

*Behind Skin and Scars*

*By Abby Sandman*

## Chapter 1

For the three hundred and twenty-seventh time, I threw the flare box in the air, the now clammy bronze landing heavily in my palm before I let it fly again. Three hundred and twenty-eight. And that was just today. But then, I needed something to distract myself from the stone walls of a cell that seemed to be shrinking with every passing day.

The walls unnerved me. The dark cracks that slithered between the stones in mismatched patterns were too thick, too black, and the coarse surface always appeared to be moving, dancing like shadows beneath the surface of a lake. I'd tried convincing myself that my eyes were playing tricks on me. That it was probably just the shadows from the bars over the window or the odd glance of moonlight that made the walls seem so unnatural. But I knew that wasn't true.

Ancient magic ran through the veins of the Tower, bleeding between every stone, coursing through every lock. The smell of it had stung my nose the instant I arrived, after being ushered in from the prison wagon and patted down like a horse. The smell of copper and smoke mingling with the stench of prisoners. It had taken a day or so to get used to it, but still, every now and then, the smell of the magic tickled my nose.

Unfortunately, the lack of air circulation didn't stop the chill from seeping through the stones to set my lip quivering through the nights. And I'd even prepared for it, having chosen my warmest wool tunic and a vest lined with rabbit fur. It was bearable. For now. But when the crisp air of fall turned to winter and the snows began to blanket the sprawling forests and timber roofs of Eslo, the frigid air within these walls would be enough to kill, especially without food and drink to warm one's stomach. Meals of stale bread and dirty water could only keep you so long.

I supposed it could have been worse. It had only been two days. Most who found themselves locked in the Tower were in for life, a life often cut considerably short. Fewer than one in twenty who spent a night in the Tower ever got out, and since it was built, perhaps one person every fifty to one hundred years had escaped.

When considering statistics like those, anyone would have called me crazy for agreeing to get myself arrested for a job. Mo certainly had. She'd spent the better part of the night pacing around the cottage trying to talk me out of accepting. Of course, I'd tried to make the point that if she really didn't want me to take it, she never should have told me about the job in the first place, but she wasn't taking feedback.

I understood her concern. It wasn't just about the Tower. It was about Eslo, the westernmost province in Luiavera and the Tower's home. Everything about Eslo made me queasy, from the half-cooked pig I'd had the night before my journey to the Tower to the tavern-master who questioned what a nice young woman like myself was doing there all alone. That, plus the new laws nailed to every post and doorway banning all mages from practicing magic, and I'd really sooner have been anywhere else. But I didn't anticipate being in Eslo much longer. Only until I finished the job I'd been hired for. Assuming nothing went wrong, I anticipated being on my way back to Mo in approximately twenty-four hours.

Of course, if something did go wrong, from the behavior of the guards transporting me and my fellow prisoners, I guessed that whatever crime was committed by the girl whose place I'd taken had put her in for life. It was an outcome I preferred not to consider.

I was at three hundred and thirty-four when a sharp clang and creak from the door sent a jolt up my spine, followed by the telltale scrape of metal on stone. That door hadn't opened since I'd arrived, and I certainly hadn't expected it to open for at least a day.

The flare box slammed into my nose.

I sat up, shoving the forbidden item under the loose pile of hay that lined my cot before turning my attention to the opening door. Light wedged its way in from the corridor, the point nearly reaching my boot before the shadow of a figure blocked it out.

"You're getting a roommate."

I blinked. The guard I'd spent the better part of a night interrogating had told me that, as long as I was placed alone, I would be here too short a time to have a prisoner placed with me. And after my numerous threats and a generous bribe, he assured me I'd be placed alone.

"May I object?" I asked, not that hopefully.

"No." He shoved someone through the narrow opening and slammed the shrieking door shut, the bolt locking devastatingly into place.

A hulking shadow had replaced the guard, his shoulders nearly twice as broad as mine and his head damn near brushing the ceiling. In the scraps of light peeking through the small window, his hair looked nearly black, as did his eyes, which took me in as an afterthought.

Once I had thoroughly surveyed the way his tunic and vest hugged his torso a bit too snugly and the muscle roped through arms that could tear me apart, I slunk back down on my cot

to contemplate my new situation and resumed at three hundred and thirty-five, bitter that I'd broken my spotless catching record.

His steps thudded against the floor as he made his way over to his cot, a piece of furniture I'd been hoping was merely decorative. The wood hardly creaked, but the hay crunched as he sat.

Silence followed, the only sound that of metal hitting the skin of my palm. I couldn't decide if the presence of another human being made the cell more or less disconcerting.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A lemon drop," I said. "Want one?" To the casual observer, I would have seemed quite immersed in the flare box rising and falling before my eyes. But my attention was wholly on him.

"Was never a fan of metal in my sweets," he said.

"Your loss."

He said nothing. Then there was a rustle of hay, and in one stride he had crossed the cell, snatching the flare box out of the air.

I was upright in an instant, my hands braced against the cot and the muscles in my neck tightening as I craned my neck to look up at him.

"I'd like that back," I said tightly, my fingers curling around the wooden frame, my body coiled.

He studied the object a moment, his figure submerging me in shadows.

"What is it?" he asked.

My nails began to dig into the wood. "A flare box," I said tersely. At least that was the name the mage who made it for me had provided. It wasn't an object found at your local blacksmith's.

"What does it do?" he asked, turning the small metal square over in his hands.

"What's it to you?"

He glanced at me disinterestedly. Then, he let it go, and the flare box landed in my hand. Relief swept through me as he returned to his side of the cell. Of all the things my plan of escape hinged on, the flare box was perhaps the most important.

Warily, I lay back down on the cot, starting up at three hundred and seventy-three. His eyes didn't leave me.

“How’d you get that in here?” he asked.

I didn’t look at him, remembering the confused expression on the cobbler’s face when I asked him to make one of the heels on my boots hollow. “No one ever suspects a woman.”

“Then how did *you* get in here?”

I turned my head, my eyes finding his hulking figure in the darkness. “How did you?”

The shadow didn’t respond.

“If you won’t answer, why should I?”

My game of catch resumed as my cellmate’s voice reasserted itself in the darkness. “Are you a mage?”

“Why would you assume that?” I asked, masking my surprise.

“We’re in Eslo,” he said.

I snorted. “If I was, do you think I’d come anywhere near the only province where magic is outlawed?” The laws had only been passed a month ago, following the quarter year legislative process spurred by the death of an Esloan peace leader’s wife at the hands of a mage. An unfortunate accident truly, and a rare occurrence, but humans will look to any excuse to push for restrictions.

He didn’t seem to have an answer. After another minute or so, he asked, “So, are you one?”

“Do I look like one?” I asked, rolling my eyes towards him.

He shrugged.

I supposed, given that I’d more or less been raised by mages and that my best and only friend was one, I likely had a skewed sense of the commonwealth’s knowledge of their magic-wielding counterpart. They were plentiful in Luiavera, but aside from the jobs that humans hired guild mages for and the few times a year the guild masters met with the peace leaders of their province, they tended to keep to themselves.

Still, even for those who’d never encountered a mage in person, it was rare to find someone who hadn’t at least heard stories of the black or red marks that curled across their skin and the inhuman coloring of their hair and eyes.

“I’m not a mage.”

“I’d believe you,” he said, “but you seem like a bit of a liar.”

I snatched the flare box out of the air and turned to him. “A bit?” I asked, eyes wide. “Clearly, I’m not doing my job well.”

I didn’t like all of these questions. They weren’t the kind I would expect out of a Tower prisoner. In fact, I wouldn’t expect any questions out of a Tower prisoner. Only stoic silence, the kind held by every criminal who thinks they’re tough enough to withstand the oozing blackness and strange smells and thousands on thousands of days towering before them. Before the paranoia and nightmares and insanity set in.

He had none of that. Despite the massive figure, deep voice, and what I imagined to be a brooding sort of stare, he had none of the qualities of a criminal. Except, of course, being in prison.

I wished I could get a better look at him. A look at his clothes, at his boots, at his skin. It’s amazing what you can tell about a person from their skin. If only the cell wasn’t so dark.

“What’s your name?”

The flare box hit my palm.

“Why do you want my name?”

“Traditionally, it’s one of the first things exchanged between strangers.”

“Yes,” I remarked, “it is.” There was a level of propriety to the way his spoke. To the way he ordered his words and the words he used. But it wasn’t overdone. He likely had a tutor, but that really only ruled out the lowest classes.

“So?” he prompted.

“So what?” I’d forgotten he’d asked me a question.

“Your name.”

I rolled my eyes. “Diana Thorp.” The words slid easily off my tongue. From her name, I’d guessed the girl whose place I’d taken was from northern Eslo, near its borders with the Claw. She’d been short for a northerner, but she had the pale eyes, ivory skin, and narrow nose. Physically, I passed for her quite easily. Only the hair had been a challenge. I knew some northerners with auburn hair, but never one with locks like well-ripened raspberries. Luckily, Eslo received frequent imports from the south, so the berry wasn’t as difficult to come by as I’d worried it might be.

“I don’t believe you,” my cellmate said. He was leaning forward now, his elbows on his knees as he appraised me. It occurred to me that the only reason he seemed marginally at ease

was because he didn't perceive me as a threat. He was considerably bigger, clearly more muscular, and when comparing my horizontal figure to his upright one, he was evidently in the better position. I wondered if the fact that I appeared relatively unconcerned about him had raised any red flags. Truly, I doubted it.

"That's your right," I said.

I sat up, the hay rustling. My eyes had adjusted since the stab of light from the open door, and I could now just make out his features. When he'd entered, I'd been far more concerned with his capacity to kill me than I had been with his face. Looking at it now, I found that it was an infuriating kind of pretty. Definitely too pretty to just kiss and almost too pretty to kill. But only almost. From the shadow along his sharp jawline to the tenacity in his gaze, I guessed that he couldn't be much older than I was.

"I'm Grey," he said. I had dropped my eyes back to the flare box once my appraisal was complete, and I didn't lift them at his voice.

"That's dull."

"Dull?" He sounded surprised.

"Mhm."

"Because Diana is so exciting?"

I pulled my legs up, the cold from the wall seeping through my vest as I leaned back. "It's better than Grey."

He stood, his large frame looming over me where I sat curled on the cot. He must have seen me tense, his eyebrows rising as he moved towards the door.

"You should be more careful with your tongue," he said, his voice soft and rumbling as he studied the spot on the door where a window ought to be. "Next time you might get a cellmate much worse than me."

I remained silent, merely watching as his fingers moved tenderly down the edges of the door, just as I had done the first day I arrived. I wasn't worried. There wouldn't be a next time.

The thud of the bolt sliding out of place disturbed the night's weighty silence. Finally. I'd only allowed myself a few hours of sleep, and the time I'd spent sitting up waiting had been agonizing. Luckily, Angus Fletcher, the guard I'd interrogated and paid to undo the bolt to my door on my third night in the Tower had taken my threats seriously.

I'd had the flare box tucked in my vest since I lay down to sleep, along with the thick bundle of rope I'd removed from the hay bales that originally lay across the cots. It was itchy, even through my tunic, but I'd wanted to be sure I was ready the moment the bolt was removed. A few seconds were far too many to spare when you were as pressed for time as I was.

I was on my feet nearly the instant the echo of the bolt faded. Five paces later, I was at the door, my fingers running gingerly down the edge just as Grey's had done the day before, until they found the spot where the wood warped from the metal frame. I pressed hard and the door popped out. The protruding edge was no wider than my fingertips, but enough for me to pull the door open.

A hand struck out above my head, closing the door just enough to block my exit.

"What are you doing?" The deep voice rumbled in my ears, and I turned to face my cellmate where he stood inches away.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You're leaving." Good to know he was more than just looks. But my heart began beating harder than I would have liked. If I didn't get this done and put as much ground between myself and the Tower as possible, I would be spending the rest of my life rotting away in these cells. Mo would kill me.

"Interesting word choice," I said, my shoulder sliding in the gap left between the door and its frame. He clearly underestimated how small I was.

"I'm coming with you." His hand tensed, pressing the door into my shoulder.

For a moment, I stared at him. It would be easy to leave him behind. All I needed to do was distract him a moment, and I could slip through the door and be off. But that would leave a witness. A witness who could potentially alert the guards sooner than I needed and a witness who knew my face, who could potentially recognize that the dead body of Diana Thorp lying outside the Tower was not the woman he shared a cell with. Of course, taking him with me could also pose any number of problems, but those at least were problems I had some control of.

"Fine," I said. "Don't get in my way."

He looked stunned, the distrust plain on his face. But then he loosened his grip on the door, likely not wanting to run the risk that I might change my mind.

The air of the hall felt thick, more like wading than walking. With every step, I swore I heard a groan, a human wail, the creak of a door opening. It made me nauseous knowing that



Grey walked only a step or so behind me, but a part of me was glad that I didn't have to walk these halls alone. The soft sounds of his steps against the floor were almost enough to drown out the sounds my ears invented.

I was eager to be rid of this prison. Rid of the smell of burnt copper that stung my nose when I breathed too deeply. Rid of the writhing stones. It was no wonder few ever escaped. Even if the doors and windows weren't spelled to keep them in, this place incited more than enough madness to keep its prisoners docile.

But I wasn't like the rest. I didn't find myself locked in here unawares with nothing but my wits to formulate an escape. I came in with a plan. Through the silence of the hall, the guild master's voice sounded in my head.

"To do what you're going to do, Alyx, you need to abandon impulse," she would say, her voice like water on a parched throat. "Your instincts you can keep. You'll need those, but impulse is the death of any job. The plan is what's important."

Granted, so was execution. A well thought out plan would account for those little things that could go wrong. It would account for the big things if they were predictable. But she'd also told me to never take on an unexpected variable unless I had a plan to deal with it.

I glanced back at Grey. Lucky for me, I was fast thinker.

"What are you doing?" Grey's hissed, his hand wrapping around my arm as I started up the stairs at the end of the hall. "The exit's down."

I eyed his hand. "There's something I need to do. That something is up." I pulled lightly, but his grip didn't budge.

"Why would I follow you up there?"

He certainly was a willful variable. I glared at him. "Magic may be outlawed in Eslo now, but it certainly wasn't when this place was built. There are at least three measures of security between you and the exit, and my bet is even with all this..." I lifted my wrist, his thick hand still curled around it, "you don't make it through one."

A sigh whistled against his clenched teeth, but he released my arm and motioned me forward. As we made our way up, I was more than grateful for the near silent way he managed to move in spite of his size. It took a certain highborn grace to do that.

If I'd had the time to dwell on it, my curiosity regarding what had gotten him arrested might have been overwhelming, but my internal clock was ticking loudly.

I didn't hesitate when we reached the door at the top, pulling a clip from the thick tresses of my hair, snapping it in half, and sliding both ends into the lock. It clicked easily, the door not bound by magic as the others were. Humans had added it later. They needed somewhere to keep the prisoners they wanted secluded from the rest.

"So, you're a thief," Grey said disdainfully.

I slid the bolt out of place. "Something like that."

The hall we entered was black as rot. I tasted death, but even someone as familiar with death as I was couldn't have prepared for the suffocating weight of the thousands of souls who'd wasted away in the cells behind these walls.

"There are no guards up here," Grey said quietly, his voice a scream in the silence.

"If you didn't notice," I said, beginning to move down the hallway, "there were no guards in our hall either. The cell doors can't be broken. And the only way out is down."

"Then, how did our door open?"

I ignored him, hearing the soft scuff of his boots against the stone floor as he began to follow. Were it not for my hand trailing along the wall, I might worry I was walking into oblivion. As it was, my senses were running wild. Every brush of boots against the stone was like the crunching of bones, the blackness breaking into shapes before my eyes, and a dryness like woodchips in my mouth.

When we reached the end of the hall, my fingers crept across the crevices in the stone until they found the lock in the door. I slid the flare box from my vest and pressed it close to the lock, hoping the mage who sold it to me was right about this.

There was a gasp behind me as the fire flared, casting malignant shadows against the walls.

"You can't pick this one like the other?" Grey asked uneasily.

I didn't look at the flame, trying to ignore the warmth in my fingers as the bronze began to heat up. "The cell doors are sealed with magic. Only an equal magic can break them." It had taken me a week to track down a mage who could make a device like this. Something that could drain the Tower's magic, even just a little. The fire in the flare box was fueled by nothing tangible, but the mage refused to tell me how she made it. Only that I should use it sparingly. All magic required some kind of trade or balance, and a flame that could drain magic from the

Tower doors would have to be linked to the magic's source. I would have killed to know what sourced the Tower. Which, I supposed, wasn't saying much.

The seconds ticked by painfully, each one grating against my mind as I imagined the magic in the flare box draining and the sun creeping towards the horizon.

I flicked the flare box off, tucking it back into my vest. Hopefully, that was enough.

"Wait here," I said to the shadow I assumed was Grey. When he didn't object, I applied an easy pressure to the bolt, sliding it out of place and easing the door open. It elicited hardly a whisper as it closed behind me.

The air was cooler in this cell, as though we were high enough to catch a breeze, though I was just as blind as I'd been before. But I wasn't alone.

"Who are you?"

A voice spoke from the darkness, raspy like embers crackling. It was exactly how I imagined. Deep and commanding but worn away. The way everyone's voice becomes when they're imprisoned.

I squinted, my eyes adjusting to take in the faint shadow of a figure. It was a good deal taller than I was, but even in the dark, I could see the hunch to his form.

"Petyr Durallane?" I asked.

The man stepped forward, and the room took shape before me, his body no longer blocking the light that crept through the window bars to streak across the floor.

"I am he." He was tentative. No one was supposed to know he was here.

I nodded. "I'm here to help you."

"Help me?" he asked, his confusion thickening his voice. "Did Halvorson send you?"

I ignored him, moving towards the cot on the right side of the room. "Have they come to speak with you yet?"

"No." His boots shuffled against the floor as he moved towards me, his eyes on the blur of my hands darting across the hay. "I've been in isolation since I got here."

I'd gotten here on time. I ran a hand through my hair. "Good."

I spun, the warm spray of his blood speckling my hand as his throat split open. Then, I had one hand over his mouth, the other catching him under his arm. The small blade I'd hidden in my hair was still pinched between my fingers.

"What the—"

Lifting my head, I saw where Grey now stood in the doorway, his eyes like liquid onyx in the light from the window as they widened on me. I ignored him, lowering the weakening body to the floor as the blood pulsed slowly from the man's neck.

Were it not for the tense circumstances, I would have found the shock in Grey's voice amusing. "You said you were a thief."

"No." I peeled my hand away from the man's mouth. "I said I was like a thief." Straightening, I turned to meet Grey's eyes. "You didn't ask what I steal."