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PREVIOUS BOOKS IN THE RUINOUS LOVE TRILOGY:

*New York Times* bestseller *Butcher & Blackbird*

# LEATHER & LARK

BRYNNE WEAVER



PIATKUS

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## CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNINGS

As much as *Leather & Lark* is a dark romantic comedy and will hopefully make you laugh through the madness, it's still dark! Please read responsibly. If you have any questions about this list, please don't hesitate to contact me at [brynneweaverbooks.com](http://brynneweaverbooks.com) or on one of my social media platforms (I'm most active on Instagram and TikTok).

- Eyeballs but not eye sockets, so you're welcome
- Teeth and tooth byproducts
- I might have ruined pizza and beer. Also smoothies.  
Still not sorry
- Snow globes
- Autocannibalism . . . ? Welcome to a debate you never thought you'd have
- Numerous weapons and sharp objects, including darts, scissors, guns, saws, knives, grinders, an edger, and a little implement called an enucleation spoon
- Severed fingers
- You might have new thoughts about crafting with epoxy resin
- Vehicular collisions
- Drowning in various forms

- Terminal illness of a loved one
- Detailed sex scenes, which include (but are not limited to) adult toys, choking, rough sex, mild degradation, sexual acts in public, pegging, praise kink
- References to parental neglect and child abuse (not depicted)
- References to child sexual assault (not depicted)
- Religious references/trauma
- Explicit and colorful language, including a lot of “blasphemy.” Don’t say I didn’t warn you!
- Injured dog (cause of injury not depicted, and he’s okay, I promise!)
- There is a lot of death . . . it’s a book about a contract killer and a serial killer falling in love, so I feel like that’s probably a given

For those of you who came here after the *B&B* ice cream and just read the *L&L* triggers and thought, “She’s not really serious about the pizza . . . right . . . ?”

This one’s for you.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Wanderer**

*Alone (Slow Edit)*, BLVKES

*New Religion*, MARGARET WHO

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Last Defense**

*Immortal*, MARINA

*Dizzy*, MISSIO

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Apparition**

*Triggered*, Chase Atlantic

*We Appreciate Power (feat. HANA)*, Grimes

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Scorched**

*Twisted*, MISSIO

*Work*, ionnalee

*Locked*, Welshly Arms

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: Renew**

*Liabililty (feat. Astyn Turr)*, Tape Machines

*My My My!*, Troye Sivan

*Believe in Love*, MARINA

**EPILOGUE: Magic Trick**

*Afterlife*, Hailee Steinfeld

**BONUS: Strapped**

*Troublemaker (feat. Izaya)*, OMIDO

*Love U Like That*, Lauv

PROLOGUE

**IGNITE**

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Lark

“This is called the consequences of your actions, sweetie,” I say as I unravel the fuse to the fireworks strapped between Andrew’s thighs.

His cries reach a fever pitch only to die in the tape strapped across his mouth.

You wouldn’t look at me and think it, but it’s true . . .

I love the sound of his distress.

Andrew sobs and thrashes in his chair. I give him a bright grin and continue backing away through the meadow and toward the tree line, close enough that I can see the fear in his eyes, just far enough that I’ll be protected by thick trunks when I leave him alone in the clearing. His muffled pleas are desperate. His rapid breaths billow from his nose in plumes of fog that reach toward the starlit sky.

“Do you know why you’re there with fireworks strapped to your dick and I’m over here with a fuse?” I shout.

He shakes his head, then nods as though he can't decide which answer will stop this torture. The truth is, it doesn't matter what answer he lands on.

"If I ripped that tape off your mouth, you'd probably tell me you're *oh-so-very-sorry* about fucking Savannah in our bed while I was away, wouldn't you?"

He nods wildly, his predictable bullshit caught in the glue. *I'm sorry, so fucking sorry, I'll never do it again, I love you I swear . . .* blah, blah, blah.

"I'm afraid that's not really why we're here."

Andrew blinks at me, trying to decipher what I might mean as my grin turns feral, and when it does, his true panic sets in. Maybe it's my words, or perhaps it's the delighted gleam in my eyes. Maybe it's the way I watch him, unblinking. Or maybe it's the way I laugh as my thumb strikes the flint wheel of the lighter clutched in my hand. Maybe it's all of these things combined that make him piss himself. The urine shines in moonlit rivulets as it streams down his naked, shivering legs.

"That's right, sweetie. I know your secrets. *All of them.*"

My eyes stay locked on Andrew's as I slowly bring the fire closer to the fuse.

"Oh fuck—I almost forgot." I let the flame extinguish. Andrew's body sags with hope and relief.

*Hope.* It's cute, really.

I guess I can't judge so harshly—I had hope once too. Hope for *us*.

But I was naive to think Andrew was right for me with his hint of a bad boy edge. Those two well-placed tattoos seemed hot. That perpetually disheveled hair gave off a *no-shits-given* attitude.

Even his inability to stick to a job seemed legit, though I don't know why. Somehow, I'd convinced myself that he was a real-deal rebel.

Then he fucked our friend Savannah while I was out of town and I realized, he's not a rebel.

He's a loser.

And not only that. Once I discovered he'd cheated, I stole his phone, and I learned just how wrong I'd been all along about my so-called boyfriend. I found messages to girls, some of whom were too young to know better than to trust a hot drummer who called them beautiful and promised them all his attention. I found more than just a bad boy.

I found a fucking predator.

One who had slipped right under my defenses. And years ago, I promised myself one thing:

*Never again.*

When I lift my gaze to the night sky, it's not really this moment that I'm seeing. It's not even memories of the anger and disgust I felt when I looked through Andrew's phone. It's a memory of the gray stone spires of the prestigious Ashborne Collegiate Institute, their copper-capped points taking aim at the stars. Even now, years later, I can still summon the sense of dread that lurked beneath every breath I took there. It was a palace of shadowed rooms and sickening secrets. A castle of regret.

Predators like Andrew abound on this beautiful earth like a fucking locust invasion. Sometimes it seems like no place is free of infestation, even fortresses that are meant to be sacred, like Ashborne. Beautiful and grand. Secluded. *Safe.* Just like in nature, the prettiest things are often the most poisonous.

And Mr. Laurent Verdon, the artistic director of Ashborne? Well, he made some very pretty promises.

Regret washes over me. Regret about the death of Mr. Verdon. But not in the way you might think.

*I should have been the one to kill him.*

And now my best friend, Sloane, will carry that burden and its repercussions on her shoulders for the rest of her life.

I see glittering flecks of white light as I press my eyes closed, tighter and tighter. When I open them again, the past is safely stored away. Back then I had no power. But things are different now.

Predators might make beautiful promises, but mine is simple and unfussy.

*Never.*

*Again.*

It might not make for a pretty vow, but I do my best to make the execution of my promise fucking *spectacular*.

I take a deep, cleansing breath of the autumn air. Then I grin at Andrew and rummage in my bag until I find the portable speaker and connect my phone.

“Atmosphere is so important in these moments, don’t you think?” I ask as I bring up “Firework” by Katy Perry and turn it up to full volume.

Predictable? Yes.

Perfection? Also yes.

I sing along and don’t bother to hide my broad smile. There might be no chance for Andrew like Katy suggests, but he’s definitely gonna have a spark inside.

“Well, I guess it’s time to get this show on the road. And you know what you did. So do I. We both know I can’t let you go. Like I said, baby,” I call to him over the music with a shrug. “Consequences.”

I light the fuse to the sound of Andrew’s renewed desperation.

“Ciao, sweetie. It’s been . . . something,” I call over my shoulder as I duck into the safety of the forest.

Andrew’s screams are a delightful harmony to the crescendo of music and the percussion of fireworks that crack and burst in the night. His suffering is a grand show of colorful sparks, a salvo of bright light and thunderous sound. Honestly, it’s more majestic of an exit than he deserves. Everyone should be so lucky.

It’s fucking magnificent.

I can’t be sure when Andrew’s wailing stops, not once the Triple Whistler bottle rockets start to go off. Those things are *loud*.

When the eruption dies and the last sparks are little more than falling stars, I step into the clearing. The scent of saltpeter and sulfur and singed flesh wafts from the blackened, smoking form in the center of the meadow.

With careful steps, I walk over to him. I can’t tell if he’s still breathing, and I’m not about to check for a pulse. It won’t make a difference for him anyway. Even so, I watch for a long moment, music still blaring behind us from where I left the speaker in the tall grass. Maybe I’m looking for signs of life. Or maybe I’m waiting for signs of life in me. A normal person would feel guilt or sadness, wouldn’t they? I mean, I loved him for two years. I thought I did, anyway. But the only regret I feel is that I didn’t see the real Andrew sooner.



Even that tinge of remorse is dulled beneath a feeling of accomplishment. One of relief. There's power in finding secrets and blowing them up in a beautiful, bright light. And I've kept my promise. No one else suffers but the ones who deserve it. I took care of it myself. If a soul will be marked for this life taken, no one will carry that mark but me.

*Never again.*

A low moan pierces through the music. At first, I don't believe it, but then it rises again in a puff of smoke.

"Holy shit, baby," I say on the heels of an incredulous laugh. My heart sings beneath my bones. "I can't believe you're still alive."

Andrew doesn't answer. I don't know if he can even hear me. His eyes are sealed shut, his skin charred and raw, blood seeping from warped edges of seared flesh. I don't take my eyes from the fog that spills from his parted lips as I rummage in the depths of my bag until I find what I'm looking for.

"I hope you enjoyed the show. It was a great performance," I say as I unholster the gun and press the muzzle to his forehead. Another quiet moan escapes into the night. "But I didn't bring enough fireworks for an encore, so you'll just have to use your imagination."

I squeeze the trigger, and with a final explosion, there's one less locust in the world.

And there's only one thing I feel.

Fucking invincible.

# SUBMERGED

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Lark

"Don't hold your breath," I yell to the man in the sinking car as he pounds on the window and begs for my mercy. "Get it?"

I don't think he heard me. But that's okay. I just smile as I wave with one hand, my gun trained on him with the other in case the window budes and he manages to slither his way out.

Fortunately, the pressure of the climbing water makes it nearly impossible for him to escape, and in mere moments, the vehicle is submerged. Bubbles burst in the black water as the car slides beneath the gentle waves of Scituate Reservoir. The headlights point to the stars, flickering as the electrical connections succumb to the flood.

"Well, *shit*."

This isn't good.

Actually, it's kind of amazing. But it's also a giant pain in the ass.

I chew my lip and watch until the lights blink out and the surface goes still. When I'm sure everything will stay silent, I pull out

my phone and open the contacts. My thumb hovers over Ethel's number. She's always been the one I've called when things have gone tits up. Admittedly, a car casket at the bottom of a lake might be a little beyond the usual definition of *tits up*, even if the timing wasn't already making it impossible to ask for Ethel's help.

With a sigh, I select the number just above hers instead.

Two rings and he picks up.

"Meadowlark," my stepdad chimes on the other end. I roll my eyes and smile at his use of my childhood nickname.

My wary tone is his first indication that something might be amiss when I say, "Hi, Daddy."

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Is everything okay?"

"Sure . . ."

"Did someone puke on the carpet?" he asks. It's safe to assume he's had a few drinks at his own Halloween party if he hasn't already clocked that there's no thumping bass or raucous voices in the background from my end of the line. "I'll have Margaret arrange some cleaners for you first thing. Don't worry about it, honey."

A final, damning bubble erupts from the lake like an exclamation point. "Umm, those aren't really the cleaners that I need . . ."

The line goes silent.

I swallow. "Dad . . . ? You still there?"

A door closes in the background on his end of the line, muffling the laughter and voices and music. My stepdad's unsteady exhalation is the next thing I hear. I can almost picture the way he's probably rubbing his fingers across his forehead in a futile attempt to channel some chill energy. "Lark, what the fuck? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm totally fine," I say, as though this is just a minor inconvenience despite the balled-up, bloody T-shirt I press against my hairline where a deep gash throbs. My smile must be bordering on deranged. The Harley Quinn costume and twenty layers of makeup I'm wearing probably don't help either, so I guess there's more than one reason to be grateful that no one is around.

"I can sort it out if you just give me the number."

"Where are you? Did Sloane do something?"

"No, not at all," I say, my voice firm, my smile instantly gone. Though I hate that he would jump to the conclusion that my best friend is at fault, I swallow my irritation rather than unleash it. "Sloane is probably holed up in her house with a smutty book and her demonic cat. I went away for the weekend. I'm not in Raleigh."

"Then where are you?"

"Rhode Island."

"Goddammit."

I know what he's thinking, that I'm too close to home for a fuck-up of this nature. "I'm sorry, truly. The car just . . ." I reach for the right words to explain, but only one surfaces. ". . . sank."

"Your car?"

"No. Mine is . . ." I glance over my shoulder toward my Escalade, the smashed headlights glaring back at me. "Mine has seen brighter days."

"Lark—"

"Dad, I can sort it out. I really just need the number for a cleaner. Ideally one with a tow truck. And maybe some scuba gear."

His laugh is hollow. "You've got to be joking."

"About what part?"

"All of it, hopefully."

“Well,” I say as I lean over the rocky drop to peer down at the water, “we might be able to get away with someone who can snorkel. I don’t think it’s *that* deep.”

“Jesus Christ, Lark.” A long-suffering sigh permeates the line. I loathe the feeling of disappointment. It’s as though he’s standing right next to me with that look I’ve seen so many times before, the one that says he wishes I could do better but he just can’t bear to break my heart by saying it out loud. “Fine,” he finally says. “I’ll give you the number for a company called Leviathan. You’ll need to give them an account code. But *do not* give them your name. Not over the phone, not when they arrive. They might be professionals but they’re dangerous people, honey. I want you to send me a text every thirty minutes to let me know you’re okay until you get home, understand?”

“Of course.”

“And *no names.*”

“Got it. Thank you, Dad.”

A long silence stretches between us before he finally speaks again. Maybe he wants to say more, to call me out, ask some uncomfortable questions. But he doesn’t. “I love you, sweetheart. Be careful.”

“Love you too. And I will.”

As soon as we hang up, I receive a text from my stepdad with a phone number and a six-digit code. When I call, a polite, efficient woman answers and takes down my details. Her queries are direct and my answers are minimal. *Are you injured?* Not really. *How many dead?* One. *Any special requests to facilitate cleanup?* Scuba gear.

When she’s relayed all the terms and conditions and payment details, I hang up, then turn back to my Escalade where the cooling engine ticks beneath the crumpled hood. I could wait inside the vehicle, where it’s warm, but I don’t. This crash is going to take a toll on my already fucked-up sleep schedule, so it’s not like I need to sit in the wreckage and conjure more nightmares. Even still, it was worth the consequences to watch that piece-of-shit predator sink to the bottom of the reservoir.

Another locust exterminated.

When a friend from back home in Providence mentioned rumors of a pervy teacher at her little sister’s high school, it didn’t take long for said pervert to take the bait on my fake social media accounts. Before long, he was asking for photos and begging for a meetup with “Gemma,” my teenage alter ego. And I thought, *Hell, why not? I can come home for a visit, party for Halloween, and get rid of some vermin.* Technically, I guess I was successful, though I hadn’t really intended to run Mr. Jamie Merrick into the water. I was hoping to force him to the side of the road and shoot him in the face, find a worthy trophy to take, and then leave him there like the piece of trash he is. Unfortunately, he seemed to catch on that he was in trouble and nearly got away. I guess I gave him a big clue with my failed attempt to shoot out one of his tires when he refused to pull over. Cackling maniacally as I waved the gun out the window probably didn’t help either.

It might sound surprising, but it’s actually not that hard to get away with shooting someone on a deserted road and driving away. Problem is, it’s a little harder to cover your tracks when part of your car is imprinted on part of theirs.

On the plus side, ramming that asshole's vehicle into the lake does have more theatrical flair.

"Everything will work out better in the end," I whisper as I use a coin to loosen the screws from my rear license plate. The front plate is a crumpled sheet of metal—I already picked it up from the road. When I'm finished, I drag my coat out of the Escalade and pull on a pair of gray sweats over my tiny shorts and fishnet tights. With my gun safely holstered in my bag, I gather the paperwork from my glove compartment before I toss the strap over my shoulder and close the door.

For a moment, I just stand at the steep bank of boulders where Jamie's car flipped and catapulted him into the afterlife. His face is so clear in my mind, illuminated by my headlights in the instant before the crash. Wide, panicked eyes. Curly blond hair. His mouth agape in a silent scream. He was terrified. He knew he was about to die and had no idea why.

Shouldn't I feel bad about it?

Because I don't. Not at all.

I blink away the determined fury that still lingers in my veins and grin at the watery grave ahead. "Sometimes karma needs a backup bitch, don't you think, Mr. Merrick?"

With a satisfied sigh, I stride toward the rocky shore.

I text my stepdad to let him know I'm okay and set a timer for the next message. Then I climb the jagged rocks until I find a spot out of view from the road. With my hood tugged up over my pigtails and my body aching from the crash, I lie down on one of the granite boulders and stare up at the sky, a perfect place to wait.

And wait I do.

For almost three hours.

The occasional vehicle passes by during that time, though they can't see me where I'm wedged in the shadows of the boulders. None of them stop to check the Escalade. I managed to park it next to the ditch perpendicular to the lake before it thoroughly died, and unless you're on the lesser-used road and really looking, the damage is hard to see. So when a vintage car with a rumbling engine approaches slowly and rolls to a halt next to my SUV, I notice right away. My heart thunders beneath my bones as I remain crouched between the rocks to watch.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown sender.

Here.

"Short and to the point," I say to myself before pushing to my feet. My head spins a little and my legs seem wobbly at first, but I manage to keep my shit together as I approach the car.

The engine cuts out. I hold my bag to my body with one hand inside, my fingertips resting on the cold handle of the gun.

When I hesitate in the center of the road, the door creaks open and a man steps out, his muscular body sheathed in a black wet suit. A mask covers his face so that only his eyes and mouth are visible. His build is powerful but every movement is graceful as he approaches.

My hand tightens around the gun.

"Code," he growls.

I rub my head with my free hand as I try to remember the numerical sequence that I've repeated to myself several times since my stepfather gave it to me. With this strange guy staring me down, it takes a moment longer to remember than it probably should. "Four, nine, seven, zero, six, two."