

Shameless

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Shameless

She waves her fingers through the water, watching it swirl and move around them. It's cold, as she expected it to be. She feels the bite of the morning air on her skin as she pulls the clothes out of her basket and washes them in the river. Except the occasional chirp of a bird and the rustle of wind through the trees, there's only silence. She tries not to dwell on her solitude, but she can't help but think of the other few women and girls who'd left at her arrival. They'd worn the same old expression of distaste, fear, condescension, and even a little loathing. The tears don't prick her eyes anymore, but she still feels the dull ache in her heart.

"Mourning again? Or raging?" the voice comes, stiff and unforgiving.

She glances up to find, not a person, but a creature unlike anything she'd ever laid eyes on before. She shoves down her mix of disgust and fear. Its rough skin is pulled into a wicked grin, its small eyes deep-set into its large head. Its fingers end in long, razor sharp claws, its skin a muddy green, and it crouches on its back legs in the shallow water.

"Thinking of that day? That rabid lone wolf? The one that found you at the river, just a little farther upstream from here?"

Her blood freezes at his words, chills race across her skin. She'd do anything to forget that day.

"There's a way to return to what you had, to be accepted again by those around you." He offers, "I'm not saying you can bring her back, but you can still have a worthwhile future."

Bring her back. She wants to scream. Of course not, she can never fix that mistake.

“That day you were at the river with your sister, you couldn’t have known the wolf would appear,” He acknowledges. It feels as if he’s reaching inside my head and voicing all my deepest fears, my deepest secrets. “But when you panicked, you left and your little sister tried to follow...when she tripped and you weren’t there to protect her...”

A tear slips down her cheek, hearing Alice’s terrified scream again. She left her. She didn’t save her.

“The wolf got her. You were a coward. A murderer.” He states. “If you listen to me, you can leave that all behind, create a new life for yourself.”

She wants to bury it all so badly, to never again relive it.

“If you marry the noble son Alistair, you’ll never be dismissed again. If you kill the older brother, you two will inherit everything. You can abandon your past and start anew.” He promises, “Are you willing to do so?”

She can’t hide her pleasure in his words. She can do it, if it means she’ll find peace again, she’ll do anything.

“Yes.”

She dismounts her horse, her feet hitting the forest’s ground with a light thud. She glances sideways to see the two noble sons doing the same. The elder son turns back to the guards. They step back at his gesture, leaving the immediate area to hunt a little on their own. In her head, she’s dubbed him Heir. She avoids calling him by his name whenever possible. It’s easier that way. Her heart speeds up a little. She’s so close. It’s almost time. They continue on, away from the guards to the clearing, the cliff. The younger son steps to the ridge’s tip, looking down the

small distance to the trickling stream and trees below. It's not too far, but it's a high enough drop to kill a person. She resists the innate urge to keep far away from the ledge.

She steps up beside him, studying the scene below. "It's beautiful."

"That it is," he replies, smiling. She follows suit, her smile wide. He glances at his brother, and she keeps her countenance from revealing her mind's shift to calculation. The noble heir lumbers over to stand beside them, and she breathes in as she contemplates the situation, feeling almost hyperaware. She needs Alastair to remain ignorant, so he must leave. She needs an excuse. *He—he was defending us! This, this THING came out of nowhere. It rushed us, shoved him backwards...* That'll do. She needs him to pull his knife, to have it in his hand. It'll make her story more convincing.

"Oh, oh no--," she glances down at her hand, mock horror overtaking her delicate features. "My bracelet, it's gone. I must have dropped it when we dismounted. I should go find it—"

"No, no, let me," Alistair offers, to placate her. "It won't take me but a moment."

"Thank you," she replies, ashamed. "That's very kind."

He ducks his head with a smile before heading off into the woods. She watches him, in a show of fondness for his observant brother, as she waits until he's far enough way. She doesn't know how long he'll take, but the bracelet's tucked away in the pocket of her riding clothes. She estimates he'll search a few minutes at least.

"Your brother is very kind," she says, drifting back to the view and the Heir. She keeps herself a step behind him, the plan unraveling in her mind. *She gasps, "Watch out!" staring at the trees.*

“He is. He’s always been altruistic, ever since we were young,” he admits, admiringly. “It doesn’t matter the task, big or small.”

He spins on his feet and follows her gaze, pulling his knife. “What? What is it?”

“Sometimes he tries too hard, stretches himself too thin. I’ve wished I could be as selfless, to hold his guileless strength of will.”

“Something’s in the woods,” she swears. She takes advantage of his distraction, one shove backwards, his feet slip on the hard soil, his balance wavers...just one more heave. He topples...

His words transport her back to an innocence, a naïve belief that everything is good, everything is fair. Her sister believed so. Even she’d believed so, before that day, in the times she spent with her sister.

Everything is good. Everything is fair. Everything will work out.

But it didn’t. Now she’s here, on the brink of finding that happiness again, finding her peace. All she needs to do is this one deed, then she can marry Alistair. She’ll have unobscured access to the family’s riches, she won’t be ignored any longer. She won’t be shamed, disgraced, insulted, or avoided, not anymore. Her mind won’t quiet.

She can’t stop feeling as she felt in the moment after the incident. The moment she realized her sister was gone, and she wasn’t coming back. The moment she lost part of herself. She looks at the Heir, as he calmly tells her about his brother. He glances at her, and she nods in understanding. He continues.

Tears gather in her eyes, but they don't fall. This won't help her. She knows now, nothing can fix her sister's disappearance and nothing can change her past. She can't kill him, she can't tear apart Alistair's family like she tore apart her own.

She steps back, barely holding back her sobs as her heart breaks anew. She thought this would bring her happiness, but it'll accomplish nothing except placing another murder under her name. She turns away, not caring what the Heir, Silas, thought, and she departs. She hears him call her name, uncertain, but she doesn't turn back. She knows exactly where to go, where they won't find her.

She leans against the tree, facing the boulder Alice had once called their spot. Her tears had stopped a while ago, and for the first time she felt lighter. She'd always been called a coward and a murderer behind her back, she'd seen it in the faces of her neighbors, but she wasn't. She won't murder, she isn't capable of it. She knows that now.

"What have you done?" the hateful voice demands her attention. She finds the creature only a few yards from her, enraged. "You didn't follow through, you've ruined everything! This was your last chance to return to any resemblance of the respect, the dignity, the happiness you had, and you've dashed it to smithereens!"

"No," she says simply.

"You have nothing now."

"I have everything now." She says, unafraid. She stands, strengthened by the knowledge that she didn't possess the evil everyone accused her of. She was stronger than it. And she wasn't a

coward, either. “Your intentions and your plans are no longer of any concern of mine, I don’t need this to acquire any happiness. I don’t need you to give me anything.”

The creature shrieks louder as she turns away. Its claws swipe at her in an instance. She doesn’t notice the danger, doesn’t flinch as it raves, only getting more and more apoplectic. She just keeps walking. Its claws pass right through her, as if they weren’t even there.

She returns home, feeling content for the first time in a while.