

THE
FALLEN

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A CROW CITY PREQUEL NOVELLA

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So I won't forget that day.

TRIGGER WARNING: A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE to start with the trigger warning for this story.

Because there's really only one, but it's a frightening one I was almost afraid to write about, more than any of the others I've touched on or plan to touch on in future books. So I might as well just come out and say it bluntly:

This book deals with the subject of suicide.

PTSD and survivor's guilt, too, as factors in the impact of loss and trauma and how they can pave the way to suicidal thoughts. This is not the story of a macho alpha male toughing things out. It's not a story about a brave struggle; it's not a story about hope, even if there is growth, change, and in the end...a very important choice. This is a story about a broken man with nothing left, and a look into the suicidal mind once it's progressed beyond denial and fear into fatalistic acceptance. It's a perspective many people don't think about, and may not be able to identify with or understand. But it's a real and terrifying path that many others have tread—and some never made it back from that black and lightless place.

I did. Barely. But that's a story for later, if you make it through to the end and the afterword.

If you've read *The Lost*, you know Gabriel Hart's story doesn't end in these pages; that may be some small comfort. But that doesn't change that certain things depicted in this story may be triggering. If you're triggered by mention of suicide, *do not read this book*. If others' thoughts of suicide push you to suicidal thoughts of your own, walk away. If others' thoughts of self-harm or mentions of drug use trigger the urge to harm yourself, put this book down—now, later, it doesn't matter if you quit on the first page or halfway through as long as you step away from something that harms you. While it matters to me to write this story, it matters more that you keep yourself safe.

You matter.

And I would never want you to read anything that would make you feel otherwise.

CHAPTER ONE

HE WONDERED IF HE WOULD EVER be able to put the gun down.

Gabriel Hart stroked an oiled cloth over the slide of his Sig Sauer M11, then wiped down the barrel; the scent of gun oil, pungent and faintly astringent, stung his nose. Under the dingy light in the shop front of Blackbird Pond, the handgun's parts gleamed against the scratched tile counter. He could disassemble and clean his weapon with the thoughtless and comforting familiarity of prayer, a ritual cut into his flesh like stigmata. The sharp metallic clack and slide of pieces slotting together was his choir, the chant of a silent monk who offered up his voice to a broken god of death.

The pattern on the grip of the barrel pressed into his palm, a subtle scratch, and he closed his eyes. He could still feel the simmering boil of the Afghani sun swallowing his entire body, skinning him one layer at a time to flay him under the heat. That smell always brought it back: gun oil, a whiff of something like warm goat fur, the crunch of gravelly earth under booted feet, and the baking shimmer of dusty desert air that smelled and tasted as yellow as the pervasive blanket of sand and dust. Everything had been washed in the same shade of pale dun, back then. The land. The buildings. The sky. His memories.

Him.

He could never shake that taste that built in the back of his mouth, caking on his tongue like clay. That taste of dirt and old blood, thick and choking off his airways.

Back then he'd carried an M4 Carbine, slung across his chest and hanging heavy, its strap biting into the shoulder of his fatigues and scratching against his flak vest, the barrel pointed down. The rifle had become an extra limb, its presence so ingrained that giving it up had felt like amputation.

Those long days crouched among burned-out ruins, sleeping in the back of a field Humvee, far from home and any promise of safety, the rifle had been his only shield. He hadn't understood, when he'd first enlisted. Hadn't understood that out in the field it wasn't the violence, the gunshots, the constant shelling, the omnipresent threat of land mines and IEDs that ate a hole in you.

It was realizing that four walls no longer meant safety, no longer meant stability, no longer meant the inalienable right and *ability* to control his environment and defend what was his. That the world of *home*, where walls and a lock could become a man's fortress and his kingdom, was gone. War taught a man what it meant to be vulnerable. To *live* vulnerable in a way that most men, secure in their positions, would never understand—and there would never be a moment in that yellow endless hell where a wall was anything but temporary cover and the blind, grasping pretense of even a moment's safety as long as they couldn't see outside. The constant tension had been more than just a crushing weight.

It had been his world, pressing down on him and rolling him flat, and the only thing he'd had to force it back, to make some room for himself, had been the length of that M4 in his hand.

Old habits died harder than old friends. He'd lost the M4 in the ambush, and by the time he'd been airlifted out of Sangin in pieces vaguely shaped like a man, getting the rifle back hadn't mattered. But when the VA hospital had released him into the emptiness that remained of his world, he'd needed something to staple his feet to the ground. Something to take the place of that missing limb, and the standard-issue Sig Sauer had been good enough. It had fit *just so* in his hand and let him feel like he was made of the same stuff as the rest of the world, instead of a twisted thing of broken steel cutting every fragile bit of paper life he came into contact with.

And every day, the ritual. The routine. The poetry of it, rhythmic and sharp, putting the pieces where they belonged because the Sig...the Sig was *easy*, everything fitted and grooved and falling together just right with no effort at all, until it sat so perfectly in his hand. Even when the scar on his leg became a second heart pumping pain through his veins instead of blood, even when the Vicodin started to wear off, he knew how to handle the Sig. He slid the pin back where it belonged and pulled the slide back, then slammed the mag in with the heel of his palm until its weight and balance settled just right, and for just a moment everything fell back into place inside him.

He closed his eyes, breathing in and out, and pressed the muzzle to his temple. It bit in hard, flooding him with that heady smokelike gun oil scent. His finger curled against the trigger, hooking into the cage of the trigger guard, sliding home. The silence waited for the *pop*, the *crack*, begging for anything to fill the breathing emptiness with something more meaningful than the rusty *mew* of the cat in her little corner bed. He could do it. Easily. Killing was something he was *real* fucking good at.

Deadeye aim, and he knew just where to angle to make sure it was just one hot burst of searing, cracking red and then a 9mm slug lodged in his brain and *bang*, nothing left of Gabriel Hart.

No one to even remember he'd been here.

And he was lying to himself if he believed that.

He swore and jerked the Sig away. When he set it down on the counter, it rattled and jittered loudly until he let it go and shoved his shaking fingers into his hair, gripping tight until they couldn't tremble anymore and the pain pulled at his scalp, pulled at him, pulled him back. His chest burned hot, breathing fire, and he dug in his pocket until he found his phone. There were only two numbers in the address book. The rest he'd deleted. They were gone anyway. So was *she*, but as long as he didn't delete her number he could pretend she was still waiting just a phone call away, to call him *little brother* and tell him what a fucking dick he was for not making it home for Christmas or the Sun Dance or her chemo treatments yet again.

He stared at the screen, at the listing that read *Lani* – (555) 853-6739, then wrenched his gaze away and stabbed his thumb against the contact that just said *Priest*.

The phone rang twice before that *click* came, that sound of the line connecting when Gabriel had half hoped it wouldn't. He didn't know what he was hoping for. What he thought would happen. And he didn't know what to say when a familiar voice rolled over the connection, deep and liquid with the fluidly lyrical inflections of a native Italian speaker.

“I never thought I would hear from you again.”

Gabriel closed his eyes. Priest's voice wrapped him in chains. As long as Priest was alive, as long as *one* was left, something still bound him to earth.

Even as those chains squeezed the life from him, choking him until he couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak.

He had no voice. No words, when he didn't even know why he'd called.

Because the one thing he wanted to say, *save me...*

That would never happen.

In the silence, Priest's low, dark laughter drifted, a breathy and dangerous thing, heavy with sinister promise. With *malice*. He hadn't sounded like that before. No. No, he'd laughed with hearty, cynical amusement, the laughter of a man surrounded by people he trusted and cared for like his own brothers and sisters, people he'd sworn his life to. Sworn his humanity to, though they'd failed to protect that.

Gabriel had failed to protect that.

“I know it's you, Hart,” Priest breathed. “Trying to pull me back from the edge again?” A long

silence, and then he made a low, considering sound. “No...that’s not it, is it? You’re standing on the edge yourself. Looking over into the black. Ah, *si*...it’s so very tempting, isn’t it? Compelling. Seductive.”

Gabriel shuddered. Priest spoke about suicide the way some men spoke about sex, raw and deeply enticing, yet he’d never go down that road himself. No. Not Priest. Instead he’d filled the cracks in himself with blood.

Other people’s blood.

I can’t do that, Gabriel tried to say, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“You know how to ease the pain.” Priest chuckled. “You just won’t do it.”

“I don’t know how you can.” He found his voice. It plunged daggers into his throat and carved the words out of him. “I don’t know how you can give this to other people. Make them feel it. It’s not right.”

“There is no such thing as ‘right.’ There is only who deserves pain, and who doesn’t.”

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“Don’t I?” Priest lilted. “*Madre de Dio*, you’re still so *noble*. But that is where you and I differ, my friend. Your scars cut away the monster to reveal the man. My scars killed the man...and left only the monster. And the monster understands that sometimes, pain is the only way out.”

“You’re not a monster.”

“We are *all* monsters.”

“I can’t believe that. I can’t accept it.” He shuddered. “I can’t accept *this*.”

“Then your only options are to watch yourself die slowly—or finish it quickly.”

“Believe me,” Gabriel whispered, “I know that already.”

Again that laughter. That sick, darkly seductive laughter that didn’t belong to the man Gabriel knew. The man he’d loved like his own blood. This was the laughter of the grim reaper, reaching through the phone to wrap dry bone fingers around his neck.

“Look at you. Still sacrificing yourself for your country. *Semper fi* was never meant to be so literal, Hart.”

He ground his teeth and hissed, “Maybe not to you.”

“You and I are different breeds.”

“We weren’t always.”

“Things change.”

“You changed them.”

“*I didn’t do this to myself*,” Priest growled, that voice deepening abruptly, the snarl of a wolf

backed into a corner, hackles up. “This was done *to me*.”

“But you chose what to do with it.”

“At least I chose.”

“Yeah.” Gabriel opened his eyes, pulled the phone away, and ended the call with a swipe of his thumb. His fingers went numb, and he dropped the cell, carrier of hateful messages, onto the counter next to the Sig. “Yeah, you did.”

* * *

HE STAYED IN THE SHOP as long as he could stand it: repairing the second lift, organizing his tools, pretending this was *work* when it was really just a holding pattern, something to fill the hours. Tybalt trailed him back and forth from the shop front to the garage floor, mewing until he sank down on the oil-stained concrete and let her crawl all over him and shove her head under his jaw. Her hind paws pushed and kneaded against his lap as she propped her forepaws on his chest and rubbed her wet nose to his chin. He buried his fingers in her fur and rested his brow between her ragged, chewed-up ears.

“You’d be fine without me,” he said. Her whiskers tickled his cheeks. “You would. You’d walk the alleys and climb into dumpsters and hunt rats in the street. But she’d kill me if I didn’t spoil you...so I suppose you’re stuck with me for a while longer.”

“*Mew*,” she said, and Gabriel laughed—a bitter and cracking thing like swallowing glass—and pulled himself to his feet, spilling her to the floor.

“Yeah. I know. Less feeling sorry for myself. More food.”

He let her back into the shop front, dumped some kibble out in her corner bowl, and scattered a few chewy cat treats around the bed she only deigned to sleep in when the sun had arced away from her favorite warm spot on the windowsill. As the sun sank toward the hard line of the city streets, he propped his hip against that windowsill, easing the pressure off his throbbing thigh, and struck a cigarette. And as the taste of singed cocoa coated his tongue and smoke coiled around his head in wreaths, he wondered if Be:he:teiht had first seen his visions of the world to be in the smoke of his carved wooden pipe, before he blew the land to the four corners of the earth and made the world that was.

“*Hehheisonoonin neniitoneino', noh hebesiibeih'in,*” he whispered, exhaling smoke on every word, but he doubted either the fathers or grandfathers heard him. Or the sisters, or the mothers, or anyone left in this gray world of concrete they’d built atop the painted white cones of their teepees. But the blood of the old world still ran in the cracks of the new: in the narrow skyscraper spires that mimicked the jutting poles of tents, in the bright red and white graffiti scrawled in patterns of chevrons and crows and turtles on the dirty walls, in the smell of frying flatbread that filled the streets. It was

still in the songs they sang with each new moon, in the drumbeats and ululating voices blending into the pop music drifting from car radios tuned to the local airwaves, in the leather-scrap dolls they gave their children, in the way fathers taught their sons the rites of coming of age. A new rite every so many years, each to celebrate the life of a warrior who had survived yet another winter and another time of killing.

He remembered his father: his face painted to show the number of his years, his gray-streaked hair bound back, zig-zags making lightning down his face and his shoulders draped in feathers and stars. One at a time, he'd painted Alani's face, then Gabriel's. His sister had been a warrior, too. Maybe more of one than he was. They'd been sixteen. The first rite, their faces painted red with the blood of birth into a new life, that passage into the fringes of adulthood. They'd looked at each other and laughed. It had seemed so silly, then. Children who knew the ways of their world, loved the ways of their world, but they'd been seduced by the shallow modern practicality of the *niatha*, the white spiders that wove their way around Crow City and caught it in their webs.

By the time they'd had their next rite at eighteen, they hadn't been laughing anymore. *Heisonoonin* had been gone, and it had been mother who'd painted their faces in slow, grave lines and woven dip-dyed feathers into their hair and spoken the heavy words turned strange by her English accent, her recitations clumsy and uncertain yet so sincere. Father's fishing poles had stayed against the wall, drying out and turning brittle. Mother had never seemed the same after, and when she'd stood at the window and watched the sun turn the river into a pool of blood, Gabriel and Alani had held each other's hands and tried not to look at the place where *heisonoonin* had gone under and not come back up again.

Then one day she'd been gone, too. A lymphoma that had gone undetected until far too late. A countdown. A promise. And, too, a prophecy.

One that had been fulfilled far too soon.

When they'd been twenty-two, Alani graduating Ivy League medical and Gabriel graduating Annapolis, they'd painted each other's faces in bars striped across their brows, and stared into the eyes of the man and woman who had replaced the children they'd always known. That man and woman had gone separate ways, and he hadn't found his way home until there was nothing but a tombstone and grass growing over earth long gone cold. According to tradition, he'd placed her weapons on her grave: stethoscope, scalpel, forceps, things she'd wielded with a warrior's grace but hadn't been able to use to save herself. He'd smoked a ritual pipe alone in the graveyard, and tried to see her face in the smoke.

There'd been nothing.

There was nothing in the smoke now, either—and he stubbed the cigarette out on the windowsill, smeared his fingertip in the black ash, and streaked it under his eye like a *notkóniinén* going to war.

But he didn't know what he was fighting. Not anymore.

There was nothing left to fight but himself.