ground she covered in five steps it covered in one. She knew she would die tonight—a horrible, painful, agonizing death.

She would die screaming.

"Somebody help me!" Tears stung her face, blurred her vision but she kept moving. Her pants were getting heavier and it was getting harder to breathe. Her legs were so tired that she could only feel shots of pain thrum through them with every step that she took, but she willed herself to keep pace. Large steps were gaining on her and she couldn't afford to let her exhaustion grant her a quick death. Behind her, she heard tree limbs crack, fall and smash under heavy fearless stomps. They were going down like bowling pins and grounded out like sawdust.

This is what it would be like for her. It would stomp her out like a tiny flame. Her flesh would tear and her bones would crush and crack under the pressure of relentless claws and teeth.

There was no place to hide, and she didn't know how long she could keep going. She could not risk a fall. A single misstep would lead to doom.

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Whatever it was, it was unprecedented. No one knew of its existence and anyone who did know never lived to tell about it.

She would become one of those people.

She beat down the tiny branches that leapt out and threatened to block her way. As she made headway, she caught a glimpse of a clearing in the distance.

There was a road ahead. It was vague, but large enough to instill a glimmer of hope. If she could get there fast enough, she might have a chance. She forced her legs to move faster. Even now she knew the odds, but she was a fighter. Always had been, and if she was going to die tonight she'd die trying to live.

The road grew closer, larger and she hoped like hell that some unsuspecting driver would come along at just the right moment. If not, then death was inevitable. There was no place to hide and the predator—this was its land. Familiarity, instinct and the drive to kill—she didn't have a chance.

The road. Closer... closer...

God please!

And there it was. For a moment she thought she saw a vague light in the distance. A headlight! She ran toward the road and then suddenly, there it was again.

Right before her stood the small dark cabin she'd spent the last ten minutes running away from.

"What?" All things forgotten, she could only stare in horror and disbelief.

She was not stupid, not fooled into thinking the roadway she'd seen was imagined, the path she'd run was crooked. No, she'd stayed on course. She'd run away from the cabin, not toward it. She'd never veered... she'd made certain of that.

During all of the insanity, that was the one specific thing. She knew life all too well and deemed nature the same way, knew that if she'd run in a straight line long enough, something would eventually intercept—disrupt it. Nature was like a good plan, well thought out, everything in place... but there was always something willing to destroy perfection. There was always that unknown element just waiting to hinder a good thing.

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A chill crept up her spine.

Something wasn't right.

There's something wrong. There's something wrong with this place...

A loud growl ambushed her thoughts. She gasped. The beast had caught up with her. Time had run out. It was behind her.

She breathed a long ragged breath. Though she trembled she didn't dare move... didn't dare look. She couldn't. Didn't want to know if the evil she'd seen was as abominable as she remembered. So she stood, staring ahead, listening to the silent countdown. Waiting... wondering what moment would be hers.

A stream of hot liquid trailed down her leg, creating a puddle at her feet. The scent of urine lingered for a moment, and then suddenly it was gone.

And like that, without warning, a large force pulled her under and the last thing she heard was the sound of her own screams.

Groggy eyes opened. Disoriented, it took her a moment to remember. Then it all came flooding back. She shot up, looking around the room, searching for the abomination that would give her nightmares for the rest of her life. But like a child with imaginings too authentic to decipher between fact and fiction, she wondered if it'd all been a fabrication of her own mind now that only the ghost of it lingered behind.

The room was lulling. She noted several candles situated on the bedside table and felt safer than she'd felt in a long time. Shadows cloaked the room in what would normally be considered frightening distortions of darkness, but strangely enough she was appeased by them rather than terrified by what they might conceal. The room was fairly empty from what she could tell. She noted a large black dresser along the wall, the small nightstand that supported the candles and the bed she lay in as its furnishings, and, although she couldn't see it she got the distinct impression that a closet lay hidden in the night somewhere along the far left corner ahead.

She let out a slow steady breath and eased back against the pillows until her senses absorbed the full affect of her surroundings. It was only then she realized she was not alone.

Ahead where she presumed the closet lay hidden she guessed someone stood within the shadows.

“Who’s there?” She whispered.

A figure stepped into the light. It was a man. His hair was dark, his figure lean and his face was gripped with a mixture of fascination and compassion. Yet she noticed little else since her attention was held by his fine attire. It was peculiar that he was so well dressed given the circumstance. She almost validated the thought with the assumption that he might be dressed for her funeral until a sharp pain surged through her left leg, relieving her with the understanding that she was in fact alive.

“I gave you something to help the pain,” he said. “You should lie back.”

She did as he said, suddenly feeling very tired again. He moved over to the bed and she fixed her eyes on the tall tower of a man standing above her. Now she noted that he was relatively handsome and probably not much older than her, but most importantly she regarded he wasn’t a threat. Obviously if he meant her any harm she wouldn’t be alive to think about it now.

“Where am I? What happened?”

“The sun came up.” There was a slight twinkle in his eye when he spoke and she wondered what left him so elated that he’d found himself in such a light-hearted mood during a dreadful time such as this. She murmured a soft sound, closed her eyes as exhaustion overcame her and drifted off to sleep again.

Beatrice threw a pail of water across the floor. The cabin was exactly how she’d left it the night before: blood and death everywhere. Before the chaos erupted, she remembered the living room was otherwise a charming habitat. There was a sofa positioned in the middle of the room and beside it resided a small fireplace that crackled with a warm intimate fire. Beyond that sat a wooden dinner table and a few feet away to the right there was a tall bookcase that surprisingly held a wealth of knowledge. A collection of books filled each shelf with subjects that ranged from medicinal practices to psychological behavior. In front the sofa resided a long unfinished coffee table, ruined by the blood that had been shed during the chaos. Near the window in front of her

also sat a small writing desk which would have normally held her attention, but the tragedy set before her made that impossible. Although creative expression was as much a part of her life as breathing, it was far from her mind today.

She dropped to her knees and began scrubbing, pushing back the threat of emotion. Her mind willed her not to think. She understood that if she thought too much about what happened, then this time she might not find her way back to reality. In no way did she find reality any less formidable than the edge of insanity, but at least she could trust what was in front of her, whereas insanity was full of phantoms and illusions, and nothing seen, heard or felt there could be trusted to be real. So for hours she simply scrubbed, clearing the blood from the floor.

It was two o'clock in the morning when she realized the stain on the floor would never fully disappear. She'd hidden the reminder by cloaking the coffee table with a table cloth that had previously been a white floral sheet meant for a bed. However, the floor wasn't easily disguised. In truth, there were too many stains and some were too large to disguise with the little they had available to them. Sadly, this meant that every time she was in the room and she looked at it she'd remember. She didn't want to think about how difficult that would be, so she didn't.

She stood to her feet and gathered the bloody clothes together and placed them in a large black garbage bag. It was in no way comparable to knowing that a grave inhibited part of her son's remains, but a body within the earth was a symbolic gesture anyway. Yet, if it was that simple it wouldn't have mattered if her son had been cremated and his remains floated somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean as long as she knew he'd died a conceivable death.

She didn't need to stand over a lifeless grave and speak to him, as if he stood in front of her, to feel at ease. It wasn't the gesture that mattered. It was how he'd died. Although she'd seen it with her very own eyes, his death was inconceivable, it was abhorrent and his missing body was a reminder of that. So the loss she'd feel would always be harder to bear than it would have been if she'd known he felt peace when the end came. But he hadn't, instead he felt nothing but terror and pain, and she wondered if she'd ever manage to bear the thought of that.

Outside, along the side of the cabin she dug a grave for a body that would never fill it and threw the bag in the deep ditch. From time to time her eyes would look upon its surroundings.

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The full moon that glowed above, the dark woods that, only yesterday, aided in her escape from the monstrosity that was on her trail every step of the way. Tonight it didn't seem real. It almost felt like a bad dream she was certain she'd wake up from at any moment. She hoped it was.

It took hours but when she was finished and the exhaustion she'd managed to overcome from an entire day of rest weakened her once again, she moved to the front of the porch and laid her head against the post, taking in her surroundings one last time, then her eyes closed and she lost herself to sleep and to a dream state that brought her contentment for a brief time.

It was the morning sun that stirred her awake. It was warm, and for a moment, before she regained proper thought, she remembered thinking that the warmth against her face felt a little like heaven. A light smile touched her lips until a sense of foreboding overtook her. She searched her mind. Something had happened, something awful... and then she remembered.

Jacob.

Her eyes snapped open and the surge of emotion she hadn't succumbed to last night was no longer possible to postpone. It had all happened so quickly. They'd found the empty cabin... and gave thanks to God for their good fortune. Then he was screaming and...

No, she wouldn't think about it.

She reached for the cold steel leaning against the banister. It was a fairly large gun for a woman her size but she was certain she would make good use of it. She had a pretty good idea what she could use for target practice. The stranger had given it to her the night before for protection. That was when she knew. He said nothing. It was the look in his eyes, and it was at that moment she'd realized that the monster and the quiet man that had stood above her bed were one in the same.

After giving her instruction on how to use it, silence had been the only thing between them. For a moment she hadn't known what to think and then she realized she didn't want to think. She wasn't ready to evade the dullness that kept her from thinking of anything other than staying alive and he appeared to be in the same state of mind. So, for the time being it seemed best to allow her senses to remain numb by the shock she'd experienced from the night before.

But today was a different matter altogether.

She was now in full possession of her emotions and they led her on a different quest than the near numbing sensations she'd had last night.

She stood to her feet, gripping the gun tighter than necessary and stepped inside.

"What kind of monster kills a twelve year old boy?" She aimed the gun at his head a few feet away from where he sat on the ground. There was little else he could do since his leg was chained and his hands were cuffed; a circumstance in which she considered a perfect opportunity for revenge.

Her hand shook, not from fear but from desperation—the desire for absolution. Memories, thoughts and yearnings assailed her, making what she'd fought so hard to deny a reality she could no longer ignore. Her son was dead and there was no getting him back.

Ever.

Everything was gone, erased. All the years of happiness gone—like that. The light in her world had died. The emptiness she'd managed to forsake from years of abandonment and abuse threatened and taunted her future. She'd have to walk through the dark tunnel again and that's what scared her the most. She'd already walked through it countless times before and unlike what others professed, there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Not in her life at least, and her bitterness left her thinking similar thoughts about death.

Both would be an endless torment of darkness.

"I can explain," he said.

"I don't want your explanations. I want my son back. But you can't give me that, can you? Tell me why I shouldn't put a bullet through you right now?"

"Don't you think I've already tried that? Don't you think if I could end it all right now, I would? That I wouldn't give you back what I took?"

She cocked the gun. "Shut up!" She could hear Jacob's screams even now. They were a song that played over and over and over again. *Mommy!* He'd screamed, begged her to save him... and she'd failed.

“Oh God.” She crouched, pain clawing at her insides. The truth punched her so hard in the face she could barely stand, much less breathe.

She was to blame. It was her fault. Her son had died screaming for her to save him and she'd failed him. She had killed her son, allowed him to die because she had been so paralyzed with shock and fear that she'd sacrificed his life for hers.

“Please. Just drop the gun. You don't want to do this.”

Tears streamed down her face. “Six bullets say I do. You could've at least had the decency to clean up after yourself. Do you have any idea what that does to a person... to a mother? You killed my little boy!” Each conviction grew louder and by the time she'd finished speaking her voice was saturated with rage.

“I can explain!”

Mommy! She closed her eyes, trying to deafen the screams of terror that assaulted her with relentless force. “Jacob... I'm so sorry.” She released the round of bullets on the target in front of her. His body dropped to the ground like a lead balloon, and once she was convinced he was dead she let the gun topple to the floor. The deed was done. But even now that it was over, now that she'd avenged her son's death, the screams persisted. “Oh God... just let me die. I need to die.”

Why wouldn't they stop?

Stop!

They were never going to stop.

She screamed to silence them and when peace finally resonated within the room she came face to face with a raw reality. How could she go on living when there was nothing left to live for? Every minute ticking away. Ticking ticking ticking. Clawing through her—sharp pains. Pain after pain after pain. Never a moment of peace. Every moment pain.

Her eyes focused in on the gun and she knew what she had to do.

She picked it up, aimed it at her head, closed her eyes but refused to flinch. She would not flinch. *Don't think.* Hesitating led to uncertainties and she was not willing to come to terms with the questions residing in the recess of her mind. She pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

Again. Nothing. Click click click.

Empty!

She threw the gun down and ran up the stairs. *No, this can't be happening! Not happening!* During all of that rage, she'd been a fool. Stupid and blind, but worst of all, alive. She'd never even considered saving a bullet for herself. It could've been easy. It could've been a quick leap into darkness, her body lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

But that was the problem with being irrational. Hasty, unplanned actions led to messy consequences. She was paying for it now.

Beatrice ran into the kitchen and pulled out every drawer she came across. All of which contained everything, but what she needed. She searched the third drawer. Old papers, appliance manuals—rubbish!

The next drawer was no better. It was full of dingy lids and containers that looked as if they'd been there longer than they'd ever been used. Useless.

She was losing him. *No, don't go. Don't leave me!*

Next drawer. *Spoons, forks, measuring cups.... Knives! Where were the knives?*

Had she missed them during her panicked search or had someone moved them with the idea in mind they might be ill-used at some point or another?

She slammed the last drawer shut and moved to the cupboards. Peace came when she noted all were full of potential weapons. Plates, glasses... and bowls. She grabbed a glass, smashed it on the floor and reached for a large shard. Pushing the edge of it against her throat, she goaded herself to take action. *Do it. Do it!*

He was almost gone. His beautiful face was fading....

She pushed the sharp edge of the shard closer. A trickle of blood seeped down her neck. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes willing herself, gearing up for that final brave act that would put all of the wrong things right...

Do it!

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But she couldn't. No attempt could will her to make that quick thoughtless cut. An abrupt horizontal incision from one direction to the other... that's all it took. But she was a coward.

She dropped the piece of glass on the floor and ran for the front door. She had to get away. Away from the truth, away from the loss, away from herself... and maybe if she ran fast enough she could run toward something—toward everything that she'd lost and find it again.

But the moment she stepped outside, she knew no amount of denial would set the loss in reverse. Nothing she did would help her reclaim what was already gone.

She dropped to her knees and cried. "Jacob! No!" It was a low deep gut-wrenching wail that could only be matched by another mother whose loss was of equal or greater value.

She reached out for Jacob, almost seeing him there, but no... nothing. He was gone. It was just an empty space that contained the lingering image of his face conjured up by her effective imagination and pretty soon that would be gone too. And then all too soon it was... and left in its place was nothing.

She sobbed, knowing that was the life she'd live from that day forward. A life with nothing in it.

Jonathan had just heard the worst sound he'd ever heard in his life. If he hadn't known better, he would've guessed someone had just had tortured her on the spot.

But he knew better.

Yet, in spite of that he supposed he could say someone did... and that that someone was him. Yes, it was clear. He wasn't to blame for just one death, but two. She might be physically breathing, but he knew she was in no way truly alive.

But now was not the time to think. There was more than enough time for that later. Right now he had to get free. He scanned the dingy cellar and a few feet away, near the stairs, he caught a glimpse of a broom. If he could pull himself close enough he might be able to reach for it and slide the keys off the table. He had a free good leg.

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It was raining and about an hour later when he stepped outside and confronted her again. She was lying on the ground, staring ahead: eyes blinking but unmoving. Wherever she was she wasn't there.

He'd had plenty of time to look at her yesterday when she lay asleep in bed. His eyes had roamed over every feature of her face countless times and after each time he was convinced he had to look just once more. Like a besotted schoolboy, he could barely turn away as he could barely do so now. Her soft pink bottom lip, her curly black hair, her coffee colored skin... all quite alluring, but ultimately, it was the lovely brown tone of her flesh that captured him the most. It blended so well with her attire that by the end of the day he was convinced that the cream colored gown he'd put her in complimented her warm skin tone quite nicely.

It was such a simple observation to come to terms with, given the fact that he'd spent so many hours staring at her. He had been entranced, so to speak, so much so that he'd forgotten his manners—to clean up after himself as she so astutely put it. And by the time he'd realized it, it was too late to undo the damage. He'd run out of time.

At the time, he wasn't quite sure who had died. He'd noticed blood, but he'd never paid attention to much else. Truly, he never had a chance to take a close look or maybe he just didn't want to. Either way, most, if not all of it was truth. Once he'd come to, he had to tend to her and that was all the distraction he needed to avoid the reality that threatened him from the day he'd arrived in this God-awful place.

He picked her up. She was drenched through. He would have to get her warm soon before the chill set in and she came down with something neither of them could cure. He would do it quickly, because the thought of losing her so soon was close to unbearable.

Before, he was capable of enduring the long days of loneliness with skillful thinking, but now that he had company he couldn't imagine going back to that insane place in which he had to keep himself occupied with his own thoughts hour after hour, day after day.

In the bedroom he laid her on the bed. She still seemed a little dazed but more responsive as if she was slowly becoming aware of her surroundings again. A few more moments

of silence passed between them and then she spoke. "You should've killed me." Then her statement became more of a plea. "Why? Why?"

Beatrice couldn't understand it. Why was God doing this to her? Why was He letting this happen? When was enough enough? What had she done wrong that committed her to such internal imprisonment and sorrow? Why did He give such beautiful gifts and then take them away?

She could've managed if she hadn't known the difference. If she'd known only sorrow, if her entire life had been as it was before, but now that she'd seen, touched and tasted better—happiness, love, family—she couldn't survive with anything less.

Why did God damn her to a worse fate than she'd already lived? Why hadn't He just left her to ignorance? Why? Why couldn't He just leave her in that place where she wouldn't be tortured by the hope of something better, by the experience of life that was all things good and beautiful? And now that she'd experienced such euphoria, it was hell having to go back to an existence that no longer possessed it.

It seemed ridiculous now that just the other night she'd tried so hard to live when she could've made a simple choice of allowing that night's torture to save her from today's. The pain of being ripped apart limb from limb seemed small in comparison, when the torment of the present sentenced her to a worse kind of death... every single day.

Jonathan's expression softened and he took her in arms. He had seen the quiet torment she was going through. Her face changing from confusion to anger, and then finally to sorrow in the course of a moment. Her silent sobs grew louder. She held on to him. He could feel her grip tightening and expected it was her son she presumed she was holding.

"It's alright," he said. He glided his hand along her back, trying to soothe her. He wanted to hold her forever, if he could, but he understood that was an irrational reaction. Something he seemed prone to have in her presence. "Everything's going to be okay." He didn't believe that it would be and suspected she probably didn't either. How could it be okay? She'd lost a part of herself and he knew the devastation of that emotion. In truth, it was likely that nothing would ever be okay again. Chances were very good they'd both die there. For her it was be a physical death, for him... a loss of himself to something much worse.

He closed his eyes and pulled her closer. He wanted to remember this moment. The last moment he'd probably ever have to share something other than hatred, anger, sorrow or guilt. She was warm, she felt like life in spite of how dead he guessed she was feeling inside. For him, she was life. A light that meant he might actually have a chance to die with someone by his side rather than the unbearable thought of dying alone in the dark hole that offered them no way out. If for no other reason, he would do everything in his power to see that she lived so that he could look upon her gentle face when the end came near.

He pulled away when her sobs died down. Then, heavy silence settled in the room. One last temptation of affection compelled him to wipe away the tear streaming down her face. Then to distract himself he noticed her wet clothing. "Your shirt," he said and moved to unbutton it, then stopped, realizing his giddy mistake. "You need to get out of those wet clothes." He moved to the closet and laid a robe on the bed. "I'll just be out in the hall."

While she shuffled to get dressed, he'd used the opportunity to grab the rope from the closet a few feet away. He would use it if he had to, if only to save her from herself.

When he stepped back in the room it was the first thing she noticed.

"People have killed themselves for less dramatic reasons. I can't be responsible for you too. But, if you give me your word, I won't need it."

She cut her eyes away. Her confession was unspoken but blunt. So she was an honest woman. He wasn't surprised, but witnessing her raw honesty did stun him a little, in spite of his understanding that she was the very thing. In cases like this one, when death was such a tempting alternative to the pain, most would not be quite as honest. But it was a good sign. The fact that she was willing to admit she wanted to die was also an indication that she actually wanted to live.

He moved over to her and tied the rope around her wrists, but such a simple act was fairly difficult for him given the fact that every so often his hand would brush against her arm and send a fierce surge of desire through his body. After his unwarranted fascination with her last night, he expected he might have this type of reaction in her presence. Obviously if he couldn't tear himself away from her enough to consider the bleak mess that tainted the atmosphere of the

living room, then clearly she had enough of an affect on him that he could presume that her company fogged and muddied his thoughts to an unpardonable extent.

Once he'd finished with her wrists, he focused his attention on tying the rope to the post. However, that temptation was a little more difficult to overcome because it meant she was forced to lie back on the bed. And in all relative positions in life, this was a situation he deemed as one of the most dangerous. Abstinence was damn near impossible in a circumstance in which a man sat next to an attractive woman lying in bed, near under him, and managed to restrain himself. It was like asking a hungry person not to eat the food sitting on the plate in front of them.

He was a man with a high degree of discipline. However, even for him, focusing became an absurd notion and all sane thoughts seemed to scurry out of the room like a hoard of insects rushing toward a drop of honey.

He was very content with his disciplined nature until the passionate side of him erupted and conspired against his need to exact control. This wasn't often, so when it did occur, he paid careful attention as to why it was happening. He was attracted to this woman. That was the obvious answer. But why? Of course she was lovely in her own way, but there were plenty of women above her station in both grace and beauty.

Then again, he always knew he appreciated women of quality inside and out, and the outward appearance was something one was born with rather than something one could take credit for. It was just a simple lottery of fortune verses misfortune. Yet, in the case of character, just about everyone could shape who they were and who they became. So, countenance was of no greater value to him than character, but he could reduce his interest in it even more if character made up for lack of beauty.

In this case, he wasn't fully aware of her character but he must've seen something of it shining through last night, given the fact that her looks were not astounding yet he couldn't make himself stop looking at her.

So, he was enchanted by something within that shown without, but it didn't make the bewitching any less difficult. During every occasion in which she was near, he had to work like hell just to function like a normal human being. He couldn't even blame it on her, especially since

whenever they were in each other's company one of them was either injured, unconscious or trying to kill the other. But in spite of the odds, there was this connection between them that could only be described as cataclysmic. It made him wonder if she felt it too.

His hand fumbled, the knot slipped and he couldn't still the trembling that was on the rise. Then to make his edgy nerves shatter her breath beat against his cheek and the last ounce of stillness he'd maintained was tattered and frayed.

He could feel her eyes on him, boring a hole through him as if she was searching for something in his soul and wasn't sure she'd find it. He tried to force himself to concentrate on the task at hand—not to look at her—but it was if she was a magnet, pulling him, drawing him closer... closer. No matter how hard he tried, how much he willed himself against it, he was no match for the black hole that sucked him in and forced him to face the dark compelling eyes staring up at him. For a moment she reminded him of a quizzical child with a thousand questions on her mind, but beyond the questioning, he could see more. Much more.

Her night eyes contained a history of sorrow. Needful, sorrowful eyes, longing... aching, making way for a tear or two that slipped down her cheek and dripped on to the pillow.

He wanted to heal the pain. The pain he caused and the pain he knew nothing about, because he was quite certain what he'd done wasn't the only thing to blame for the tragedy within that somber stare. Those eyes tempted him to ask a world of questions. Questions that led to need, and need that led to wanting... and wanting that led to a desire to love.

A desire to love her.

There was such innocence there but there was no doubt she knew the world in a way that he'd been fortunate enough to avoid. She didn't hide it behind a masked wall. No, it was there in plain sight. This youngish woman was an old soul—a dreary, jaded soul that seemed too tired to want to live any longer. It was clear she wanted to die for more compelling reasons than the ones brought about by the present circumstance. But what were those reasons?

He edged closer, their mouths only inches apart. Her breath hitched, and he could see that she was fully aware of exactly what was taking place between them. Yet, he himself could not claim to be unaffected. His labored breathing was the most obvious sign. He was nearly

panting like a dog, as if he'd had a five mile hike up rocky terrain. But not only that, his skin burned as if he was being eaten by fire, and if he'd touched a piece of paper right now he was certain he would singe it. And his heart was beating so fast he was surprised it hadn't tired from exhaustion. It was like a rocket ready to shoot out of his chest and go into orbit any moment now.

He'd been tempted plenty of times in his life, but never to this extent. Not by such honest desire. Usually his desires were quite perverse. Perhaps because he'd lived a very isolated life in which emotion was of least importance to those around him. But with her it had nothing to do with rebellion, perversity or even simple lust. Joining with her was one notion in the grand scheme of it all. In the end he would like to love her and lie next to her, hold her, and then tell her everything was going to be okay. Then maybe if he said it enough for the both of them, he'd come to believe it too.

One of them had to act but they both seemed paralyzed and transfixed by the other and the thick blanket of attraction that formed between them. For a moment it was so thick he'd swear he could reach out and touch it. Almost taste it even. Taste, touch, smell, hear, see...

He didn't think he'd ever be able to forget those beautiful eyes now. They'd imprinted themselves upon his mind permanently and he would've been glad to stare into them for the rest of his life but a less noble surge of attraction tugged at him.

Her lips parted, and his attention set there from then on. He pushed back a hard swallow, focusing on the soft pink sweetness of her bottom lip and felt an urge to suckle it whole. All pretenses aside, he was shaking now and she'd have to be blind not to notice it, but there was little he could do. The battle of temptation he was fighting against was a strong one. One of the worst he'd ever come against in his entire life.

She took in a deep breath and he could see the expectation and need in her eyes matched his own. He shut his eyes, forcing himself to focus. *Remember!*

Yes, right. The reality between them was too great. His mind might be fuzzy but he needed to remember the facts.

And what were the facts? The facts were... the facts were... umm... think...

Right!

Even if she was warming up to him for the time being, he would guess that later she would hate herself for needing him in a moment of weakness. As much as he wanted to believe otherwise, he knew she wasn't herself. The wanting that was softening her to him was simply a desire to feel safe—to take away the pain, to be connected to something that made her feel anything other than what she was feeling at the moment. He was nothing more than a common painkiller to dull the senses, and it was almost easy enough to fool himself into thinking that was a fair exchange.

Almost.

But he wasn't a fool. There was nothing visible to hinder them from using one another to escape the harsh reality, but he'd lived long enough to understand the trappings of emotion and how a simple need the day before could turn into a lifetime of regret the day after. Yes, he understood her silent request was as innocent as her face, but the simple kiss she was asking for could lead to something more, and chances were very high that it would.

It was tempting, yes. Enticing even. And wrong? Of course. There was no doubt about it.

He didn't have to know her to know that this was a woman who wanted and deserved the promise of marriage and a lifetime of commitment. He also knew that he was the type of man that wanted to give those kinds of things, the type of man that wouldn't act on anything less. So, as much as he wanted it, needed comfort—as much as they both did, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He was to blame for too much already, but he wouldn't be to blame for this as well.

Easing away, he forced himself to concentrate on tying the ropes to the post once again. He didn't look at her—couldn't, but he could feel her hating him for what he didn't do. Strange, he expected it to be the other way around, but perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps true regret was in what never came to be. That could be the case. Life was funny that way. Chances not taken were just as harsh on the mind as reckless chances that resulted in bad outcomes. And yes, he was feeling that type of regret right now. Nevertheless, maybe she would've hated him no matter what he did. He'd never know because he wasn't the sort of man who wished to rebel against his strong code of ethics. Better to regret for the right reasons than for the wrong ones.

But even that didn't stop the wanting. He let out a slow ragged breath and closed his eyes to a tide of should-haves and could-haves pushing their way to the surface. He'd let the moment slip away. He wished he'd done it now. Wished he'd kissed her. He should've kissed her, if not for her sake, then for his. But he was not prone to selfish tendencies... no matter how badly he wanted something. He was always conscious of his choices, controlled and disciplined... to a point of fault. However, in this case the reasons were very right.

He didn't always like making the right choices. Sometimes they were so damn bittersweet. Like now. Every time... the temptation cut through his insides like a double-edged sword. He could literally taste a good choice by the awful flavor it left in his mouth. The dry gritty swallow, the quickened heartbeat, the intense panic that urged him to reconsider and lastly, the raw need that bashed through his bloodstream, sending a deaf thrumming pulse to his eardrums.

Good choices hurt like hell.

And of course he'd made many of them in his lifetime, but he never quite got used to them.

"If you struggle, you can be out by morning," he said and moved to the door, then stopped. His back to her, never facing her. "I'm counting on it."

A few moments of silence cloaked the room before he spoke again. "I'm sorry for what I took from you. I know that'll never be enough. I can't take back what I did. But it doesn't mean that I don't wish to God that I could."

He walked toward the cellar, trying to forget the kind face that imprinted itself on his mind. But... she lingered. Considering the thought further, no, she wasn't beautiful by any standard, but she did have generous features by most. She was easy enough on the eyes in which her countenance was not deemed radical on either end. Best said, she was far from beauty and far from beast. He deemed if she survived long enough, he might find it quite difficult to pretend he didn't enjoy looking at her quite so much. That was not a comfortable thought but he couldn't deny the truth. He liked her. More than what was considered rational for someone he'd never met before. But, there was something about her.

Something...

Cursed Ground

She made him want things. He took care enough to know that he wasn't the sort of man that could substitute one woman for another. He also knew himself enough to know that any other woman in her place wouldn't have gotten the same reaction from him. There was something about this woman in particular. Something more...

Something extraordinary...

This was not the time to love... but the candle was lit and he didn't know how to stop himself from kindling the fire. He might as well as admit it now. No sense in lying to himself. He wasn't the sort of man that told himself tales to appease his conscience.

Afterword

Thanks so much for reading Cursed Ground. I hope you enjoyed the story. Remember, you're welcome to pass this ebook along to friends and family and give it away on your website as long as everything remains intact and the ebook is offered for free.

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