

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY  
(CHAPTER 1)

FALLEN EAGLES SERIES

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Edited by

UNDERLINE THIS EDITING



A Terrible Beauty

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T. Birmingham** believes words are our greatest form of magic. And making magic is what she loves best. But when it's time to put the words aside, T. enjoys drinking whiskey with her tribe, eating pretzels with Nutella, watching and reading as many stories as she can, especially romances, and traveling wherever the wind takes her—sometimes all at once. She also loves a sturdy (but cute) pair of cowgirl boots, is hoping to one day build a log cabin with her Man Bear, and she writes Urban Fantasy as well as Paranormal, Contemporary, and MC Romance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This story was one I sat down to write, put to the side after a chapter or two, and then a couple weeks later, I sat down again, and in one day, banged it out. It flowed through me, and I honestly cannot help but love Kit and Lee. They will always be one of my favorites.

I'd like to thank my editor, Katie of Underline This Editing, for all of her help getting this newest baby in working order. You're my Devil's Advocate, girl.

**Thank** you also to my proofreader, Cat of Cat's Eye Proofing and Promos. You catch a great deal of my last minute literary fuck-ups.

**To** my friends, family, and readers: Thanks for being the best fans a girl could have.

**Rock on!**

-T.



*This story is dedicated to the survivors who hold the stories of the fallen in their hearts.*



## FREE FALLING

**T**he A/C hadn't kicked on in the old Ford pickup they used for her family's hardware store, Markham's Everyday. The hot, thick, humid air filled her lungs, opening her pores to the elements and clearing her mind in a way that nothing else seemed to now a day. Not since she'd returned from the war.

There was little in the world that kept Kit Markham sane any longer.

Her hands curved around the solid sphere of her steering wheel, and the stinging heat settled her nerves as the bright sun sliced violently through her window. It could have been the sweltering heat that brought the flashback forward, or the sitting, or...just that fucking time of day.

She tried to settle, tried to hold onto the brief moment of clarity the heat had brought, but she knew it was futile.

*Stay in the moment.*

*Focus on this one point in time.*

Still, all the calming shit they'd given her at the therapy meetings; all the talk of healing and self-help; all the focus on meditation and staying in the moment...

All of it was useless.

No matter where she was, any little thing could send her back through the black hole of time—for Kit, war was for always, and her mind was a reminder of that.

She felt her scream slowly rise as her mind and body both fell into the wicked sting of the past—

*“GO AHEAD, GIRL. TEMPT THEM TO TELL US THE TRUTH. SCREAM SO YOUR male protectors will have no choice but to convert or die,” the dark young man, called Hashmat, taunted. He spat at the ground, sending some spittle into the area of dirt near her knees, but she was long past caring.*

*He knelt at her side as he sliced through her bra with the standard issue knife he’d actually stolen off her own person. Her uniform from the night’s patrol was already on the ground, shredded along with her body, which had been covered in small slices. Punishment. Torture. But these men had made it perfectly clear that it wasn’t her body they wanted.*

*Beyond the insanity Hashmat kept spewing about conversion and killing the kafir or infidels, she recognized that their true aim was to torture. Ironically, they weren’t focusing on the men for torture. Rena and Summer herself had received the worst of the punishments.*

*While Summer had just lost her bra, she was still clothed in underwear but Rena was completely naked. Her light skin on display for all the men in the room, including Hashmat and the three other men he’d had with him when she and her friends had been ambushed.*

*She and Rena had been rushing, trying to get off shift so they could hit a local party. It was only by chance Hammond had stopped by with his buddy, Casper, just as the militants came upon them. They’d been reckless and stubborn. They’d both thought that life was all about parties and sunshine and a little bit of war thrown in.*

*She knew better now. Life was all about war.*

*Her eyes softened, pleadingly, even though she felt anything but on the inside.*

*“Please don’t,” she whispered to Hashmat as bile rose. She didn’t want to*

*plead. She wanted to kill the four men who'd taken her, Rena, Casper, and Hammond.*

*Four on four; should've been even. If she and Rena hadn't been distracted.*

*Instead, she'd gotten them all three things: herself and three of her fellow soldiers into enemy territory, weapons taken, and by the rising and setting of the sun, over twenty-four hours of captivity.*

*Hashmat's hot breath touched her ear as he whispered his disgust. "We don't touch filthy heathens, girl." He looked briefly back at the three other guards and at her own teammates. "You're not cooperating!" he yelled and she tried to ask what he needed, but his eyes were alight with a rabid fire that she knew wouldn't be tamed by more questions. "I think I'll continue working you over, girl." His accent was thick as he continued to tease her, not with the violation of her feminine form, but with the violation of her wounded body, once again glossing over his earlier comments about conversion and the killing of infidels in favor of torture. There were things worse than penetration. There were knives and bullets and various instruments that could be used on an already naked and humiliated body.*

*Summer had realized from his rantings that whatever was happening here was more about Hashmat's anger—whether having to do with his religion or some other reason, she might never know. She just knew they had to find a way to survive, so she'd do what she must. Too bad Hashmat and his three buddies were the equivalent of Afghan rednecks, completely unaware of the upper politics, militants who were just in it for the fun of torture or under the guise of religion were unpredictable.*

*She ignored Hashmat's whispered plans for torture and instead did a visual check of the others. Rena's eyes were filled with shame, but also a steady anger that Summer knew would help them survive.*

*Casper was his normal stoic self—a detached calm he wore naturally, which Summer envied at the moment.*

*But it was one of her oldest friends, Hammond, who settled her. His whole demeanor promised retribution and pain, and at 6'5", almost 300 pounds, he could deliver on that promise.*

*His midnight blue eyes and dark, olive Cajun coloring only served to*

*remind her of the man she'd left behind and might never see again, Hammond's little brother, Leland...*

*Lee, her mind whispered.*

*She'd been ignoring the other three men and Hashmat's threats, but she suddenly heard a loud crack and the whizzing of a bullet through the room, so close...*

*The earth quaked beneath her, but the logical part of her brain understood it wasn't truly the vibration of the land below them. It was a reverberating against the dirty slab of the home's structure as someone she knew fell to the ground from the kneeling position they were all in.*

*She didn't breathe. Didn't whimper. But oh god, she wanted to do something. Yet, she didn't dare move even a muscle. Everything in her body was still, except the tears she felt start to move down her face and the quiver of her lip, unable was she to stop that one tremor.*

*She couldn't see who fell, but dear god, she hated that her foremost hope was that Hammond wasn't the one dead. While Rena had been one of her best friends in college ROTC, Hammond was her family. Her older sister, Autumn, would never forgive her if she got her husband killed.*

*When their captors left abruptly, a deadly quiet in their wake, she fell to the ground, unable to hold herself up. But in falling forward, she saw who'd caused the reverberating, and her scream came out clean, as though it'd been struggling to escape the whole time.*

*Although the sound was cut off almost as quickly as it had started, the scream tore through the room like a knife, leaving jagged cuts between the relationships they'd built over the years.*

*And even with those hours behind her, that had been only the start of the thirty hours they were held captive.*

KIT'S VOICE WAS RAW FROM THE SMALL SOUNDS SHE'D BEEN EMITTING, but it wasn't her tortured throat that dragged her out of the memories.

No, it was the soothing hands of an unknown as Kit was pulled

from her truck, and although she struggled, whoever was calling her name was stronger.

And didn't that just fucking piss her off.

She lashed out, catching the man on the cheek with not just the strength and precision of her left hook, but also the red claws she got filled every couple weeks at her younger sister, Winter's, salon.

"Summer!" She couldn't answer. Instinct told her to fight. "Kit!" The voice yelled, but she was too far gone.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

They were such an ugly four words.

But just because they sounded ugly or terrible didn't mean they weren't true.

There were days, weeks, months, years where she lost time, and inevitably, those thirty hours spent in the home of ignorant and disturbed militants was the cause of her time lapses. A few had labeled her paranoid among other things, but at the bottom of it all, the pit that she filled her lost time with had been laid bare and dug during her time in captivity.

The hands on her softened even as she scratched and kicked and fought.

Her arms were pinned to her sides, her legs cocooned by the man's against the side of her truck, his warm breath fanned against her temple, and his familiar scent invaded her thoughts.

He'd always been her escape.

Once, he'd been the bad boy with the good heart, her childhood best friend, and her high school sweetheart.

Now, however, their relationship baggage could have its own zip code.

"Lee." She exhaled his name like a silent reckoning, a faithful prayer that would never come to fruition, but still she wanted so badly to rekindle what they once had, to reach out and take what he was offering—and to give her all in return.

But that was impossible.

For over two years, she'd come to him. Not for sex. Never for that.

But for freedom, yes.

He seemed to understand, just as he always did, what she really needed. After holding her tightly for just a moment and kissing her temples gently, he moved quickly away from her, grabbed her hand, and she walked with him to his bike.

There was a time when his bike had been a rebellion.

Since coming back to Golden Trail, Pennsylvania, riding the wind on the back of Lee's bike wasn't a rebellion.

It was a refuge.

And as much as she hated herself for all the pain she'd caused since those thirty hours...

As much as she'd never be absolved of her own bag of lies...

She still felt that sometimes she'd earned her short spurts of refuge.

So, she swung her leg over the solid plated, shiny beaut of a bike that was Lee's Triumph, and she let the road have her. She didn't fall into old banter, didn't comment on the fact that Triumphs were a class below Harleys. She couldn't. Not then.

Right then, she just needed refuge.

And as the scarred and fucked up loose cannon she now was, a part of her didn't even care that she did whatever the hell she needed to in order to fill her ever-sinking soul.

She dealt with the slightly slimy feeling every time she used Lee to get her fill of some small piece of freedom.

She drew the line at sex.

She drew the line at true comfort.

She drew the line at taking too much from the man she wanted to give her everything.

But she'd take everything else.

And because there was nothing truly left of the girl she'd once been, she gave very little in return.

What the fuck did she care?

Hell had saved a seat for her ten years ago when she'd been a naïve

twenty-two-year-old, fresh out of college, thrust into a desert battle, and changed her friend Rena's fate.

She was a fucking masochist, though.

Anytime she gave even just a little bit, like when she held on tight as they rode the streets outside Philly as hard as they could, she could feel just a bit of the old Summer.

Then she'd remember the time in that deserted insurgent guardhouse after Rena's loss, remember what happened after, and even that small part of young Kit would cringe and hide.

For Kit, war was for always, and she'd see it sometimes—that long-lost look in Lee's eyes that said he'd seen plenty of shit too. Even if she didn't have so much to confess to the only man she'd ever loved, she'd still not have brought Lee into her inner war for all the world. He deserved his reprieve from battle.

But if she wanted to recover what she and Lee once had, she never could. Because she'd have to let loose the handle on that bag of lies, and there was no guarantee they'd survived what crawled out of that old canvas sack she'd carried since the war.

