

TO MY FROGGIE FRIENDS:

Just start reading. We can chat over Hangouts. If you have comments, questions, etc, just make a little comment on the side. This only works on a real computer, so all you on phones... sorry. I'll get to writing... if you need me I'll be at the end, if I'm on at all. (Which happens less than you'd think. _(°~°)_/)Excuse the numerous typos and misspellings, or the abundant plot holes and unexplained randomness. I'll fix them in the second draft! (And third. And fourth. And quite possibly seventy-second.) Also, excuse any random "William"es that you may find in the middle of words. They are the byproduct of a malfunctioning piece of Google Docs software. Pay them no mind. (If only I could blame all the mistakes in here on Google Docs.)

See ya in between the lily pads!

-Kel

NOTES TO MYSELF

OVERUSED WORDS:

There was

WAs

Could

Started

Immediately

Suddenly

Turned

Stared

Sighed

THINGS THAT COULD VERY WELL NEED WORK:

Kate's personality- need some more quirks- Starbucks test

MICE THING

Chapters

Find a new personality for Richard- because JOHN... *growls*... unless maybe Rich was an inspiror in John's rebellion? And he just copied him?

LP'S NAME... uuuuuuuuuunnnnnnnrrrrrrrgh....

Jailed Heart

Jailed Heart



JAILED HEART

Uploaded to Kel's Little Nothings



Bunk Bed Books

In the Year of Our Lord
Two-Thousand and Nineteen

Jailed Heart

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Jailed Heart

To Charlotte Sidney Bower
“Cha-Cha”

From Kel, Bane of Brothers, to Charlotte, Knave of Brothers,
Greeting!
This is to you, Cha! Enjoy your fifteen minutes of fame while they last!
“Youth’s a stuff will not endure” and all that rot.
Tally Hooooooooo!

NOTE:

Kate, her friends, the castles, and the villages are all purely fictional.

NOTE FOR THE HISTORICAL SNOBS:

This is not a textbook.

I do not try to be hyper-accurate. I'm not trying to write a thesis, with all my sources listed and my outline clear and concise. I'm writing a novel, and that's a horse of a different color. It's also a lot more fun to ride.

I figured that I had two ways of going at it. I could either place Kate in a fantasy world that looks *uncannily* like England in the 1200s, or I could just put her in England in the 1200s.

I chose the latter. I knew it would be harder to write and a lot more research would be needed (*The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in the Middle Ages* never left my side during the writing of this book), and I, like the fool I am, jumped right in.

This is a work of fiction, written by a modern-day author who has no intention of making her characters speak in old English or use so much medieval vernacular that you need to use your dictionary every other word.

I also do not want to make the Middle Ages seem overly idyllic. I will admit as freely as anyone that they were not. Yet, I also don't want to dwell on the discomforts and sufferings of medieval life too much. From Kate's perspective, 1200 is as modern as it gets. People living in the year 3000 will probably look back in 2018 and think how terrible we had it, with all those stinky and noisy cars, strangling-hazard electrical cords and lumpy, uncomfortable fabric mattresses. Does that make our life any worse?

This has been a major rant, I know. I figured I would get it all out of my system now, right at the beginning. I won't bore you with any more notes. Let's get right on to the novel.

So, my bottom line: THIS IS NOT A HISTORY BOOK. THIS IS HISTORICAL FICTION.

My creative license is up-to-date and active. I got it renewed yesterday, just for this book. Watch me plow through this book, holding this card as my answer... or excuse. Whichever you feel is more accurate.

Chapter One

The Dawn of the Everlasting Night

I came awake slowly as the sun rose over the hills. It cast its rays over my face as I raised my head from my knees. The bright light hurt my tired eyes, and I buried my face in my hands for a moment before looking up again, blinking against the light.

It felt like I had just gotten to sleep. The nights didn't last long enough now. There seemed to be no nights anymore. I was too worried and too overworked to sleep.

I stood from my knee-hugging position and stared down at my hopelessly wrinkled skirt. I ran my hands over the creased fabric a few times, trying vainly to smooth the dress, but the wrinkles stubbornly refused to flatten. I sighed and gave up. There were more important things nowadays than wardrobe.

"Good morning, Kate," I heard my mother say. I stretched long before answering. The joints in my back answered beautifully, snapping down from the base of my neck to the bottom of my spine.

I turned to Mother. "Good morning." I smiled down at her and smoothed her sheets. "How'd you sleep?"

"I didn't," was her terse reply. "I froze the whole night."

"You could have woken me up," I said. "I would have gotten you more blankets."

"No, no," Mother said, waving her hand at me. "I felt my skin." She held her hand up to my cheek, and I felt the heat radiate from it. "If I want to get over this fever, the last thing I need to do is give it more heat."

"I can't argue with that logic," I said as I moved to the table next to Mother's bed. I picked up the empty pitcher setting there and stared inside for a moment. "You were thirsty." I set the pitcher down and scowled at her. "Honestly, you should have woken me up. I didn't sleep much, anyway."

Mother laughed. "Oh?"

"What?" I asked, sitting down on the edge of her bed. She just smiled at me with a laughing twinkle in her eyes. I grabbed her hand. "Tell me!"

"You didn't sleep, did you?" she said, raising her eyebrows. "You could have fooled me. You were snoring louder than your father!"

I laughed with her, but a sadness passed between us at the mention of Father. There was a pause, then Mother looked out the window.

"Any word?" she said wistfully.

I shook my head. "No. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing."

"Well, I don't know, either. Sometimes I'd prefer bad news than this awful suspense," she said, running her finger along the wooden window frame.

I bowed my head. "I know." I stroked Mother's hand, and suddenly she drew me into a hug.

Jailed Heart

“Oh, Kate, what’s going to happen to you?” she said, her voice suddenly sad. “I know I can’t stay here much longer, and...”

I immediately drew back and placed a finger over Mother’s lips. “No,” I said firmly. “We will *not* talk like that.”

Mother lifted my hand from her lips and placed it against her heart. “Kate, there’s no use dodging facts. Unless God does a miracle, I’m going. You know it. I know it.” She held up her hand. “I’m old, Kate. Older than most mothers. I don’t think you realize it, but it’s true. I’m not as healthy as most. I’m falling apart.”

“No.” My eyes were filling with tears. “No. I love you too much, Mother, to let you go.”

“You can’t stop it, Kate, no matter how hard you try. It’s natural to die, completely natural. You’re going to follow me, too. We’ll meet again.”

I was truly crying now. She held me in her arms and rocked me like I was a baby again. “I can’t let you die, Mother,” I whispered. “I need you.”

Mother wiped my eyes and smiled up at me. “You don’t need me,” she said, “You just want me.”

“No, really,” I said, brushing a tear from my cheek. “I need you, need you so much.”

“I’ll miss you too,” said Mother, “But you’ll come after me, and we’ll be happy for all of eternity.” She looked out the window again. “And I have a feeling that Father will meet me there.”

I started out the window towards the east. It looked down at the manor’s village. The town was already swarming with serfs. On the road that wound through the village, villagers and farmers were hurrying along.

Father was out there. He was fighting, fighting somewhere far away. “*Come home,*” I silently prayed. “*Come home and save Mother.*”

“*Please come home.*”

Movement on the road caught my eye. There was lots of motion on the road, but it was of the ambling sort. This was direct and purposeful, with urgency. I looked again and clutched at Mother.

He was riding a horse. Only knights rode a horse.

“No, it can’t be,” I said, leaning out of the window and gripping the frame harder. “No,” I said again, willing myself to believe against what I knew.

“He’ll meet me there,” Mother said quietly.

Chapter Two

Messenger of Death

I helped Mother dress. I cried the whole time, but Mother just stood there quietly, composed. She sat on her bed afterward, breathing hard.

“It won’t be long now,” she murmured to herself, and a chill ran up my spine. Just for a moment, her shoulders slumped, but then she straightened again and smiled at me.

There was a knock. “Come in!” Mother called out. Thomas, our steward, opened the door, accompanied by the knight. They both bowed before Mother, who smiled at them.

“Tell whatever news you have now,” she said before either of them was able to get a word out. “And tell it in the most direct and to-the-point manner possible.”

A look of surprise flashed over the knight’s face, and I had to suppress a giggle in spite of everything. The knight obviously hadn’t expected this type of reception. He bowed his head as he began to speak, and immediately all my mirth left me.

“Lady Grant,” he said, and I could feel the weight to his words, “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your husband was killed, fighting for Jerusalem. I’m...” his voice trailed off as he saw the look of anguish that had appeared on Mother’s face. “Sorry,” he finally said. “Just... sorry.”

Mother was silent for a moment, and I could see the grief contort her face. “Thank you,” she finally said, voice shaky, “For being honest. You can leave now.”

The knight and Thomas both rose to go. Mother held out her hand. “Wait, Thomas, stay a bit.”

Thomas nodded and lingered in the room. The knight shut the door behind him, and suddenly there was a loud, unearthly wail from Mother. I looked over to see her rocking on the bed, head in her hands.

I ran to her side. “Don’t cry, Mother, it’s alright.”

She took a quick breath to steady herself. “I know. I can’t waste time crying now. We have to move fast.”

Across the room, Thomas started. “Surely you don’t mean...”

Mother said nothing, just motioned to the window. Thomas glanced outside and his eyes widened.

I stuck my head out of the window and stared down at the village. All the peasants were gathering in the center of the town.

“What’s going on?” I asked Mother. “What are we doing?”

“The plan,” Mother said quietly.

I caught my breath. The plan. I knew what the plan was, but I never thought we would ever actually have to use it. And I never, ever thought I would have to use it by myself.

Jailed Heart

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m not leaving you, Mother.”

She gazed mildly at me. “I’m going to die soon, Kate. I’m weaker than you know.” She looked up at Thomas. “How long do you think we have?”

Thomas stuck his head out the window again. “Hour.”

“Look, Kate,” Mother said, “We’re far from any other castles or manors. The nearest one is Tarwood Castle, and that’s a two-week journey from here. The peasants will soon figure out that Lord Grant is dead, and that I’m about to die. When they realize that, they’ll rebel.”

“We have knights!” I said, crying. “They can protect us!”

“I’m afraid many of the knights want my power to themselves,” Mother said, frowning. She shook her head. “I’ll die, one way or the other, but you…”

She stopped and took my face in her hands. “I love you, Katherine Elizabeth. Love you more than I can say. And because I love you, I’m telling you to run. Run as fast as you can.”

“No!” I cried, throwing myself to my knees and burying my head in her lap. “I can’t leave you!”

“God says to obey your parents,” Mother said firmly, “And I’m ordering you to leave me. Therefore, you have to.”

I knew I had no choice. I stared up at Mother for a few seconds, then hugged her tight, sobbing. She kissed me once, then pulled my chin up. I watched as she raised her thin hand and pulled her ring from it. She held it up to the light. It was the ring Father had given her, a signet ring, with the Grant family coat-of-arms carved into the large sapphire that decorated the band. She lifted my hand and slid it on my finger.

“Let this ring remind you of two things,” she said. “I will always love you. Always. And never forget who you are, Katherine Elizabeth. Never forget that you are a lady. Never forget.” She kissed me again, then looked up at Thomas. “We’re ready.”

I stood up, knees shaking. I kissed Mother one last time. “I love you,” I whispered, hugging her neck tightly.

Chapter Three

The Flight of the Pretty Birds

Thomas led me out of Mother's room and down the stairs. I about fell on the steps, but he grabbed my arm and steadied me. I couldn't see where I was going- I was crying too much.

I stopped at my room to gather a few of my things. My lady-in-waiting, Anne, was there too. She looked up, concerned.

"Kate, what's the matter?" she said, casting her needlework to the side and leaping up.

"Everything," I said, willing myself to remain in control of my emotions. There would be plenty of time to cry later.

Anne studied my face for a moment. "Ah."

I had a sudden thought. I grabbed Anne's arm. "Come with me, Anne. I can't do it by myself."

"Do *what* with you?" she said, eyeing me and pulling away.

"*Run*," I said, walking to my dresser and yanking open my top drawer. There was a leather satchel setting there. Picking it up, I draped it over my shoulder. Opening my jewelry box, I pulled a few necklaces from it and shoved them into the satchel. These were Grant family heirlooms, and I would protect them till I died.

There weren't that many in the box. Father had sold many of them to raise enough money to go crusading. It made me sad to part with the jewels, but it was for a good cause.

Anne was packing with me. She opened my wardrobe and began selecting a few dresses. I stopped her, grinning slightly.

"We won't be needing those," I said, half-laughing at the confused look that flashed across her face. "Just grab anything you place value on."

"I place value on clothing," she said, running her hand over the fabric longingly.

"Oh, Anne," I said, sighing in frustration. "Why?"

"Why?" she echoed as if *I* was the one who was crazy. "You *wear* them."

"Look, Anne," I said as I shut the wardrobe, "We're not going dressed as rich noblewomen. If we did, how long would it take for us to get robbed?"

Anne suddenly seemed to understand. "Oh..." She dropped the gown she was holding and rushed to the door. "I get it. I'll get some food."

"Meet us in the chapel!" I called out, "Get something good!" I turned and shuffled through a chest in the corner. I pulled a few blankets out and rolled them into tight little bundles. I picked up all of my supplies and nodded at Thomas. "I'm ready."

We ducked across the short distance from the manor house to the chapel. It was empty, which was a good thing. Anne was already there, holding a sack full of dried meats and loaves of bread pilfered from the castle kitchen.

Jailed Heart

We walked through the chapel into one of the back rooms. I had never been here before, but Thomas knew exactly what to do. He pushed a crate to the side, then knelt. He pulled on a ring embedded in the floor. A trapdoor groaned as it opened slowly.

“Do we *really* have to go down there?” Anne said, staring into the black abyss.

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” I said, pulling her towards the hole.

“There could be rats...” she said, trying to undermine my confidence.

“All the better,” I said, taking the lighted candle that Thomas handed me. “There might even be some mice.”

Anne sighed, the sigh of a hopelessly persecuted martyr. “Whatever.” She glanced down the hole and balked. “You first.”

I obliged her, crawling down the ladder. My skirts got in the way, but I still hurried. I jumped down the last few rungs and held my candle aloft as I stared around the room that I never thought I would actually see.

It was a small room, musty and damp. I *did* see a rat skitter across the far corner, but I didn’t tell Anne. Loud screaming was the last thing we needed.

I walked to a trunk in the corner and opened the lid. Inside, the clothes we would need lay neatly folded. I picked up a long, white robe with black patches on it, and I smiled. Father was a genius.

Anne had come down now, and she wrinkled her nose, lifting her skirts above the dirty floor. “Kate, what are we doing here?”

“Disguising ourselves,” I replied.

“I’ll wait up here and keep watch,” Thomas called down. “You know what to do, Lady Katherine.”

“I’m not a lady while my mother yet lives,” I called back. The trapdoor shut, and we were alone.

“This place is creepy,” Anne said.

“So it is,” I said, beginning to let my hair down.

“Uh... what are you doing?” Anne said, staring at me warily.

I didn’t stop moving. “Undressing,” I said as I unpinned my bodice and slid out of my skirt. I now stood in only my woolen smock. Glancing up at her, I waved my hand. “Why aren’t you undressed?”

“What are we doing?” Anne practically shrieked. I stopped what I was doing and looked up at her.

“Alright,” I said, sighing. “I’ll explain. But we have to keep moving while I explain.”

She complied, beginning to take her clothes off.

“I’ve known of this plan for years,” I said, sifting through the clothes in the chest. “Father had this room made in case we ever had to flee the manor.”

“Alright...”

Jailed Heart

“We’re going to disguise ourselves as lepers, so we can travel around unstopped,” I said, slinging my satchel over my shoulder.

“*Lepers?!?*” Anne said, staring at me like I had gone mad.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?” I said, pulling the white-and-black robe over my head. The satchel was hidden underneath the fabric.

“But... but... what if we find a spot we want to live in and...”

“We’ll pack two disguises,” I said, holding up a peasant girl’s dress.

She stared at it, her face falling. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I wish I was,” I said, settling a tall red hat on my head. “Get thy costume on, Anne.”

She groaned, then took the robe I handed her. I walked over to the shard of broken mirror in the corner and peered at myself.

For once, the things I had always hated about myself came in handy. My square face, my thin lips, my boring brown eyes. They came together to complete the effect. I looked like a commoner, a leper. I had always thought of lepers as men, but now I realized that there were probably just as many girls with the horrible disease as men. I felt for them.

I let my hair fall from my shoulders and stared at it for a moment. I always did this in front of mirrors. My hair was my one vanity, my one pride. Whenever I felt that my reflection was about to drive me mad with her plainness, I would roll my hair out of my braids and run my fingers through it.

My hair flowed down in a bronzed cascade, glinting with gilded highlights. It more than made up for my hawkish nose and sharp chin. It was my personal opinion that I had the greatest hair in all of England. If I only had a face to match it. No one ever saw my hair, anyway. Whenever I appeared in public it was always plaited and covered by a headdress, leaving nothing to distract from my plain features. Well, nothing to distract but my clothes, which I always thought were distracting with their sheer elegance.

I turned back to Anne and started. She looked so... different... in these ridiculous robes. She normally looked like a noblewoman, a princess even, with her lovely face and cheerful smile. I was always a little bit envious of her, but the knowledge that her hair, which was blonde and stringy, wasn’t near what mine was.

Anne put on her hat and stared at herself in the mirror. She wasn’t as convincing as a common girl as I was. Her features were still decidedly noble and delicate. But there was nothing to be done. I couldn’t change her nature.

“What now?” she asked wearily as if I was a torturer in a dark dungeon.

“Dirt,” I said, picking up a handful of dust from the cobblestone floor. “We have to look like we’ve been on the road for months.” I sprinkled a bit on my hands, rubbing it around like it was soap. My skin turned from a healthy pink to a chalky brown, and I admired my work for a second.

Jailed Heart

I glanced up at Anne and couldn't help but chuckle at the look of total horror that graced her face. Her eyes shrank from the dust I held in my hand as if it were poison. She stared at me, uncomprehending, as I rubbed the dirt on my face and neck, completing my disguise.

I scooped up another handful and turned to Anne. "Just pretend it's makeup," I told her, "And you're having a makeover."

Anne bore it bravely, with only one long shriek for her lost nobility. Tears rolled down her cheeks, though she tried in vain to control them. At last, my dusting finished, I stepped forward and hugged her.

"Don't be ashamed of your tears, Anne," I told her as I held the weeping girl, "We're all going to cry before the day is over. But..." I wiped a tear from her cheeks, "You're ruining your makeup."

Anne choked back her sobs and took a long, calming breath. "Alright, Kate." She leaned down and scooped up her own handful of dust. "But you forgot one thing."

"What?" I asked, bending to get a bit more dust to touch up Anne's face.

"Our hair," Anne said, letting the handful of dirt fall right onto my hair. She tousled my crop, thoroughly distributing the dirt throughout my hair. She did the same to hers in relative silence, though her body jerked with controlled sobs. Finally, she looked up. "I think I'm ready."

I took her hand. "I'm proud of you." I walked over to the clothing chest and fished around. Eventually, I had two complete servant girl's outfits, ones close enough to our size to be passable. I stuffed these into a sack and slung it over my shoulder. I picked up another bag, this one filled with blankets.

I smiled at Anne as she picked up the sack full of food. She smiled back at me, unsure, but she was a smart person. The need didn't need to be explained to her. She knew that we needed to run from here.

I climbed up the ladder and pushed open the trapdoor.

Chapter Four

The Catching Disease

Thomas helped me up as I emerged from the underground room. He stared at me for a moment. "You..." He stopped, unsure what to say next. "Look like a leper," he finished lamely.

I rolled my eyes at him. "That *was* the point." I leaned down and grabbed Anne's hand, pulling her up. She tumbled onto the floor, breathing hard. She lay there for a second, then leaped up with surprising speed.

"We have to go now," she said, trying to be brave, though her voice trembled with fear.

I hugged her. "Yes, we do. There's no time to waste."

Thomas led us out of the chapel, and we squinted in the bright light. I glanced around, surprised by the stillness.

"Maybe..." Anne began, but she was never able to finish. She was cut off by a shout from behind.

I turned to see Mother, struggling to yell to us. I stared at her.

"Mother!" I yelled, running towards her. "You can't be down here- you're still sick!"

"Run," she panted. She was shaking. She stumbled towards me. "Run, you ninny! They're coming! RUN!"

"*Mother!*" I shouted as she collapsed onto the grass.

She lifted herself a bit and pointed a finger at me. "RUN! THAT'S AN ORDER!"

"Kate, she's right!" Anne said, grabbing my arm. "They're coming!"

I could hear them. The entire manor village was coming towards us, and they weren't being quiet about it. I heard shouts and the stomping of feet.

"I can't leave you!" I shouted to my mother.

"*RUN!*"

I knew I had to. But I still couldn't do it. She was my mother- I couldn't leave her to the mercy of these crowds.

Thomas grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. "Go!" he shouted in my face. "Right now!" He roughly pushed me away, in the direction of the front gate.

I took a deep breath and wiped the tears away from my eyes. The dirt on my face and hands had turned to mud, but there was nothing I could do about that now. I slowly started walking, Anne at my side.

Then the peasants came. There were over fifty of them, all brandishing sticks and rocks and clubs. My heart faltered. We were never going to get past them alive.

But, when they saw us, they suddenly stopped. I could see fear wash over their faces. "Lepers," I heard, whispered over and over again, from ear to ear.

Jailed Heart

“Don’t hurt us,” I heard Anne call out, and her voice was perfect for a leper, weak and fearful. I don’t think she had to do much acting. “Just let us pass on, please.”

“Get away from this village!” someone called out. “Why’d you come here?”

“We were hungry,” Anne answered. We were looking for food.”

A man stepped out from among the group. “We will let you leave if you leave *now*,” he said, pointing away from them. I noticed that everyone was slowly inching away from us. I could feel the anger pulsing from the peasants and I shuddered. They were full of hate, hate mixed with fear. It was a deadly combination. I could practically smell the blood in the air.

“Yes sir, thank you,” Anne said, beginning to walk away. I followed her, keeping my face shielded from view. I couldn’t let my tears show. As they let us walk away, I realized how narrow our escape had been. We got onto the road and started walking away, slowly.

I heard a scream from the manor, and I turned and watched as the peasants flooded the manor, my home. I wanted to scream too. How was I doing this, letting them kill my mother? What type of monster would walk away in perfect safety while their mother was murdered? I took a step forward.

Anne’s arms wrapped around me. “No, Kate,” she said firmly. “She would have wanted you to live.”

“They’re killing my mother,” I said, urgently pressing against my captor’s arms.

“She ordered you to run,” Anne said, “So run we shall.”

“I can’t,” I said, beginning to cry.

“Later,” she said, “Later when we are far away. Then you will cry, and I will cry with you. We will both cry, for everything that we have lost. But for now, we must be brave. We must have the courage to walk away.”

“When did you get so brave and wise?” I said, not unaware of the humor and reversal of this situation.”

“I will explain it all to you later, and I’m sure you’ll find my story very inspiring,” she said, “But right now we need to run.

“I know, I know,” I said, turning away. Another scream split the air. I tensed. “I can’t do this, Anne.”

“Hold my hand,” she instructed, “And just follow my lead.”

I grabbed her arm and held on for dear life, trying to block out the terrible noises coming from the manor. Just one more step, I told myself. Just another step, then another, then another, until this whole horrible world, is behind me and I step into Heaven itself. I closed my eyes and relied on Anne’s strong arm to guide me. I couldn’t see where I was going. I didn’t want to see. I was sure that the moment I opened my eyes a horde of horrible peasants would come swarming down on me, ready to kill me. I was going to have nightmares about this for years to come, I knew. I clung to Anne’s arm as she led me away from the only life I had ever known, into a life of which I knew nothing.

Jailed Heart

Chapter Five

Fireless

I passed that day in a daze. Anne (bless her soul) led me, led me on and on. She didn't know where we were going, but she stuck with me anyway. I finally found myself in a wood, seated on the ground. I still clutched Anne's arm.

Realizing I was safe, I slowly released my chokehold on Anne's arm. She immediately began to rub her arm, shaking it a bit. I couldn't help but notice how she winced.

"Let me see," I said, coming back to myself. I rolled up her sleeve before she could stop me and stared.

Her arm was black-and-blue, the bruised outlines of my fingers clearly defined. I ran my finger along the bruise, wincing with her. "Anne... I am so sorry," I said, wishing I had some cold water to put on the wound.

"I'm fine," Anne said, smiling in a pained way, "You just lost your mother- I get it."

"Mother..." I stared at Anne. "Mother..." My eyes lost their focus, and I no longer looked *at* Anne, but *through* Anne. I was lost in my pain for a moment, then I collapsed onto Anne's shoulder, sobbing. She held me and comforted me, though she cried too. It was like she had said- we cried for everything and everyone we had lost.

I don't know how long I cried for, but when I looked up, it was dark. I was suddenly terrified. These leper disguises might keep humans away, but what about wild animals?

I groped around for our bag of blankets. Finding the sack lying on the ground next to me, I pulled out two thick blankets. I handed one to Anne and unfolded mine. I wrapped it tight around my shoulders, shivering in spite of its warmth. I didn't know why, but having a piece of cloth coiled around me somehow made me feel safer.

Anne leaned her head against my shoulder. "I'm exhausted." She closed her eyes and heaved a long sigh.

I stroked her forehead. "Poor girl," I said, hugging her shoulders. "You walked so far today." I thought over the events of the day and suddenly remembered Anne's extraordinary bravery. I looked at her quizzically. "Anne, you said you were going to tell me about the complete change in your personality. Could you tell me now, please?"

"Oh, that," she said, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. The moon had risen over the tops of the trees, and shards of silver light danced through the rustling leaves. Anne stared out at the dark forest and shivered.

"Well..." she said, pulling her blanket tighter around her, "I remember seeing your mother lying on the ground, giving herself up for you..."

The memory flashed back to me and I fought the sudden urge to scream. I bit my lip and listened to Mary, through tears rolled down my cheeks unstopped.

Jailed Heart

“I saw the look on your face, and I realized that you were too confused and heartbroken to lead properly. So I made up my mind that I was going to be brave for you. And I’ve tried. I’ve been pushing back my fear all today.” She glanced around at the trees and her voice cracked. “I don’t know how much longer I can be brave, Kate. I can do it in the daytime but at night...”

All at once my heart nearly exploded with love for good, loyal Anne. She was like the sister I never had, keeping me safe in danger like a mother hen. I pulled her closer. Her courageous exterior melted in the warmth of my arms, and she sobbed. I cried with her, but I wasn’t lost anymore. I knew Anne. She was as delicate as a rose, and I vowed that she wouldn’t have to be brave for me anymore. I would be as brave as I could just for her sake, just to make sure Anne’s bloom was never bruised again. I would stand on my own two feet and wouldn’t be carried by anyone.

She fell asleep in my hug, tears drying on her cheeks. I kissed her forehead like a mother tucking her child into bed and covered her with a blanket. I sat there, on the cold, cold ground, and I passed the longest night of my life.

The tree leaves rustled, sounding like a whole pack of wolves and creeping things were closing in on me. An animal crashed through the brush beside me, and I stifled a scream. Two yellow eyes, reflecting the moonlight, watched me for a whole hour. Even though I knew they belonged to an owl, I had to constantly remind myself to be brave. Brave for Anne. Brave for Mother.

Mother. She haunted me more than any spectral animal or monster. I couldn’t forget those screams. They echoed through my mind like laughter, mocking laughter. *You ran*, they said, *you ran when she needed you most*.

I shut my eyes, but I couldn’t block out my thoughts. I didn’t sleep at all, though I tried to. I was in agony, mental torture.

Just when I thought I couldn’t stand it anymore and would have to scream or go insane, a bird started chirping nearby.

I slowly opened my eyes to see the sky pinkening through the trees. I sat up and watched. The bird trilled a few warm-up notes, then fell into an expectant silence. All over the forest, I could hear birds going through similar exercises, singing a few notes to clear their throats before silencing themselves. The sky grew brighter and brighter, and eventually, the whole forest, even the leaves on the trees and the slight breeze that rustled the grass stood still, waiting.

I have no words to describe what happened next. The edge of the sun peeked over the hills, and the forest exploded with sound and life. The birds started singing, and a more beautiful choir was never heard in any church. The trees began to shake themselves, shaking off a never-ending night and shedding their cloak of darkness, stepping into this glorious light.

I stared at the sunrise, the most beautiful I had ever seen, or so it seemed to me. The wind lost its chill and began to dance playfully. The monsters of the night fled, and I was left with only a beautiful warmth in place of the chill of the dark’s presence.

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That was the moment my soul began to heal and my heart began to truly love again. I raised my hands to the light, breathing it in and *feeling* it. I wanted to sing and dance and live like this, in this light of the sunrise.

I heard a stirring beside me, and Anne sat up. We both stared at the sun, rising in all his glory, and we both sighed longingly in unison. We both looked at each other at the same moment, and then we both fell back into giggles, girlish giggles. We laughed and laughed, though nothing particularly funny was said. We laughed from relief, from joy springing up where despair was. We laughed for the joy of rebirth. We rolled on the ground, laughing so hard that tears squeezed from our eyes, and with every giggle, our hearts healed just a little bit more.

Finally, Anne sat up, wiping at her eyes. “So, Kate,” she said, standing and shaking her robe out, “Where are we going today?”

“I... don’t know... exactly...” I said slowly, staring up at the treetops. “Somewhere safe. I don’t want to wander around all my life.”

Anne knelt and opened our sack of food. She handed me a heel of bread and a slice of dried meat. I thought over this breakfast. As I swallowed the last bite of bread, I had an idea, and I snapped my fingers.

“I have a cousin,” I said, “She’s older than me, a lot older. Her name’s Joan, and she’s the lady of a castle. Hilltop Castle, I believe it’s called.”

“Do you know how to get there?”

I laughed. “Not a clue. But...” I stopped and thought a bit. “I know it’s in the far southwest of England. It’s also a pretty well-known castle. If we kept heading southwest, eventually we would get close enough to ask for directions, right?”

“There are so many hidden assumptions in that statement I’m not even going to try to riddle them all out,” Anne said, shaking her head at me. “What if we don’t make it? What if we get lost?”

I grinned. Anne’s courage had definitely worn off. “We’ll probably get lost. Think of all the different roads we could take. But...” I said, looking back up at the rising sun. It was almost all the way up now, with only a tiny sliver of it remaining below the horizon. “But,” I repeated, “We could try it. It’s our best bet.”

“Alright...” Anne said warily. “How far do you think it is?”

“Oh, about seventy miles or so,” I estimated. “Don’t worry, we won’t do it all at once,” I added, noting the look of consternation that appeared on Anne’s face.

“That’s not what I was worried about,” she said, frowning. “I wasn’t expecting us to try to get there in a day- that’d be crazy, even for us.” She glanced up at the sky. “I have only one question.”

“Yes?”

“Do we have enough food to last us?”

I pondered this for a moment. “Good question. You’d know that better than I would.”

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She opened the sack and peered in. She closed her eyes and made a few rapid calculations. “No,” she finally said, “We don’t.”

I clicked my tongue. “That’s a problem.” I thought a bit. “How do lepers usually get their food?” I asked her.

“They beg for it,” Anne said, then realized what I was saying. “Now, Kate...”

“We’re traveling about the countryside disguised as lepers,” I said, “Nothing is Jemond us now.”

“We are *still* noble!” Anne said, crossing her arms and frowning at me like I was a naughty child. “I *still* have some pride, and I will *not* stoop to begging!”

“Alright,” I said promptly, “Then *I* will, so you don’t have to.”

Anne raised her hands in horror. “That’s just as bad! *You* are nobler than *I* am!”

“Well, if you’d rather starve, then I guess that’s your decision,” I said, folding our blankets.

Anne sighed and put her head in her hands. “Yesterday morning I woke up debating if I should braid my hair or put it in a bun,” she said wearily. “This morning I’m debating whether or not I should beg or starve to death.”

I smiled at her. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have much in the way of choices at this point.” I stood and threw the sack of food over my shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Six

Dusty Roads, Dirty Girls

I practically fainted as I cast myself down on the side of the road. “How can walking be this hard?” I moaned.

Anne cast herself down in the exact way I had, only with her innate grace and beauty. *I* probably looked like a jumbled heap- *she* looked like a queen, adorning the ditch with her presence.

We had given up setting up camp in the woods, hiding. We had learned that no one bothered themselves with lepers, and other travelers slept on the side of the road, too. There was more protection that way. Instead of being stranded in the middle of a dark forest, now, if they were set upon by robbers, they would be out in the open, often able to see the glow of another pilgrim’s campfire in the distance.

We had no campfire. Neither of us knew how to start a flame, and so we relied on our thick blankets to get us through the night.

We also discovered that people pitied lepers and were quite generous. Often, when we came next to a merchant’s wagon, a coin would be flipped from somewhere and land at our feet. (In my whole life, I have never met anyone as adept at accurate coin-flipping as a wealthy merchant.)

Moreover, I found I had a talent for begging. I didn’t do much acting. I didn’t have to. My costume did half my work for me. Even though Anne had an uncomfortable feeling that she was betraying all of the illustrious nobility that had gone before her, sullyng their spotless reputations by partaking of this bread, ignobly gotten, I gently reminded her that she had to eat enough to stay walking the next day. I also pointed out that much of her ancestor’s food had probably been “ignobly gotten” too, one way or another. It just hadn’t been recorded in the records.

I glanced over at the sun. It was low in the sky, but not low enough to call the day over.

“I think we have to keep walking, Anne,” I said, sitting up.

Anne groaned. “I... don’t... WANNA!” she said, putting her hands over her face.

“Me neither,” I said, laughing at her tiny fit of temper. “But we have to go on.”

“Wh-iiiiii?” she asked, dragging her hands down her face. “Can’t we just pitch up for the night?”

“It’s not late enough to bed down,” I said, waving a hand at the sun. “Look.”

Anne looked, and she sagged back to the ground. She stuck an arm straight up into the air. “Hand.”

“Well, in order to help you get up, I have to get up myself,” I said slowly, pondering the situation.

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“Well, what are you waiting for?” Anne said, “Help me up! You’re telling me to get up and get going, do it yourself!”

“But... I... don’t... WANNA!” I cried, laughing at my own hypocrisy. Anne just stared at me stormily for a moment, then burst out laughing too.

“What are we going to do with ourselves?” she said, crossing her arms behind her head.

“Live with ourselves, I suppose,” I reply, stretching luxuriantly and settling myself into a more comfortable position. “Live with ourselves, and sleep tonight, and wake up earlier tomorrow morning refreshed and invigorated.”

“Do we have the sacks?” she asked, feeling around on the ground.

“Right here,” I said, heaving the two bags into the space in between us. These were our lifelines on these roads, and we took great precautions to ensure that they wouldn’t get stolen. If they were taken, we would be lost. So every night, we slept on either side of these two sacks- one for our food, the other for our blankets- we had discarded the third sack, the one containing our other disguises, long before, stuffing our clothes at the bottom of the blanket bag.

I pulled a blanket from the bag and tossed it to Anne, who caught it and spread it over herself. “I never thought,” she said as she settled down, “That a ditch could be so comfortable.”

“Neither did I,” I said, rolling myself into a blanket and settling down. My eyes seemed to close themselves, pulling darkness over my world.

Sleep has never seemed so sweet. I have never slept as soundly as I did then, after walking and walking all day on a dusty road. I think, once or twice, I fell asleep while walking down the road.

We were only robbed once. And I don’t think you could even call it “robbing”. It was during twilight, that ambiguous time of day where the world seems to go into different values of grey, and a lovely haze obscures everything.

We were bedding down for the night when I heard a branch snap in the brushes. I slowly looked up, right into the eyes of a man. He was staring right at me, wide-eyed.

“Lepers!” he shouted, scrambling back into the forest. I could hear shouts of men from farther back in the woods, and I knew that our disguises had saved us. I shuddered to think of what would have happened if we hadn’t been masquerading as lepers. We’d probably never have made it to the castle.

I healed over that long trip. Every night for the first week, I cried myself to sleep. But I gradually felt the wound in my heart beginning to close, to bind together. I came to grips with my new reality, and I moved forward. I was still heartbroken- I knew I would always be heartbroken- but I pressed on. With every step, I left Grant Manor farther behind me, and I got one step closer to Hilltop Castle.

We finally came to a village. We were both wondering if we were anywhere close to where we needed to be, and Anne came up with the idea of asking for directions. I knew that we couldn’t

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go in our leper outfits, so we found a secluded spot in the woods and changed into our peasant-girl disguises.

I picked up a handful of dirt, preparing to dust myself. But then, as I lifted the dust, I noticed something. My hands were no longer white and clean. They were covered in dirt, grime, layered on, caked on. I let the dirt fall from my hands and stared at my palms. Looking up at Anne, I knew from the look on her face she had just realized the same thing as me. We weren't nobles anymore. There was nothing to differentiate us from common peasants. A sadness bore down on me. I looked down at my hands again. *Just a commoner.*

Then, something caught my eye. There, on my finger, a single sapphire sparkled. Immediately, Mother's words flashed into my mind.

"Never forget who you are, Katherine Elizabeth. Never forget that you are a lady. Never forget."

I held my chin a bit higher as I stared up at the sun. "I," I said aloud, "Am Katherine Elizabeth Grant. I am the Lady of Grant Manor, and nothing can change who I am."

I stuffed my leper clothes into the bag. "Let's go," I said to Anne, who had changed completely. She tossed me her white robe and hat, and I pushed it into the sack and threw it over my shoulder. I looked her over. I had to admit, she looked a mess, but a beautiful mess. She looked so much more fitting in clothes of her own gender, regardless of how ragged and dirty those clothes were. Compared to the ridiculous black-and-white leper's robe and tall red hat, she looked like a princess.

She looked me over as well. She shook her head at me. "I won't be seen with you," she announced decisively.

I stared at her. I knew I was homely, but I never thought that Anne would ever insult me to my face. It cut my heart. "Anne, you-"

She held up a finger. "I won't be seen with you... as long as your hair looks like that. It's lovely, Kate, and we must monopolize on that fact. Since peasant girls wear their heads bare, we can showcase it as never before."

She walked behind me and let my hair down from the messy bun I had put it in for traveling. She ran her fingers through it and shook her head.

"Too many tangles," she announced. "I can't do a thing with it until I comb it."

I sighed. To be honest, I had been genuinely excited about having my hair done. Anne had a natural eye for beauty, and she did my hair every morning back at the manor. I began to bundle it back up into a ponytail. "Oh well..."

Anne stopped me. "Not yet, dear. Wait a bit." She crossed to a sack and reached deep inside. She pulled out a tightly wrapped fabric parcel and unfolded it. I watched, awe-struck, as she pulled a comb, an honest-to-goodness comb from the depths of the package. She held it up to the sun for a minute, exulting in my dumbfounded face.

"Where- how..." I sputtered. A comb? Where on earth could she get a comb from?

"When we were packing up," she said, laughing, "And you wouldn't let me take any dresses, I figured the next best thing was beauty supplies. I already had them all in a bundle. I have

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combs, mirrors, perfumes, makeups, oils...” She stepped towards me and pushed me to the ground. “Sit.”

I sat, cross-legged, as Anne worked her comb deftly. My hair was tangled Jemond belief, but Anne told me that she had seen much worse. Where she could find anyone with worse tangles than I had was Jemond me, but she worked each knot skilfully, and they gave way before her nimble fingers and flying comb. It took not fifteen minutes and the rat’s nest had been eliminated, combed into a smooth wave of golden-brown honey. She scrutinized her magazine of cosmetics and selected a few specific oils and scents for me. She plaited my hair in a complicated series of twists that I had never been patient enough to lean. Finally, she graced it all with a bunch of flowers and stepped back to examine her work. She grunted in satisfaction.

“I’d love to do something better about your clothes, Kate,” she said, folding her kit back into a small parcel and tying it up with a bit of twine, “But I think it almost suits you better than those gaudy clothes. This lets your natural beauty shine out, the simplicity of it. They don’t distract from your gorgeous face.”

I laughed at her. “I don’t have a gorgeous face, Anne. Don’t flatter me.”

She stared up at me for a moment, then began to untie her parcel again. “Let me prove you wrong,” she said, pulling a mirror from the packet and holding it to my face.

I stared for a moment. What had happened? I looked... good. I had never looked good before when I looked in a mirror. Maybe Anne was right, and the luxurious clothes I was always dressed in *did* draw attention away from me and made me look plainer. Dressed in common peasant’s garb, was it possible I could look... *uncommon*?

I pushed the mirror away with a sickening feeling in my heart. I would *not* become vain. Vanity was what ruined my mother. Even though I loved her with all my heart, it got tedious to watch her stare in the mirror for hours on end. I would not become so egocentric. I refused to.

“I wouldn’t say that I look ‘lovely’ or ‘gorgeous’, Anne,” I said, trying to laugh it off. “Those are adjectives reserved for you, not me.”

Anne eyed me. “I don’t think young men would think so.” She packed up her mirror and hid it deep in the bag once more. She hefted the sack over her shoulder and tossed the other to me. “To the village we go.”

Chapter Seven

Arrival

The village was bigger than the manor's village. It was clearly a castle's village- the castle itself ruled over the tops of some nearby hills- but that's not what made me and Anne stare.

The truth was, we had grown used to being avoided as lepers. When we would walk by in our leper clothes, passers would hurry to the other side of the road. Here, we were jostled, bumped as children ran past us chasing each other and, once, we were thrown to the side by an alert man just as a horse came Willging past. Anne gave a short scream as the horse thundered past, inches from where she stood. The man took a deep breath and turned to us. "Are you alright?" he said with real concern.

I paused to look at our rescuer. He was an older man, dressed entirely in drab browns and greens. "Yes," I said, then realized that my voice was shaking. "I think we're alright." I smiled at him. "Thank you, sir. You saved us."

The man immediately frowned and his attitude towards us did a complete flip. Instead of concern, he gave us a look of scorn. "Watch where you're going," he said, crossing his arms, "You could have been killed!"

We mumbled hasty apologies, giving graceless curtsies in the crowded street. The mans just eyed us and stalked away, muttering something about dreamy little girls, always their head in the clouds.

After we got used to the bustle and pace of bing back among the living, I finally remembered that we were here to ask for directions to Hilltop Castle. I tapped a passing merchant on the shoulder and he turned to face us with an impatient sigh. "What is it, girl?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir," I began. "But we need to find Hilltop Castle. Are we anywhere near it?"

The merchant stared at us for a moment, then laughed. "You really don't know much, do you?"

"No, I guess not," I said, keeping my anger in check. "We aren't from here."

"I gathered that," he said, turning away from us.

"Please, sir," Anne said, and her voice was a model of humility and helplessness. "We only want to know how far we have left. We're so tired, and we need to know which way to go from here."

The man sighed and turned back to us. "You're here, girls. This is Hilltop Township, and that castle yonder is Hilltop Castle." He jumped up onto his donkey and rode off without a word.

I stared at Anne for a moment, and then, at the same moment, I began to laugh and she began to cry. But I could tell the difference between Anne's cry of sorrow and her cry of joy,

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and I knew we were both equally thrilled and relieved. We had made it. Two girls, unprotected, had escaped from a mob of murderous serfs, traveled across England, and survived. Not only that, they had escaped unhurt, well-fed, and properly clothed... though Anne would have probably said that leper's robes were *hardly* suitable for ladies. But she didn't care about that now. We hugged each other.

I turned from our embrace and stared up at the towers of Hilltop Castle, rising above the hills. I studied them for an instant. This was to be my new home.

The castle sat on top of a tall hill, the tallest around. The village sat on the hill opposite the castle. The vantage point was the best around, probably to watch for enemies.

"So..." Anne said, stepping up beside me. "We're here. Now what?"

"Well..." I hadn't given much thought to the matter. "I guess we go to the lady and we tell her who we really are..."

I suddenly stopped, unable to breathe, as a sudden vision flashed down on me. Around me, all these peasants suddenly turned on me. I could smell the anger in the air and stood, paralyzed, as they swept down on me like one man, all with shouts and raised fists. Then, just as suddenly, they were all gone, and I was alone, the people paying no attention to me. I realized my eyes were full of tears, and I was shaking.

Anne gently pulled me to the ground and brushed the tears away from my cheeks. "Kate, what's the matter?"

"I can't go back," I said with trembling voice, "I can't go back."

"Why?" Anne asked, pushing her eyebrows together.

"I just... I just..." I closed my eyes and gathered my thoughts. "I can't go back," I said at last, "Because I'm too scared."

"Scared of what?" Anne gently prompted.

"I remember those peasants, storming Grant Manor," I said, rubbing my forehead. "They were absolutely bloodthirsty, Anne. They wanted to kill me. I never, ever want to be in that position again. If I went back, I'd be terrified constantly."

"Oh." Anne was silent for a moment. "Kate," she said slowly, "I need to go back. I can't handle being out here all the time."

I had an idea. I reached for the satchel, hidden under my dress, and pulled it into the open. I pressed it into Anne's hands.

"When you get there, you'll need proof of who you are," I said, thoughts flying through my brain. "Right now, you look just like a common peasant. Except you are far prettier than one," I added. "You can show her these jewels to prove to her that you are far more."

"What?" Anne said, taking the satchel. "What about you?"

"I'll be around," I said, smiling. "I'll find a job as a serving girl, a laundress, whatever. I'll be fine."

Anne's eyes widened. "You can't. Kate! You're higher than I am, and..."

I held up one finger. "I can't go back to nobility, Anne. Maybe one day, but not now."

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Anne slowly nodded. "Alright. Alright." She lifted the satchel over her shoulder. "What should I tell Lady Joan?"

"Tell her that you are the lady-in-waiting of Katherine Elizabeth Grant, daughter of Lord Grant, her father's brother. Tell her what has befallen our family, and explain why I feel that I can't return. Tell her that I ask that you may become one of her ladies-in-waiting, and then await her response. From what I know of cousin Joan, I think she'll accept your answer and take you under her wings. If she wants the jewels, let her have them- she's a Grant through and through, and they'll stay in the family."

"Kate, I don't know..."

I held up a finger, silencing her. "As your lady, I command it to be so. Now, let's go." I jumped up and held out a hand. "You coming?"

Chapter Eight

Partings and Callings

I walked along the road to the castle. We had discarded the bag with the leper costumes in them, fearing what would happen if someone was to discover them and ask us why we had them. Our bag of food was still with us. Anne had said that I would need it more than she would, and I was inclined to agree with her. Who knew what sort of work I could get- or how soon I could get it.

I stood at the castle gate and turned to Anne. "Our paths part here."

She stared up at the big castle gate. "Do we have to? I'm sure that this castle is much better than the Manor as far as defense goes..."

"No," I said, "And that's final." I had made up my mind, and no one was going to change it now.

We walked into the castle unchallenged. No one thought two poor peasant girls would pose much of a threat, and, it's true, we wouldn't have been a bit useful in time of attack or defense. They had nothing to fear from us.

I glanced around until I found a man who seemed to know what he was doing. I tugged on Anne's sleeve, pulling her across the bustling courtyard. I walked up to the man and curtsied. Anne followed suit.

"What do you want?" The man sounded annoyed.

"Sir, we need to talk to the steward," I said.

"I'm the steward, what do you want?" the man said again.

"We must talk with Lady Joan," Anne said.

"*She* must talk with Lady Joan," I corrected, jabbing an elbow at Anne. "I don't need to."

The steward looked at me, looked to Anne, then back at me again. He sighed, frustrated. "Look, I don't know who you are or why you came or why on earth you would need to see the lady, but you can't. She only sees *important* visitors." He turned away from us.

"I *must* see Lady Joan," Anne said, quiet but determined. "It's *urgent*."

The man turned back and studied Anne with a new look of interest. He studied her from head to toe, and she rose to his inspection, lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders. At last, the man shrugged.

"Fine," he said, "But if she doesn't want to see you, that's another story."

"Where might I find her?" Anne asked, coolly polite and distant.

The steward waved his hand in the general direction of the inner castle. Anne said nothing, just waited in silence, patient with an unshakeable resolve.

Finally, the steward sighed and beckoned with his hand. "Follow me."

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He led us through the bustle of the courtyard and up a flight of stairs. We walked through hallways, through two sets of doors, and finally, he stopped in front of a dark wooden door. He knocked, and then we waited. I rocked back and forth on my heels, wishing, hoping, and praying that someone would answer.

Someone *did* answer. A maid peered out and relaxed when she saw the steward. "What do you want?"

"Me? Oh, nothing," he said, and I could feel the disapproval weighing down on us. "*She*," he said, jabbing a thumb in Anne's direction, "Wants to talk to Lady Russell."

"Need," Anne corrected quietly. "I *need* to talk to Lady Russell."

The maid scrutinized Anne with a critical eye. "Why?"

"You'll find out if you let me speak with her," Anne replied. "You can eavesdrop all you'd like. I have nothing of extreme secret to say, just some things that you don't want the whole village to know." She smiled, playing the Williammer to the point where even I could have been fooled. "You aren't a gossip, right?" she asked, tilting her head forward and lowering her voice.

The maid laughed and opened the door wider. "Come on in. You'll amuse Mi'Lady, if nothing else."

I felt a squeeze at my hand, and I grasped it in answer. Then, she was gone, and the door was being shut on me. There was no turning back now. As the door to Lady Russell's chambers closed, I closed the door on my noble past. Yes, I would always know in my heart that I was Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heiress of Grant Manor, but, apart from the sapphire glowing on my finger, there would be no outward hint of my origins.

I thought briefly of returning to my old life, but only for a second. I couldn't go back, no matter how much easier that life was. The memory of Mother's scream, the shouting of the peasants, the glow of their anger, were all branded into my memory, and I would never be able to think of returning to Grant Manor without my mind immediately being filled with nightmares of fire and blood. I'd rather scrub kitchen floors in rags than go back to that with the finest jewels on.

"So, what are *you* doing?" the steward asked, breaking my momentary lapse into the past. "I'm sorry, the king isn't available."

I stared at him. "What?"

"The king isn't available."

"What effect does that have on me, sir?" I tried to sound as respectful as possible.

"It's... ah, never mind." He shook his head. "It was *meant* to be a joke, but then you didn't get it. And when a person doesn't get a joke, you can't explain it to him, or it isn't funny anymore. So you just think about that for a while, and maybe you'll get it eventually." He sounded absolutely disgusted at my inability to get his jokes. I took a deep breath.

"Let's just start again, sir. You were asking what I am doing. Well, I'm looking for a job."

"Re-eally." He studied me. "And who might you be?"

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"I'm Katherine. Katherine, uh, Wright." There were enough Katherines in England. I could use my real first name without raising suspicion, but I didn't feel comfortable using my last name. If word got out about the rebellion and the fact that Katherine Grant had gone missing spread with it, it wouldn't take long for this steward to match me with my title. He didn't look like someone who could be easily fooled.

"Well, Miss Wright," he said slowly. Whenever this steward said someone's name, he could make it sound like an insult. "I am the steward of this castle. You may call me Becket."

"Yes, sir." Becket it was then. He could have asked me to call him Fuzzyfeet for all I cared.

"A job, eh?" He leaned against the wall with an overwhelming air of passivity. "What sort of job?"

"One that will provide me with food to eat, clothes on my back, and a place to sleep. I don't care what I have to do. I will say, though, that I'm not very strong. I won't be any good at lifting stones or anything like that."

"Ah." He leaned closer to me as if telling a secret. "Don't tell anyone this, girl. You're going to think I'm a very bad steward, but I don't know where to assign you. I don't even know most of the people who work here, honestly."

It always unnerved me when someone tacked the word "honestly" to the end of a statement. It always made me wonder if he really *was* being honest, and if he *didn't* clarify that he was being honest at the end of a sentence, *was* he really telling the truth?

"*You*, my dear,"- the way he said "my dear" made me want to slap him- "need to see the Overseer."

I shivered. The way he said the words "The Overseer" made a million little chills quiver up my spine.

"Right this way," he said, walking off. I followed at a wary distance.

This castle was never-ending, it seemed, with more hallways and confusing staircases than any place I'd ever seen before. I wondered how Becket could ever keep any of these halls and corridors straight. But I knew that we were going down, down, down. And I did not like it.

I finally found myself in front of a small door. Becket knocked on it, then opened it without waiting for an answer. I shrank back as he pushed me in.

"*You'll* be just fine," he said, in a way that assured me I wouldn't be. By now, my imagination had already supplied all the details needed to ensure me that "The Overseer" was *not* a person I wanted to meet. I had a vague picture of a cruel smile and a long, black whip that shone like a sleek black snake and bit like one, too.

Becket shut the door, and I was alone with the Overseer. I heard someone rise from a chair from behind me, and I slowly turned.

Chapter Nine

The Overseer's Assignment

I couldn't see the person right away. There was only one candle in the room, and the only other light was from the musty sunlight streaming in through the crusted dirt and mold accumulated on tiny green windows, windows that lined the room's top.

I strained my eyes to see the Overseer in the gloom. Everything looked like mottled black and green in here.

I heard a laugh, and I let out a short scream. I scrambled backward, tripping over something on the floor and falling heavily onto the ground. I screamed again, this time a cry of pain.

"Don't move," a voice commanded. "I know it's much too dark in here, but I wasn't expecting anyone. Just wait there."

I was prepared to run, to pound at the door until I could get out of here, but the voice stopped me. It wasn't the menacing voice I had expected. In fact, it sounded almost kind.

There was a shuffle, and another candle was lighted, then another. They were carried about the room, but I couldn't see the one who carried them. Maybe the Overseer was a shapeshifter or maybe could turn invisible. The room got brighter with every new light.

One last flame was carried, this time towards me. I felt a return of the old fear, and I pressed back against the wall.

The candle cast its circle of light onto my face, and another face emerged from the blackness. I stifled a gasp. The face was that of an old woman.

She studied me, and I studied her. Her face looked pale in the flickering candlelight, and she had more wrinkles than anyone I had ever seen before. One of her eyes had a whitish film over it- it was clearly blind- but her other eye shone with intelligence and amused curiosity.

At last, she spoke. "Are you alright, my dear?"

I liked her at once. In the same way that Becket calling me "my dear" revolted me, the Overseer's way of calling me "my dear" immediately made me *want* to be her dear.

"I- I think so," I said, gathering my skirts and wits about me. I dared a question. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Overseer," she said, helping me to my feet. I had expected a woman of her age to be hunched and frail, but she stood as tall as I and still had strength in her arms as she pulled me up. She dusted off my skirts and smiled at me.

"It's dark in here, I know. I've gotten used to working in the dark to save on candles. Let's go outside. You can barely see me, but I'm going to lead you out of here. Just be careful where you step."

"How can I be careful when I can't even see?" I asked.

Jailed Heart

“Just hold my hand,” she instructed. “And feel out each step with your foot before you put your foot down. That’ll make it a lot easier.”

I did as she told me, perusing each forward step with a furtive toe. There *were* a lot of things on the floor, hard things. I barked my shins and stubbed my toes against many things in the darkness, but I bit my lip and said nothing. I briefly wondered what all these stumbling blocks could be, and suddenly a bit of my old fear crept back.

The Overseer led me with confidence as if she had every single tripping hazard mapped in her mind. There was only the light from the one candle she held in her hand to guide the way, but she led me on without slowing or stopping, simply plodding on at a steady pace, slow enough to let me feel my way through the mess, but fast enough to get wherever we were going at a decent pace.

Which raised the question in my mind: Where *were* we going? I tried to put the question out of my mind and simply concentrate on where I was stepping, but the tug of the unknown kept dragging my thoughts away. I couldn’t help but wonder where on earth the Overseer was taking me. Images of a dark dungeon and rusty chains suddenly flashed before my eyes, and I stopped stock-still.

The Overseer turned and looked at me. “What’s the matter, my dear?”

“Wh-where are you taking me?” I asked, my imagination getting the better of me. I could practically hear screams of tortured innocents echoing in my ears. I made a choking noise of pure terror and turned to run.

“Wait, dear,” the Overseer said, and she dropped my hand. I hadn’t even realized that she had been holding it. She set the candle down and scurried off into the blotchy greenness, and I realized that I was alone.

I shrank towards the candle, staring around the room, my imagination supplying a million monsters and beasts ready to jump at me. I picked up the candle and stared at the flame, trying to disperse my dark fears with a bit of light.

The candle went out.

I could see nothing now, just green darkness all around. I felt a scream rising in my throat. The darkness was getting to me.

Then the shriek of terror died in my throat as the room was suddenly flooded with light. The Overseer stood, silhouetted in a door frame, a doorframe I never would have guessed was there. Light streamed in from behind her, and I groped towards it like a plant to the sun, partly blinded by the suddenness of the transition but also overeager to get out of this stuffy and stifling room.

At the doorway, the Overseer stared long and hard at me. “Are you alright?” she asked gently yet firmly.

I stared at this old woman for a second, my brain catching up enough to register her question. I slowly turned back to look into the room I had just emerged from, and then slowly looked back to her. “No,” I said slowly, “I’m not.”

Jailed Heart

Suddenly I was on her shoulder, weeping. A big wave of relief and grief and anger swept over me, and I, being woman, could do nothing with these feelings but cry.

The Overseer made a startled noise, but she quickly adjusted to my sudden change of emotion. She held me and stroked my hair, making calming shushing noises and holding me tight. I cried for at least two minutes without stop, before lifting my tear-stained face to see where I was. And what I saw almost shocked me back into tears.

I was in a beautiful garden. It was small, so small, but so beautiful in an extremely miniature sense. There were flowers everywhere, and a small pond of clearest water in the middle of the garden. A tall wall surrounded the garden, and vines clung to the grey stone, turning it into a thing of mystery and beauty.

The Overseer gently guided me to a stone bench in the center of the garden. She set me down and sat down beside me, wiping a few tears from my cheeks. "Now, what's all this about, dear?"

"I-" I stopped myself and looked at her. "Why do you want to know?" I said, suddenly guarded. I still had enough of my fear to keep me cautious.

"Because I have just as many things to learn as you do," she said, crossing her fingers across her lap. "I know, you don't trust me."

"No, no, it's not that, I just..."

She raised a hand. "I admire not trusting everyone right away. You just met me, what, five minutes ago? Trust is a great thing, not something you just hand over to the first flaky friend you come your way." Anger had crept into her voice as she had said this, and I could sense that she was verging on diatribe. But she shook her head and regathered her thoughts. "Point is, I think it's alright, even a good thing, a very good thing, to not give your trust away freely. So if you don't trust me enough to tell me why you spontaneously and without warning burst into tears, that's completely fine." She laughed at the surprised look on my face. "Yes, I talk a lot. It's a trait of mine." She shrugged. "I was one of those children who was never told that I was supposed to be seen and not heard." She laughed again. "I think I got it backward. I'm not much to look at-" indicating her wrinkled face and milky-white eye, "But I certainly *am* something to hear."

"Who..." I rubbed my hand over my eyes, trying to make sense of all that I had just heard. Failing, I gave up and tried to focus on asking questions that would improve my understanding of this situation. "Who are you?"

"I," the Overseer said, slowly and dramatically, "AM THE OVERSEER!" She flung her arms wide, and I cringed as I shrunk away from her.

"Oh..." she chided herself as she calmed herself and put an arm around my shoulders. "There, there, I didn't mean anything by it. Didn't realize that you were so scared."

"I'm fi-i-i-ine..." I said, catching my breath. "I was just... unnerved... by the darkness... and not knowing where I was going."

Jailed Heart

“A completely understandable fear, dear,” she said, leaning back and taking a deep breath. She let it out slowly, luxuriously. “Isn’t the smell of roses delightful?” she asked, though it was quite a random topic at quite a random time. I had a feeling that she made similar remarks whenever she felt like it. That seemed to be a big part of the Overseer’s personality- doing things “when she felt like it”. I tried to reconcile her dark and foreboding title with the bubbly and talkative old woman before me.

“Why do they call you ‘the Overseer?’” I asked.

“Well, it’s quite simple, really,” the Overseer said cheerfully. “They call me that because that’s what I am.” She frowned. “I will admit, at times it *does* make me feel like I have become nothing more than my job, that I have been reduced to just a title, a position, but then I walk out the door and see the people scatter!” She laughed again- she laughed a lot. “I guess they know that I am more than my job. Oh, much, much more!”

“So...” I still had yet to receive an answer to my question. “What does an Overseer do?”

“Well, dear, nothing against the illustrious Becket, but we pretty much do what the steward’s too lazy to do.” She rolled her eyes. “Becket *thinks* he’s vital to the running of this castle, but...” She leaned in close and began to whisper. “He really isn’t. His ego’s gotten too big- it’s obscuring his view of reality and can’t see things the way that they really are.” She cocked her head, as if in thought. “He probably should go to a physician for it. It’s really affecting him- and us.”

I shook my head gravely. “No, a physician won’t do any good- a good spanking is what he needs.”

There was a short scream of laughter from the Overseer, and she clapped my shoulder heartily. “Oh, I knew I liked you, I knew I did! That’s lovely, child, oh my! That’s insight! Depth! Philosophy!” She laughed again. “I knew I liked you,” she repeated.

“So...” I finally remembered why I came. “I need a job.”

“A job? A pretty young lady like you?”

“I- I’m not a lady,” I said, then immediately regretted it. *She was just being nice, Kate. Just being nice. She didn’t mean anything by it.*

The Overseer raised an eyebrow. “Ah.” There was silence for a moment, then she shifted on the bench. “A job, you say? Why would a pretty young peasant like you need a job? Shouldn’t you be out working the castle’s fields or something?”

“I don’t work for the castle.”

“A free peasant?”

“No, no. I-” I stopped and tried to gather my thoughts. “I,” I said, slowly and clearly, almost for my help more than the Overseer’s, “Am not from here. I am alone in the world, and I need food to eat, clothes to wear, and a place to sleep. I come looking for somewhere to work, and Becket said to come to you.”

“Oh,” said the Overseer. “And do you have any experience doing anything?”

“That depends. What do you have in mind?”

Jailed Heart

“Farming?”

“No.”

“Cooking.”

“Nothing edible.”

“Cleaning?”

“I can *try* to scrub a floor. It doesn’t look that hard.”

She stopped and eyed me. “*Can* you do anything at all?”

“I can embroider,” I said, my cheeks turning red in shame. “And play the lute.”

“Pardon me for asking, young commoner, but how have you lived to your age and haven’t learned these basic facts of life?”

I stared at the ground. “Uh...” I looked up at her uncertainly. “Sorry, but I...”

“Don’t trust me enough to say?” The Overseer’s one eye twinkled. “I understand.” She stroked her chin. “You know, I don’t think you’re just a commoner. Too... refined and inept to be a peasant.” She raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you think?”

I couldn’t breathe for a moment as the world came collapsing down on me, but I quickly recovered myself and laughed it off lightly. “I don’t know about ‘refined’. I’m inept, yes, but not refined.”

The Overseer clearly didn’t believe me. She leaned forward and touched my nose. “You may not know it yet, young lady, but you can trust me. Trust me, I know that you can trust me.” She giggled over her silly play on logic before becoming serious again. “If you ever need desperate help, come to me. I’ll understand.”

“Really?” I stared wistfully out in the direction where I knew Grant Manor lay. I knew I liked the Overseer, but she was basically offering to be a second mother to me. Could I betray Mother, so soon after her death? Tears sprang to my eyes, and I wiped them away as fast as I could. The Overseer noticed, though.

“Oh, you poor thing,” she crooned, pulling me into a hug, “You have a past, don’t you?”

And before I knew it, I was spilling out my whole history to the Overseer, my true name and title, Father’s death, the attack, Mother’s death, fleeing, all of it. She listened to the whole thing with a look of astonishment on her face. She stared at me for a moment before I buried my head in her shoulder.

“My, my, young lady,” she said, in an uncharacteristically bland tone of voice. “I was thinking something lesser, the daughter of a merchant, a knight, not the daughter of a lord.” She pulled my chin up and studied my face. “You say that you and Lady Joan are related?”

“Yes- she’s my father’s sister’s daughter. She’s a Grant, even if she’s married into the Russell family.”

“Huh.” She inspected my face again. “I can see some resemblance. Not enough, though,” she quickly added upon seeing my frightened face, “For anyone to really connect the two of you. Just as much similarity as cousins are.” She paused. “You know, I should really tell Joan that you’re here. It’s my duty, both to her and to you.”

Jailed Heart

I clutched at her hand. “No, no... you wouldn’t...”

“I really should...”

“*I trusted you!*”

“Be careful with your trust.”

“You...” My eyes filled with tears, and for a moment, the world was fuzzy.

Then I heard the Overseer’s laughter bouncing off the garden’s walls. “Oh, dear, you are so much fun to have fun with.” She laughed again. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear. It’s just that when people are so gullible... you can’t help yourself!”

Only coming from the Overseer would being called “gullible” be something other than an insult. I laughed with her, though the laughter *was* a bit forced on my end.

She finally brought her laughter down into manageable terms and smiled at me. “Don’t worry, darling,” she said, still repressing a giggle or two, “Nothing will part me from your secret. Nothing. It’s as safe as when you hadn’t told a soul.”

I sighed and slumped my shoulders. “So, I need a job. I’m on my own now.”

“Not quite. I could get you a nice position as...”

“I want a low job,” I said. “I don’t want anyone to have raised suspicions.”

“Dear, you are a lady, a true lady. Surely I can...”

“No.” I gave the outward reason of wanting to avoid suspicion, but inside I knew better. I found a strange satisfaction in a good day’s work. I had discovered this weird pleasure when I collapsed at the end of a day of walking, aching all over, but the ache was a good ache. I had never had a “good ache” before, though I had often heard Father speak of one after practicing his swordplay or going hunting. I wanted to have a good ache every night, and sleep well through it all. Back at the castle, I had frequent nightmares and would often stare at the ceiling for hours on ends. On my long road trip, I had worked harder than I ever had in my entire life, and I had also slept better than I had in my entire life. I had a theory about these things, and I wanted to test them out. I had once heard someone quote something from the Bible: “The sleep of a hard-working man is good”... or... something like that. Anyway, it proved my point- if the Bible said it, it had to be true, right?

There was another reason. I knew that working hard every day would toughen me, would strengthen me. I had never had to do any hard labor in my life for as far back as I could remember. I did things like needlework and music. This left me with nimble fingers but weak arms, and I knew that I was a fragile breakable compared to some of the strong and lean girls my age that I had seen on the way here. I would never be able to defend myself like this, and I never wanted to be as helpless as I was on the day they killed my mother. If I had only been stronger... but I wasn’t, and so I figured that the next best thing I could do was honor her memory in my heart by building my strength, layer by layer. I would not be as weak as she had been when the fever struck. I would be strong- the fever would stand no chance against me. I would not die a lingering, miserable death like my mother.

Jailed Heart

The Overseer tried to convince me to change my mind, but my mind was unchangeable. And, after all, I figured that if I *really* hated whatever job I was in, I could just come to the Overseer or go to Anne, and they would reveal all. I had my escape routes. I could walk right into whatever disaster awaited me confidently.

Chapter Ten

Assignation

The Overseer finally gave up on me and assigned me a job that needed filling. The castle jail, she said, needed a maintenance worker. The jailer, Simon, she said, had hurt his back and would be confined to bed for a while. In the meantime, he needed someone to help run the jail.

As soon as she said “jail”, the mental image of the dark dungeon flashed back. I blinked it away and told the Overseer that was perfect.

The Overseer scribbled a note for Simon on a piece of paper. I was amazed at this.

“You can write?” I asked, staring at her.

“I’m a secondary steward,” the Overseer said. “Of course I can write.” We had returned to the little room, and, with the knowledge that the Overseer was a friend, not a foe, the green light seemed much less scary.

I frowned at this. “Can *Simon* read?” Simon didn’t sound like the name of a man who could read very well. Besides, peasants were illiterate.

“*Simon* can read just fine, thank you,” the Overseer said, folding the note. “Hilltop Township is a surprisingly literate town, thanks to Richard, bless his soul.”

I frowned again. “Richard?”

“Yes, he runs an academy- *for free*, no less, and he teaches people how to read. I taught him way back when, and now he’s taken that and spread it throughout.” She chuckled. “Now, if only we could get more books into the public’s hands, that would be wonderful.”

I set my elbows on the table and cradled my face in my hands. “Getting them into English instead of Latin would be a good start.”

“Out of curiosity, can *you* read, Miss Wright?” She had promised to never use my title again, only my assumed last name.

“Yes,” I said shortly, “I can. I was my parent’s only child- their ‘miracle child’ they called me. They were old when they had me, and they thought they were going to have to hand the manor over someone else, considering that they had no heir. Then I came along, and, though they would have liked better if I had been a boy, they put my gender aside and trained me to be a proper lady, but also a good ruler.” I smiled. “I wanted to read early, so they taught me to read very quickly. A monk that they hired taught me Latin, too.”

“Really? You speak Latin?”

“No- no one speaks Latin anymore. We just write in it.”

“Why,” the Overseer demanded, “Would we put most of our important books and documents into a language that no one speaks anymore? If we can’t understand it, then what is the point? Why not just put them all into plain old English, so that everyone has a chance to read them?”

Jailed Heart

“I don’t know...” I paused to think. I recalled something the monk had said. “The monk that taught me to read said something about the common people not understanding... that they’ll... misinterpret... or something like that.”

“They take us for fools,” the Overseer muttered, “When most of us have better blocks than they do! Huh! At least *me* have a normal-sized head, not one that’s grown so big they can’t think straight. Huh! Nobility.” She then realized what she had said and who she had said it to and was immediately on her knees. “Oh, so sorry, Mi’Lady, I...”

I laughed in her face. “You, Overseer, are something uncommon for sure.” I gazed down at her. “Word of friendly advice: Be careful with your words.”

“So says you and everyone else in the universe,” the Overseer huffed. “Don’t you think I try?”

“I...” I followed my own advice and chose my words carefully. “Think that you want to try but forget to try sometimes.”

The Overseer sighed as she rose to her feet. “You have hit the proverbial nail on the proverbial head, dear.” She gestured around her to the stacks and rolls of paper. “With all these things to keep track of, it’s a wonder I can remember my own name.”

“What *is* your own name?” I asked.

“It’s... ah, it’s...” she stared blankly at me for a moment, then blinked twice. “I can’t remember. I’ve been known only as ‘the Overseer’ for so long...” She stared for a moment, then laughed. “Oh, I know!” She immediately began rifling through a stack of books on a shelf.

“Then... could you tell me?” This was the first time the thought had actually crossed my mind that the Overseer could very well be insane. Yes, the signs were there all along. Maybe she had cracked a bit over her long years, with all this responsibility heaped on her shoulders. After all, what type of person couldn’t remember their very own name?

“HA!” she shouted, pulling a book from the shelf. “HERE IT IS!”

Ya know she was acting crazier and crazier the more I thought about.

She slammed the book onto the flimsy desk, and I could see the legs shake. No doubt the poor thing had endured many a similar slamming.

She threw open the front cover and jabbed a triumphant finger down at the page. “Martha!” she said, “My name is Martha!”

I stepped around the desk and peered over her shoulder. It was a mostly blank page, with this message lettered in tiny, neat script. It read:

Dear Martha,

Thank you for teaching me how to read. I bought this book from a traveling merchant just for you.

Love,

Richard

“Martha” stroked the simple dedication. The paper was old and thin, worn down from a million similar strokes. I suddenly realized something.

“You loved him, didn’t you?”

Jailed Heart

The Overseer's head jerked back and she quickly shut the book. "What?" she said, trying to laugh it off. "I... I..."

"Loved him," I replied, sugary-sweet. "There's no shame in that."

Her resistance broke down. "Alright, alright, I loved him. I still love him. Is that so wrong?"

"No one ever said that it was," I replied. "Pardon my asking, but what happened?"

"His parents made him marry someone else," the Overseer said, sighing. "I thought he loved me, but he never complained or even resisted. And he seemed truly distraught when they died. And when she died." She shrugged. "It stopped hurting me a long time ago. I wanted what was best for him."

I paused for a moment and looked the Overseer over. I wondered how anyone could fall in love with her, with her wrinkles and milky blind eye and shining grey hair. I knew in my mind that the Overseer would have been younger, and her eye might not have been blind, but when I tried to imagine her seventeen, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing at the image that appeared. I brought myself into seriousness as quickly as I could.

"Martha, eh?" I said, wanting to turn the conversation away from lost loves. "That's a beautiful name."

"He thought so, too," the Overseer murmured, placing her hand on the cover of the book and staring off into the past. She refused to stray away from the topic of Richard, whoever that was. She had obviously been very much in love with him. Maybe, I thought, she still was.

"Enough about Richard," I said, throwing subtlety to the wind. "Let's move on with things."

"He copied over the whole book by hand," the Overseer said, so deep in her remembering, I doubted she could hear me at all. "He couldn't even read the letters at all. Just copied the symbols. Took him a whole year."

I grabbed the Overseer's shoulders and shook her. "Look, listen to me!"

"Wh-what?" The Overseer shook her head and ran a hand through her hair. "Where did I go?"

"With Richard."

"I guess you've realized by now."

"Realized what?"

"That I'm crazy." She grinned at me. "Don't try to convince me that I'm not insane. Knowing that I've gone over the edge is one of the signs that I'm not too far gone. It's the day that I insist I'm perfectly sane that you'll have to lock me up." She winked at me.

"If you're insane, why are you an overseer?" I couldn't help but ask the question. It had been bugging me ever since I had realized that the Overseer was just a little screwy. She seemed so incapable. "How did you ever get this job?"

"Let me think..." she pursed her lips and dredged up the necessary bit of information from her memory. "Well, it was a situation much like yours, I recall."

Jailed Heart

“You’re secretly a noble on the run from murderous peasants?” I said, leaning forward with overdone enthrallment.

“No-ooo...” the Overseer said, raising her eyebrows. Then she winked at me, a wink so imperceptible and quick that I barely caught it. But I knew that the wink was a given- the Overseer was the type of person who, though the friendliest and most cheerful person on earth, also had depth, more depth than the sage or moody and temperamental poet. She always seemed to have one more angle, one more facet, one more twist to her massive personality.

Yes, that’s what made her so unique- her personality was enormous. It seemed to spread itself like a million little tentacles around the room, linking everything to her very clearly. It seemed like the room was a *part* of her. She had an aura like a mother hen, enveloping me and pulling me closer to her. And yet, even under her wings, I was still very much myself, possibly even more so. She was, I thought, very special. The world would lose someone great when they lost her.

“Are you *sure* you aren’t a lady?” I prompted, smiling wide.

The Overseer said nothing in reply. “After my parent both died, I needed a place to work. I had no relatives, and no one would take me in.” She leaned forward. “I’m definitely crazier than I was at eighteen, but I keep it all inside now. At eighteen I was an absolute nut.”

She absently tidied her desk. “I came here. Becket couldn’t stand me, but he gave me a job. I was his public relations officer. Becket’s a great man, but...” she hesitated, “He can be a bit abrasive.

I’ll say. My one encounter with Becket was a lot of things, but “smooth” was definitely *not* one of them.

“And, another thing you’ll notice about me, despite my obvious insanity...” she said, gesturing around the room at the obvious insanity stuffed onto shelves and piled into corners. She leaned forward and smiled confidentially. “Despite my moonstruck tendencies, you’ll find that people like me. They can’t help but like me. I drive them crazy and they still like me.” She laughed again, her infectious laugh. “Here I am, being annoying and likable and useful all at the same time.”

“Soooo...” I stared around the cluttered room. “What do you *do*?”

“Everything Becket’s too lazy to do. Which covers a lot of ground,” the Overseer said, scrabbling through a wildly disorganized drawer. She finally found what she was looking for- a small leather pouch. “Take this, dear.” She pressed into my hands.

I peered inside and found a bunch of dully shining silver coins smiling up at me. I knew better than to turn the offer down- I hadn’t lost all my shrewdness. I thanked the Overseer and made to put it into my satchel, but then I remembered. I had given it to Anne.

As if reading my thoughts, the Overseer came tripping up from behind me and draped a satchel over my shoulder. I smiled at her and slid the coins into the brown darkness of the leather.

“Also, your ring,” she said, gesturing to my hand. “You’ll want to take it off.”

Jailed Heart

“But...” I stared down at the sapphire burning on my finger. “This is all I have left of my old life. All I have left of my family.”

“And when someone steals it, then where do you think all those memories will be?” the Overseer said, moving to the door and glancing in a mirror. She ran her fingers a few times through her shining grey hair- the prettiest grey hair I had ever seen, it stretched to her waist and wasn’t stringy and brittle, like most old people’s hair gets to be. No, her hair was as luxurious and vibrant as mine- just grey with age. Right then, I saw it, just for a moment- I saw in my mind what the Overseer would have looked like. She wouldn’t have been “the Overseer” then. No, she would have just been Martha, plain old Martha, maybe Marty to those who were her friends. Just for a moment, I could see her dancing through the fields, dancing with two shining eyes and no wrinkles. I could see long, rippling blonde hair and heard a bubbling laugh on her lips. Just as crazy, just as loving, just as human.

Just for a moment. Then she morphed back into the old, wrinkled woman, leaning over a mirror and peering into a past that was gone forever. I half expected her to wipe tears from her eyes, but instead, she laughed. Laughed! She was always laughing.

“Come, come, darling,” she said, sweeping a cloak from a hook on the wall and twirling it over her shoulders. She winked at me. “I can still let my hair down without shame. I haven’t married yet.”

“Yet?” I asked, giggling in spite of my effort to hold the Overseer’s feelings in the highest regard.

“I’ll never give up hope,” she said, looking up at the ceiling dreamily. “All it takes is one right person.”

I laughed again. That was the effect the Overseer had on me- whenever she said something, I laughed. And then she laughed. She went through life with laughter on her lips, living in a bubble of giggles. She made other people happier just by her mere presence.

“Follow me,” she said sweeping out the door. I ran after her- she was moving at a surprising speed. I caught my toe on a pile of books and nearly sprawled face-first onto the ground. I barely caught myself on the edge of the doorframe, and when I recovered myself, the Overseer was waiting impatiently at the end of the hallway. *How did she get there so fast?*

“Come, *come*, Darling,” she said again, laughing at me. “I know that keeping your balance is a terribly hard thing to do, but try to do it. It’ll cause a scene if Simon knows you have trouble staying upright.”

It was an insult, but a playfully delivered one, and I had to laugh. The Overseer insulted her way through life but did it with a smile and laugh. You could tell that she was just messing with you, not actually trying to hurt your feelings. I contrasted her with Becket, who made the nicest compliment tear your soul apart. I shook my head and moved on, trying my best to keep up with the Overseer. Which was much easier said than done. She seemed to float over the ground- you wouldn’t have thought an old lady could move so fast- and she left me scrambling to keep up with her.

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I finally caught up with her in the courtyard and moved through the crowds of people in her shadow, hiding from them. They looked at me curiously, and a few of them called out to the Overseer. She smiled and called back them, but she never stopped moving. She kept moving, forward and faster, until she swept me out the castle gate and down the road to the village.

“Wait!” I said, gathering my wits enough to have a real thought. “I thought I was going to work in the jail.”

“You are,” she said, not even looking at me.

“But... shouldn’t we be back in the castle?” Back at Grant Manor, the jail-dungeon was down underneath the manor.

“The jail’s not *in the* castle,” the Overseer said, and I couldn’t help but hear the note of exasperated amusement in her voice. “It’s down in the middle of the town.”

“Oh.” This made sense, kind of. If the jail was surrounded by people constantly, there would be less chance of prisoners escaping.

That’s when I snapped out of it. *Prisoners?* What had I signed myself up for? What had I done? I had never been inside a prison, but I knew that there would be people, very possibly dangerous people, with only a flimsy lock between myself and their fists. What was this?

The Overseer patted my arm, and I realized she had fallen back to walk beside me. “Don’t worry, dear,” she said, reading my face, “I wouldn’t have given you this job if I wasn’t sure that you would be absolutely safe. Simon is a good friend, and he’d give his life to keep anyone safe, I assure you. There are only two people in jail right now, and neither of them is very dangerous. Well... yes.” She paused, cleared her throat and went on. “And besides, I think you’ll like it. Everyone there needs you, and you’re the caregiver type. Oh, yes, you are,” she said at my skeptical glance, “I can read you. You’re the type that makes great mothers and nurses and midwives. Me?” She laughed. “I just don’t have that. I’ve never had that. I’ve always been a leader, an executive. I always took control anywhere I worked, which is a good thing sometimes and a very bad thing with others.” She shrugged and shoved her hands in her apron pockets. “It’s in our nature, darling, and we just do the best we can.”

“So, you’re saying that we have no free will?”

“Dearie, you know *exactly* what I mean. But, just in case your young brain cannot properly understand so great a topic as free will and destiny, I shall explain it to you, slowly, using little words.” She said all of this, incredibly condescending, with a look of superiority and disdain so great that it busted the border of ridiculousness. I knew that she was glorying in her extreme absurdity. I had thrown my hook into the water, hoping to catch her in a trick or fallacy, and the Overseer just poked her head out of the water and stuck her tongue out.

“You see, *little one*, that we are all born with certain traits that make up the way we act. This is called our *per-son-al-i-tee*. Can you say *per-son-al-i-tee*?”

I rolled my eyes and didn’t respond.

“Now, we can go against our personality, on the outside, anyway, but we can never efface it, never destroy it. Our emotions come, our thoughts come, and we are powerless to stop them.”

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Her voice slowly lost its condescending tone and began to gain an edge of raw emotion as she went on. I could tell that she was getting involved in her answer as she went on.

“We can never change how we feel at any time. We can only slowly try to influence our natural bent in one way or another. We can control our emotions and personality for a while, but we *will* come through eventually.” She cleared her throat and stared at the people walking by.

“As for the conflict of free will and destiny, which is heavily influenced by our personality’s leaning, there remains an ongoing conundrum.” She had obviously given up on “little words”. “I have no good answer for the question. I believe in free will, and I believe in destiny, and I don’t know how I can reconcile the two.”

I thought for a moment. “God?”

The Overseer suddenly stopped and looked at me. “Yes,” she said slowly, “God. That explains it, simply and beautifully.” She started walking again, but faster than she had been before. “Yes,” she said again. “God.” I hurried to catch up with her.

“Well, we’re almost here,” she said brightly, changing the topic. I agreed, we were almost there. Hilltop Township stretched right in front of us.

“The jail’s in the middle of the town, so we’ll have to walk awhile.” She beckoned me down the street. “Follow.”

And follow her I did. The next fifteen minutes were a crazy game of chase, through alleys, squeezing through narrow gaps in between people. At one point I had to inch past a horse. My heart hammered in my ears as I took short, stabbing sideways steps, trying to order myself to get over this irrational fear. Horses were my *friend*. *Friends*. But it was all I could do to keep myself breathing. I didn’t see any cats or dogs, though, so that was a bright spot.

Finally, I caught my breath and looked up. The Overseer was standing in front of a stone building overgrown with vines and flowers, not a tall one or intimidating at all, but I still felt my heart squeeze tight. I knew where we were before the Overseer even opened her mouth.

“This is it,” I breathed, stealing the words from her mouth. “Here we are.”

“Yes,” the Overseer said, smiling. “This is it- here we are.” It sounded so much happier when she said it.

She stepped up the three steps and held the door open for me. “Come on in, dearie.”

I slowly followed her and peered into the door. I knew I was peering into my future life, and I prayed that it wouldn’t be the dark dungeon I thought it was.

And it wasn’t. Instead, as I stepped in onto the stone floor, dancing circles of candlelight jumped under my feet. Eliminate “dark” from the dungeon’s list of adjectives. This dungeon wasn’t at all dark- there was more than enough light from the candles, torches, and barred windows.

It didn’t even have the Willacteristics of a dungeon. I thought of how “dungeon” was a dark and forbidding word in its very essence, and then smiled. The Overseer had been getting

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to me. Here I was, thinking about how words carried intrinsic emotion and feeling and value in their very sound. Now *that* sounded like something the Overseer would say.

There *were* cells, and I peered into them. These cells weren't overly cramped or dark or wet, though they *were* made of stone and iron. I immediately remembered the prisoners and I stepped closer to the middle of the long hallway in front of me, stood right in the center of the aisle. I could feel fear creeping out of those cells, trying to grab me.

I heard a shuffle in one of the cells, and a man stood up. He walked the few steps closer to the bars and leaned against them as he studied me with active interest. He was a tall man, dark and brown. "Why, hello," he said. "Welcome." He chuckled. "What has *she* done, Overseer?"

"Nothing," was the Overseer's answer. "She came here of her own free will."

"Is she like me?" another voice said from the corner, and another man stood up. This one was younger than the other, and he had a feeling of sadness about him.

"No, Jem," the Overseer said, "She isn't like you. She's coming here to work for you."

I half expected them to laugh uproariously at this, the ridiculousness of a young girl coming to work among such scoundrels. Instead, they said nothing for a moment, then Jem, the younger one, stretched his hand from the cell. "Thank you," he said.

I was still scared, and I shrunk back from the bars against the Overseer's warm shoulder. She shrugged me off, and I tumbled back, landing on the floor. I hugged my knees, trying to work through my fear.

"I'll go explain the situation to Simon," she said, and she breezed off. *Was she just going to leave me here? ALONE?*

I stared at the two men, and they stared right back at me. There was nothing aggressive in their inspections, but I felt like I was being attacked. I finally remembered that there were strong bars in between myself and these two... then I realized that I didn't even know who these men were or why they were in jail. I shook myself and stood.

"Who are you?" the older one asked again.

"I'm Katherine. Katherine Wright. Kate for short."

Pause.

"Who are you?" I asked, pointing at the older.

"I'm John. John Middleton. I don't have a for-short."

He is making fun of me.

I turned to the younger. "Who are *you*?"

"I'm James. James Millerson. Jem for short." He smiled. "But please don't call me Jimmy. I hate the nickname. My sisters always called me that." He made a gagging noise in the back of his throat.

"And..." I paused. "Why are you two in here?" I finally said, deciding that euphemisms and dancing around the question would only waste air and time.

"Well..." John's eyes shifted to Jem's for a moment, then he looked back at me. "I'm here because of my own fault. Debts unpaid." He shrugged. "Was my own fault. Spent Jemond my

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means. So I'm here, out of money. No family, so no true worries. I beg out the window for food," he said, jabbing an elbow at the barred cell window. It was about six feet off the floor.

I nodded. "I know all about begging." I looked to Jem. "Why are you here?"

Jem tried to smile at me, but failed miserably. He leaned against the cell bars. "I'm insane."

I looked him over. "You aren't insane- you look perfectly fine. Who told you that you were insane?"

He smiled thinly. "Miss Wright, I may not *look* insane now. I'm not insane now. I'm as sane as anyone else during the day. But just be glad you aren't staying here during the night."

"But I *am* staying here in the night," I said, and immediately regretted that I had said it. I had assumed from the Overseer's description that I was spending the night at the jail, but now I wasn't so sure. And there was something in Jem's voice that made me want to run away. If *he* was scared of what was to come, then I was right to be frightened.

Then Simon came shuffling out of the back room, leaning heavily on the Overseer to keep upright, and immediately I knew I had to stay. As the Overseer would have said, the mother sprang up in me at that instant, and my destiny was sealed, of my own free will, because of the essence of kindness and care that moved in my blood and made up my personality. The more I thought about even the craziest things she said, even the ones that were obviously only meant to mess with people, really rang with the sound of truth.

Simon was old, older than old, older than older than old. I wondered how he could even stand on his legs- which were as thin as sticks and just as flimsy. I ran forward, stretching out my arms to catch him when he fell, as I knew he would.

He let go of the Overseer's shoulder and held out his arms straight and stiff, catching my forearms and holding me there, at arm's length. He had a stronger grip than I would have given him credit for. He studied my face, then smiled. "I suppose you think that I'm in need of care, that I'm practically dead, eh?"

"Uh..."

"Well, I'm not. I mean, I *am* practically dead, but I'm not weak. I eat lots of red meat." He grunted and nodded shortly, as if that settled the matter. "However, I slipped on a puddle earlier this week and hurt my back. I'm having trouble keeping up with things, so the Overseer brought you, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't have anywhere to go back to, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"So." He ticked off on his fingers, counting, or maybe measuring me. "Where are you going to stay?"

"Here, sir." My mind was now made up. No matter what this man, Simon, said, no matter how much he tried to convince me that he was *fine*, I knew that he wasn't. The mother rose strong in me. They all really needed my help- Simon needed my help, Jem needed my help, John needed my help. And I was determined to help them.

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The Overseer stifled a giggle, and Simon looked out at me from under his white eyebrows. "Please tell me you're joking."

"No, sir."

"You're not just havin' a laugh with this old man?"

"No, sir."

"Look, uh..." He looked at me, his lips drawn into a confused pucker. "What'd ya say your..."

"Katherine," I said, "But call me Kate, sir."

"Kate," he said, crossing his twisted fingers over each other, "I can't have you staying here. You don't know what you're getting into." His eyes strayed to Jem.

"I'm not scared," I said, looking up at the Overseer and taking strength from her quick nod.

"You don't know what you're getting into, young lady. This place is well and fine during broad daylight, but at night there's..." His eye caught something, the expression on Jem's face, I believed, and he suddenly balked. He looked to the ground. "Rats," he said, though with not nearly as much confidence. "There will be rats."

I laughed outright. "To be honest, sir, I'm not scared of rats. I actually like them."

There was a thud from behind me and I turned to see both John and Jem staring out through their cell doors.

"Rats?" John choked. "You... *like... them?*"

I nodded. "I've always been a bit of a strange child. I'm terrified of horses, cats, and dogs, but rats, mice, spiders, snakes..." I smoothed the air with my hands. "All good."

John shuddered. "I thought I liked you, but now I'm not so sure." He ran a hand through his hair. "They're so... dirty."

"Try smelling yourself sometime," the Overseer retorted, standing up for me. "When's the last time *you* took a bath?"

"I- uh..."

"At least rats groom themselves. They at least *try* to keep the dirt off of them."

"When did *you* wash?" This time the question came from Jem, directed right at the Overseer. I was surprised at his boldness. I had taken him as a bit of an introvert, not very talkative, and definitely not aggressive. The Overseer turned to him smugly.

"*I* wash every day, down at the river," she said, triumphant. "You must admit, I *do* smell better than everyone else."

"It can't be good for you, all that water. Takes all the oils and good stuff off your skin," John commented, "And then what's supposed to protect you from bad air?"

"Oh, you sound like Richard," the Overseer said, clearly dismissing the concept of oils and good stuff and bad air.

"Richard always smells good," John said.

"Have you seen the amount of scents and perfumes the man uses?" The Overseer shook her head. "Even just a cloth and water would do the man good."

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“Richard’s a wise man- don’t you think that he’d know best?” Jem offered.

“Taking my advice on personal hygiene from a man that smells like a barnyard is *hardly* my idea of a reliable authority,” the Overseer shot back. “I love Richard, great man, but he’s a bit...” She groped for the word, gesturing circles with her hand. “Unprogressive.”

“Are you saying that *you’re* progressive, *you*, the Overseer who still wears clothes that went out before the Normans came?” Simon said, joining the argument.

“*I*, young man,” she said, waving a finger at the young man with a spindly grey beard and twiggy limbs, “Am not talking about fashions. I’ll admit it- I dress like a foggy old woman who doesn’t know two pence worth of trends, but I fail to see how that impacts my scent at all.”

“Have you washed your clothes? Color isn’t colorfast- touch it to water and it blotches.”

“Do you *see* any color on me, besides my scarf?” the Overseer asked, *stretching her arms wide and turning in a circle. All of the debaters examined her costume closely.

I was beginning to get rather interested in this argument. I had nothing of value to say in the conversation, and so I remained silent.

“No,” John finally admitted with reluctance. “No color. Just white and brown.”

“Ex-actly,” the Overseer said, fluffing her skirts triumphantly. “I dress simply, so when I wash my clothes, there isn’t that much to wash, and there aren’t any colors to wash away. And, can we all agree that I smell better than most of you?” She caught my eye and laughed. “Yes, even you, Katherine Wright.”

“Yes,” I had to admit with reluctance.

“You are something else, Overseer,” Simon said, shaking his head. “You should have been born later, when the world becomes ready for these newfangled notions.”

“They *aren’t* newfangled,” the Overseer shot back, “Remember when I told you the Bible story of that Naaman person? Well, how did *he* get healed from his leprosy?”

Simon sighed. “He washed seven times in the river.”

“So, if we were going directly from the Bible, which is *not* newfangled and it *definitely true*, washing is a good thing. It cures diseases, not causes them.” Her eyes fell on me. “Say, Katy dear,” she said, as if a new idea was sprouting in her mixed-up mind, “Why don’t you come and join me sometime? After all, it can only be good for you.”

I respectfully declined.

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. The invitation remains.”

There was a pause, then I piped up. “What were we talking about?”

“Uh... I don’t remember,” the Overseer said, staring at the ceiling. “Something... dirty.”

“Rats,” John said. “Rats.”

“Oh, yes,” the Overseer said. She looked at me. “Do you *really* like rats?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I love all rodents,” I said, “Mice especially. But rats are basically bigger versions of mice, so I like them too.”

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“Why mice?” John said, pulling an awful face. “Why rodents? Why rats? Why not something nice and pretty- cats, dogs, horses.” He eyed me. “You scared of them?”

“Ye-es,” I said, thinking it over. “Well, I just don’t find horses pretty. I don’t think that dogs are fun. And cats are another realm entirely.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I find rodents... *beautiful*. They are beautiful in their own little way.”

The jail was silent for a moment. Then the Overseer cleared her throat. “Well, beauty *is* a subjective concept, darling. I suppose if you truly think that there is beauty in even such a thing as a mouse, then you’re entitled to that opinion. Just...” she closed her eyes and searched for the words, “Don’t be weird just for the sake of being weird, alright? If you’re pretending to like rodents just for the shock value of it, just... stop it.” She locked her eyes on me. “But if that’s really what you like, then...” she flung her arms wide, “Go right ahead and keep dancing.”

I frowned. “Dancing?”

Jem stuck his hands out from in between the bars of his cell. “No, don’t ask, Miss Wright. Don’t ask- it’s her favorite speech to give, the one she gives every time- we’ve all heard it a thousand times- *don’t say it again!*”

The Overseer took a step backwards and squared her feet. She closed her eyes, let her head sag, took a deep breath, and then snapped her head up, her eye glinting with a wild new light. I instinctively took a step back, pressing my back against the stone wall. There was a new passion in the Overseer’s voice as she launched into a dialogue, a speech that had a strangely musical quality about it.

“I,” she said, “Am not like the rest of you.”

John sank down in a groan.

“I,” she said again, “Am *not* like the rest of you. I am something different.”

“Somethin’ different, alright,” Simon muttered, and I couldn’t help but break a smile.

“You may think I dance off-beat, sing off-key, live off-the-edge, but you’re wrong. Oh, so wrong.”

She leaned forward, and, even though ten paces separated us, I still felt an oddly personal press inward. She stared at me with the faintest hint of a smile. “I don’t dance awkwardly,” she said, her voice low and confident, “I don’t dance wrong,” she said again, her voice rising in pitch. She struck the air with her fist. “I just dance to different music!”

Suddenly she was dancing, a freestyle dance with seemingly random placement of claps and twirls and kicks. I could only stare at the spectacle unfolding before my eyes.

The Overseer whisked closer, stopping for the briefest instant to pull me from my defensive posture and raise my chin to meet hers. “Don’t look down on us, dearie,” she said, the words falling from her lips. “Don’t look down on us, dearie,” she said again, letting go of me and twirling towards the door.

She stopped at the door and looked back at us. “Don’t look down on us, dearie,” she said, laughing. “We don’t dance off-beat- we just dance to a different music, a music that only we can hear, a music that echoes through our lives, a music that shines through in every single

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thing we do or say. It's a beautiful, terrible, ethereal, fiendish music, great and tiny at once, and when we hear the strains playing, we dance, no matter what they play. We soar to great heights on the wings of grand chords, but we also crawl the deepest nether on the dark notes. We have capacity for enormous happiness, but greater sadness. We live and drink and breathe the music, the rhythm, the melody. WE ARE DIFFERENT. WE ARE DIFFERENT. WE ARE DIFFERENT." She accented each word with a strike in the air.

She laughed again, and I could hear a note of music in her laugh. "Don't look down on us, dearie- we can't help being interesting any more than you could help being dull. Goodbye, I can't stand this boredom any longer, have a nice day!"

The jail door slammed shut, and through the barred window I could hear a voice, singing a song without words at the top of her lungs. The voice receded into the distance, but the melody hung in the air, a saccharine sound that lingered. I blinked twice. The Overseer's song was good, wonderful even, in small portions, small little concerts, but the drenching she just gave us of her tune was a bit *too* much.

"The Overseer," Simon said from the back of the room- even just the sound of another normal human's voice helped clear the fog of insanity that hung in the air- "Belongs somewhere far, far away."

"I- I..." The Overseer's diatribe had so completely unsettled me that I had a tough time verbalizing. Even if I could have spoken coherently, there was nothing to speak. My thoughts were so completely scrambled and misty that I could hardly tell which way was up. I shook my head and closed my eyes tight, trying to block out everything for just a moment.

"I," I finally said, forcing my way through the mental haze, "Think the Overseer is a wonderful woman and a fun person to be around. She's just a *leettle* off the edge."

"A little?" John said from the corner of his cell. "Ya *think*?"

"Alright, alright- a *lotta* off the edge," I admitted, laughing.

Jem smiled. "As a matter of fact, I don't think she's even touching the edge. She's completely fallen off into insanity."

"I would have to agree with you," I said, nodding my head. "Now..." I closed my eyes. "What were we talking about, ya know, before we got distracted by rats and beauty and dancing and pure insanity?"

"You, I believe," Simon said, letting himself down to a sitting position. "You, and your... accommodations."

"Look, Miss Wright," Jem said, looking up at me. "You *don't* want to stay here overnight. I... I..." He lowered his head.

I scanned the room. My eye fell on Simon, who was leaning against the wall and wincing with every move, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. I pointed.

"You," I said, "Stand up."

"What?" he said, squinting at me.

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“Stand up. All by yourself.” I lifted my hands. “I’m not helping you. Prove you don’t need me.”

Simon glared at the offending John, who had dared a chuckle, then valiantly tried to hoist himself up. “Tried” is the key word here. Nowhere did I say “did”.

He tried, yes, tried so hard. As a young man, he probably could have won a war all by himself, just with the size of his heart. But he was old now, and, though his heart was just as big, his muscles had deteriorated. He managed to get himself pulled to a strange half-standing, half-sitting position, all his weight held on his thin forearms, he suddenly stopped moving and looked at me.

“Please help,” he said, and I could feel his pride bleeding, dying. For a moment I felt sorry for murdering this old man’s pride- it was probably the only thing he had left after all these years- but I dismissed the thought. After all, his pride needed to die. If his pride caused him to die physically, to not ask for help when he obviously needed it, then it deserved to be killed.

I stepped forward and took Simon’s shoulders, pulling him up and smiling at him.

“I’m staying,” I announced, “You need me.”

“You can’t,” John said, “It’s easy. You can’t.”

I whirled on him. “And why not, Mister Millingson or *whatever* your name is, why not?”

He fell to picking at his fingernails. “It’s Middleton.”

“Why not?”

“Not Millingson.”

“Why *not*?”

“Middleton.”

I could feel the awkwardness of the three in the room. I turned to face each of them, and I stopped at Jem.

“It’s because of you, isn’t it,” I said, studying his face. “Look, I don’t know why you’re in here, or what you do, look, I just don’t care.” I turned on everyone else. “I don’t care!” I said, the volume of my voice increasing, “I don’t care if the place is swarming with rats. I don’t care if ghosts drop from the ceiling and run their fingers up their spine after dark. I don’t care, whatever insane things Mister Millington or Millerson or Middleton or anyone does!” I threw up my hands. “I don’t care! I don’t think you realize something- I have nothing to lose. I have nowhere to go and no one to please. All I have is myself, and you need me. Whether you know it or not, you need me!” I took a deep breath and leaned back against the cell wall.

“Look, Miss Wright...” It was Jem again. “You don’t know me after dark. My own wife is scared of me.”

“Oh?” That was sad, if nothing else. I pictured his wife, pressed against a wall, terrified of her own husband, the one she had married. This only strengthened my resolve. I suddenly knew that there were wrongs inside this jail, horrible injustices that remained, and I knew what I needed to do. My “noble blood” was stirred.

“I,” I firmly announced, “AM STAYING.”

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John chuckled, shortly and derisively. “Well, let her stay the night. One should do it.” He laughed again. I regarded him coldly for a second, then retrieved my bag of food and blankets and looked to Simon. “Where do I bed down?”

“Well...” he looked around blankly. “There aren’t really any places for a person to sleep in here...”

“In a cell,” John said, “Like the rest of us.”

I turned to him. “That’s... a good idea... I guess.” I thought it over a bit, then nodded. “Alright.” I picked the one farthest from John, for whom I already had an especial dislike. Too sarcastic my taste. Too abrasive. Never started sentences properly.

Simon stepped forward and then flinched at the pain. I pointed at him. “No, no, no sir. I’m DOING this, and you can’t stop me.”

“You can have my bed,” Simon said, steadying himself on the bars of John’s cell. “You can have my room.”

I laughed. “Isn’t that chivalrous? Giving up your bed for a lady?” I shook my head. “No, no, I’m seventeen and strong. You’re...” I cocked my head, “Seventy?”

“Eighty.”

I whistled. “You’ve outlasted everyone else I knew... Eighty?” I smiled. “No, no, no. Besides, I insist.”

“But, I’ll...” Jem interjected.

“I don’t care what you do. Besides, I’m going to be safe in my own cell, you safe in yours. It’s all going to be fine.”

Simon sighed. “Alright, alright. Whatever.” He eyed me. “I don’t suppose it would be too much to ask for help back to my room?”

“That’s what I’m here for, sir,” I said, tossing my bag into the cell I had chosen and hurrying up to Simon. I acted as a walking cane, a support. I held up his thin body, which was surprisingly light. Then, I shouldn’t have been surprised. The man was a draping of skin over a fragile skeleton- he, no doubt, was lighter than me.

I opened the door to his room and glanced about. The room was bare, without much decoration or furniture to speak of. There was a straw pallet in one corner, and I laid the old man down this gently.

“Rest is what you need,” I said, fussing with the details of his limp pillow like a true mother. The Overseer had been more than right, more right than she ever could have imagined. I was a nurse, a mother at heart. There was no changing that fact- I would always be caregiver, and if someone needed help, no matter what their age or lowliness... but then again, I was the lowest of the low here. I had to remember that. I couldn’t treat all these people- like I was above them, for I wasn’t. I was lower than anyone here. I was a young girl, a young peasant girl, alone in the world. I was worth nothing, and I would have to remember that.

Simon groaned. I paused and considered him for a moment. “You,” I said decidedly, “Are staying in bed until I say so.”

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Simon laughed, then winced. “No, I have to be the jailer.”

“I don’t think that the Mistersons and the Millers are going anywhere. I can handle things.”

“No, I...” He tried to raise himself, and I pushed him gently down.

“I can handle things,” I said again, a little more firm this time. Simon stared at me, and then he smiled crookedly.

“You,” he said, “are a stubborn little thing, aren’t you?”

“Runs in my blood,” I retorted. I still wasn’t used to this, but I still felt the Grant in me rising to the top of my veins.

“Really?” Simon raised an eyebrow. “Being mule headed runs in the family, eh?”

“We prefer to think of it as ‘determined,’” I said. “And I’m the determinedest one of the bunch.”

“Where’s your ‘bunch’ now?” Simon asked. I could tell he didn’t mean to hurt me, that he was just curious, but it still sliced open the wound in my heart, the very one that had just recently been scabbing over.

I looked away. “All dead. All dead.”

“Ah.” He paused. “All?” He sounded incredulous.

I shrugged. “There was a fever. It ran through the town, killing everyone off.” This was the first time I had actually started inventing a backstory for this “Katherine Wright”. I knew that Simon was weighing my tale in the balances, and I thought of where this yarn could spin off to next.

“So...” he pursed his lips, “No other family? Distant relatives? Kindly neighbors?”

I shook my head. “None that I’d *want* to go live with, sir. So I finally decided I had to get out of my town and fend for myself.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

I chuckled. “I had two choices- stay and die, or run and possibly survive. By this point, everyone else in my family had died.” I hoped with all my heart he bought the tale, totally contrary to my personality. I would never run from a sick person- I would stick by them to the end. Then, with a pang, I remembered Mother. I had left her, and she was sick, too. I thought of the scream and I suddenly wanted to vomit on the floor, disgusted with myself. I swallowed my nausea and paid attention to what Simon was saying.

“What village did you come from?”

“Oh, just a little manor village, way up to the north.” At least *that* wasn’t a lie.

“How far did you walk?”

“Um...” I estimated the distance between Grant Manor and Hilltop Castle. I did some rapid calculations in my head. *We walked for almost two-and-half weeks, covered about fifteen miles per day...*

“About... I’d say about two-hundred fifty miles.”

He stared at me for a moment. “Young lady... how, exactly, did you do that?”

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I smiled the winningest smile I could. "I have my ways, sir. No one bothered themselves with little old me."

He shook his head in wonder, then looked up at me. "Well, Miss Wright..."

"Call me Kate. I hardly know who you're talking to when you say 'Miss Wright'." It was true. I had been a Wright for all of an hour, and I still didn't answer to the name at all, unless I thought about it for a good period of time. Showing a delayed response to my own last name might raise some suspicions. "Kate" would be much better.

"Well... Kate..." Simon was obviously not one given to nicknaming, "I'm not sure I believe you."

"It doesn't matter if you do or don't, sir. It happened just the same, sir." I was amazed at my ability to make up things, and even more amazed at the true sincerity I was able to inject into my voice. I hadn't realized I was this good at acting. I guess that I performed on demand.

"Don't call me sir," he said, waving his hand at me, "Don't feel natural. I haven't been called 'sir' since..." He stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, searching his memory for the rare occasions that someone had called him a gentleman. "Never," he finally said, "Never. Can't remember a single instance."

(I thought about commenting on the fact that after eighty years, his memory might be blank in some places, but I decided against it. I didn't want to be argumentative and rude, especially not to the person I was caring for.)

"Well, what would you prefer I call you?" I smiled. "Not your first name, surely. It doesn't seem right to call a person, sixty years your elder, by their first names. That would make me uncomfortable."

"Well, calling a person, sixty years your junior, by their nicknames, just like a good pal, don't make me feel all that comfortable either."

I laughed. "Fair enough, Simon. Fair enough." I pointed my gaze directly at him. "Now, are you going to let me run the jail or not?"

Simon sighed and sank back to his thin mattress. "Well, I guess a girl who can walk two-hundred-fifty miles down dangerous roads and somehow stay safe can run a little jail. I guess."

I smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now," I felt the chill in the air. Spring was coming, but winter still had its fingers around the world. "You need to keep warm."

"I'm warm, I'm perfectly-" he was silenced by a finger held straight in the air.

"No," I chided, "None of that acting-tough business. I know you better than that, and I've only known you for a few minutes- fifteen at the most." I stood. "Wait here."

I ran out of the room and returned a minute later with a precious blanket from my bag. I also brought half a loaf of bread and a strip of dried meat. I knew I was going to need these, but I already knew that Simon needed them much more than I did. His eyes widened as he held the blanket in between his fingers.

"Where did you get this?" he marvelled. "It's so thick and warm."

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I shrugged. "My mother knew a good weaver." Of course I knew that it was just an exceptionally high-quality blanket, but I wasn't going to reveal that to Simon. If I told him, no wonder where he would take it. Probably off on some wild tangent. I smiled.

He eyed me suspiciously. "What secrets are you hiding, girl?"

I smiled. "If I told you, they wouldn't be secret anymore."

"Fair enough, so long as you don't turn out to be a thief and a murderer on the run from the law." He smiled, squinting. "But I don't think any thief would be stupid enough to go right to a jail, eh? And surely none of them would be stupid enough to actually try to work at the jail, eh?" He laughed, a dry and cracking laugh, like leaves being consumed by a flame.

"I don't know... I've met some pretty silly people in my long lifetime..." I tapped my chin. "Then again, maybe they would just be an exceptionally wise thief. After all, who would think to look for a murderer in a jail? That'd be the last place I'd look."

"Very, very true... I never would have thought of that..." He looked me up and down again, then shrugged. "Oh well. If you *are* a thief, murderer, or whatever else you may be, you're too clever for me. I'm just going to go to sleep now, don't mind me!"

"Good," I said, patting the old man's arm. "You rest- you need to get better."

Simon grunted. "Whatever."

I laughed softly to myself as I shut the door to the jailer's room. I could already hear soft snores coming from the old jailer's bed. The man was exhausted, completely exhausted. I was glad I was here. Simon was going to kill himself at the rate he was going. He needed a break. A long one.

I turned around and stared at the two people I was in charge of. It suddenly hit me- these people were entirely dependent on me. Two human beings, relying entirely on my support- in that sense I was the mother of twins!

Jem cocked his head and looked at me from in between the bars. "Welcome back, Miss Wright."

I set my hands on my hips. "Now, Masters Middleton and Millerton..."

"Middleton," John said, not even looking up. "I'm Middleton- He's Millerson."

I threw my hands in the air. "I'm never going to be able to remember any of that. Would you be alright if I just called you by your first names?" I smiled at Jem. "I won't call you Jimmy, I promise."

"Whatever," John said.

I shook my head at him. "You are pathetic."

"I don't care."

"*And* apathetic," I finished. I shook my head. "Jem, how do you put up with this one all day?"

Jem grimaced. "I have no choice."

John squinted sideways at me for a moment, then went back to whatever he was doing. I stepped closer and peered in at what he was doing, and I was surprised to see that he was

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sewing. In fact, more than sewing- he was embroidering a fanciful pattern some fabric- looking closer, I recognized it as the bodice of a woman's dress. His fingers flew, surprisingly nimble, and he pulled a pin from his tight lips, so he could speak to me.

"What'cha lookin' at?" he said gruffly.

"You," I shot back. I studied his work for a moment, then put my hand through the bars of the cell. "Do you mind if I inspect your work for a moment?"

He grumbled under his breath but handed me the cloth. I took the needle in between my fingers, and I immediately felt a thrill run up my arm. I hadn't held a needle for at least a year- since before Mother got sick. I studied his pattern for a moment, then, almost of its own accord, the needle began to move up and down.

"Hey!" John said, lunging forward. "Don't touch that!"

I hopped backwards, out of his reach, and kept on sewing.

"You're gonna ruin it!" he cried, reaching out of the cell with desperate fingers.

I stopped sewing for a moment and looked at him. "Not so loud. You'll wake Simon."

"You're going to ruin it," he said again, his voice dropping to a desperate whine.

"I won't ruin it," I said, putting a few more stitches in. I then glanced up at the desperate look on John's face, and my conscience began to prod me.

I grudgingly handed over the cloth, and John snatched it up. He ran his fingers over the complicated knots and stitches for a moment, then inspected the work I had done. He grunted. "Not bad."

I laughed. "Not bad?"

He turned away. "Fine, good."

I rolled my eyes at him. "What's made you such a mean person, John? I even helped you- and you still rant at me." I shook my head. "What's the matter?"

John laughed, a belittling and condescending laugh. "Do you really think I'm going to tell my life story, a very private and personal one at that, to a girl, one who I've known for exactly three minutes?" He laughed again. "Not a chance."

I tossed my head. "Suit yourself, then." I turned away. "I only want to help."

I looked at Jem. "I don't suppose *you* would be interested in divulging you life's history to a girl that you just met, either, would you?"

"To be honest, no, I wouldn't, thank you anyway."

I spun on John. "See, *that's* the way, the nice way, to refuse an offer made from the goodwill of someone's heart."

"How do I know it's the goodwill of your heart?" John said, falling to his work again. "How do I know you're not just looking for fodder for the village's network of gossips?"

"You could believe in humanity."

"I gave up believing in humanity long ago, missy. I stopped trusting people after..." He suddenly stopped and cleared his throat. "It's not important."

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I raised an eyebrow. “Were you about to divulge some of that “private history” you referred to?”

“I *was*, but I remembered just in time.”

I wagged a finger at him. “Just you wait. I’ll have the whole story out of you in no time.”

Thought John didn’t *actually* stick out his tongue, I got the impression that he had done just that, internally, anyway. I stared at him and imagined doing the exact same thing, hoping he’d get the point.

I couldn’t tell if he did or didn’t. He just turned away with a grunt that verged on growl. I smiled at him, as friendly as I could manage. He turned farther away, til he was facing entirely away from me. I shook my fist at his back, then turned.

I peered out the barred windows of “my cell” and noted the sun’s position. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, great,” John muttered, not looking up. I eyed him.

“Well, Miss Wri- Kate...” Jem said, obviously unused to nicknaming people. “I guess... since you’re jailer now... and all...”

I motioned at him, barely looking up as I unpacked the remaining blankets from the bag. “Go on. Just say it.”

He was silent for a moment longer. I glanced up at him, wondering about his silence. Then I saw the look on his face and immediately was concerned. “Jem, what’s wrong?”

“Please...” He held out his hands through the bars. He did that a lot- almost like he was begging, pleading, for something. “It’s... it’s time to lock me up.”

“You’re *already* locked up,” I pointed out.

“I know, but it’s not enough for... what I do after dark.”

“Ah.” I studied his face. “Soooo... how *do* I lock you up more than you are now?”

Jem said nothing, just pointed to the back of his cell. I glanced inside and saw two large chains hanging from the wall. A chill went up my spine, all the way up the base of my neck. The dark dungeon flashed in my mind again.

“Why on earth would you need *those*?” I asked, rubbing my arms to try and tame the goosebumps that had seemingly appeared from nowhere.

“To... keep me from hurting myself,” Jem said, looking away and hiding his eyes behind his hand. I could clearly see the shame he felt over... whatever it was that he did at night. At once, my heart went out to him, and I put him right at the top of my list of “projects”. I had already acquired a whole list of them- John, Simon, the Overseer, and now Jem. Especially Jem. I had a sense that he needed help more desperately than all the rest.

“Well... if you really think it’s necessary...”

“Oh, trust me, it’s necessary,” John said.

“You, Master Meelonren or whatever-your-name-is, were *not* called upon to speak. I would advise that you *remain silent*,” I said firmly to John, staring him down as hard as I possibly could. He shrugged, but he *did* stop talking.

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I walked up to the bars and shook them a bit. "How do I get in?"

His eyes immediately went wide and frightened, like a rabbit's or a deer's. He *did* constantly have a hunted look about him- the thin and tired look of a creature on the run constantly. "No, no, no, Miss- er, Kate. *Don't* come in here. No telling what I might do."

I frowned. "I thought you said that you were perfectly sane during the day."

"I, Miss Wright, am *not* a safe person," Jem said firmly. "I'm scared of myself- I can't control my own mind sometimes." He thrust his hands out through the bars again, and I could see them shaking. "Do you know what it feels like to have no control over what you're doing, Miss Wright?"

"No, I don't. I know what it's like to have a situation entirely out of my control..." I paused as the memories of the storm of Grant Manor swirled up in my mind again. "But I can't imagine what it would feel like to be doing something- and not have a single bit of control over your own hands." I smiled sadly. "I'm so sorry for you. That has to be awful."

His face fell from his usual anxious cringe to a relieved smile. "You don't blame me, do you? I mean, you don't think I *mean* to do any of the things I do, do you?"

"Not at all," I said. "After all, you came here of your own free will, just so you wouldn't hurt anyone." I patted his hand. "That takes true honor and courage. You wouldn't do that if you were *trying* to hurt someone."

He smiled, clearly relieved. "Oh, I'm so glad. Most of the villagers think that I *mean* to do all this stuff, or that my insanity is God punishing me for something I've done, or that I'm bewitched..." He frowned. "I don't *think* God is punishing me- I haven't done anything terrible, I don't think... just normal, little sins... do those add up?" He sighed and covered his eyes with his hands. "Cuz other people surely have done worse- why am I here, locked up, away from my very own wife, and they free to roam and keep sinning?"

He suddenly looked up at me. "I'm sorry, I've been rambling." A new fear leaped into his eyes. "That means it's getting closer." He pointed to the wall to the right of his cell. "Hand me the key."

I placed it in his hands, and he took it to the back of his cell. I watched as he opened the cuffs on the end of his hands, and I noticed he had scars all around his wrists. Scars from these chains. They had chafed against him for so long. They seemed a bit too deep and big to just be chafing scars, I noted.

He slid his hands into the cuffs and clicked the lock shut. Turning the key in first one, than the other, he locked them tightly. He tugged gently at the chains on the wall, and seemed satisfied. He walked back towards the door, as far as the chains would let him, and handed me the key. He stretched as far as he could, and I could easily see the chains biting into his wrists. I cringed for him, though I didn't need to. He cringed for himself. They clearly hurt him enormously.

I stretched my arms as far through the bars as far as I could, hoping to spare Jem at least a bit of agony. I barely grasped the end of the key in the very end of my fingers.

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"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked, taking a few steps to the wall and hanging the key up on the hook on the wall.

Jem tried to smile. "Not really. It just... happens."

"You could try to keep 'im talkin'," John interjected. "If you can keep him distracted, he stays sane a bit longer." He glanced up at the sun outside the window. "But I don't think much can happen." He said nothing, just jerked his head at the darkening sky.

"Blackness..." Jem said, rubbing his arms as if trying to warm himself. I whipped my head back to him at the sound of his voice. There was something new in his voice, a very tangible difference. I couldn't tell if it was the adding of insanity or the subtraction of sense- I just knew that night was falling, and when the sun set, night fell upon Jem as well.

"So, Jem," I said, trying to keep my voice as upbeat and cheery as possible, "Tell me about your family. I heard you mention a wife- tell me about her."

Jem blinked, and his eyes seemed to refocus. "Oh, Isabelle," he said, a bit confused, but sane. The note of insanity was gone, and I couldn't help breathe a sigh of relief.

"Isabelle," he said again, and this time his voice was stronger. "She's my wife... lovely little thing... but hardest worker you ever seen."

"Really?" I said, "Do you work for the castle?"

"No-ooo..." Jem scratched his head. "Well- not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my father's a miller, and I work for him. Family business. I'm the oldest, so I'll inherit the mill and the trade."

"Oh, I get it!"

He glanced up at me. "Get what?"

"That's why your last name is 'Millerson'. Because you're a miller's son, and he was a miller's son, and... how far back does it go?" I suddenly felt very stupid. How, in all my years, had I lived and not put that together? After all, Grant Manor village was chock full of Smiths- and they were blacksmiths. There was a family of Farmers- and they were farmers. *Am I that stupid?*

Jem shrugged. "Way back. I can't tell you how far- our history gets blurry after a while."

"Ah." There was a silence for a moment, and an owl called from somewhere far Jemond the jail. Jem heard it, and immediately his eyes began to stare somewhere far beyond the jail, probably out to wherever the owl was. I noticed and began to talk a bit faster.

"Do you have any children?"

"Children?" Jem said, his eyes coming back to the jail, but they no longer stayed fixed on me. They flicked about, from corner to corner. In the corners, darkness was beginning to pool. I knew it and put myself right in front of Jem's cell.

"Stay with me," I said, "I want to know if you have any children."

"Wh- wh..." He shook his head, slapping himself a bit on the side of the cheek. "Keep yourself, Jem," I heard him mumble. He looked up at me, and I could see the effort to keep himself here in his eyes. But I could also see the insanity lurking at the corners of his face. All it

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would take was one weak moment, one lapse of effort, and he would be gone, past all bringing back.

“I,” he said very clearly and slowly, “Have no children yet. My wife and I have only been married for less than a year.”

“Do you hope for any?”

“Yes,” he said, closing his eyes. His voice dropped to a whisper. “I do. I do.” His hands twitched, once, twice. He opened his eyes and stared down at them. His lips moved, forming words that I couldn’t make out. All at once he leaped up and stared right at me.

“Thank you, Katherine Wright,” he said, his voice clear and sure. “Thank you for trying.”

“STAY. WITH. ME.” I wanted to shake him- maybe that would knock some of his departing sanity back into his head.

“I... I can’t, Miss Wright... I can’t... the blackness... it’s getting in...” He began to mechanically rub his arms, his eyes going far away.

“NO.” I motioned around. “The blackness is far away. Look at all these candles.”

Jem looked around at the many candles, then he stared at me. “It’s not enough,” he whispered, and then he shuddered all over. His eyes snapped shut, and he fell to the floor, trembling.

“Jem?” I said, grasping the cells bars tighter.

Jem opened his eyes and stared up at me, and all of a sudden I knew. The eyes looking at me were *not* Jem’s- Jem had disappeared into the night, leaving an empty, vacant soul. It *wasn’t* Jem- it was just an it.

“Blackness,” it said, in a hollow, grayscale voice, and I shivered. The note of insanity had returned- or perhaps the sense had just left? I realized that the sense must be the one leaving, taking Jem with it. After all, if there had been something added, wouldn’t Jem still be masked and present underneath it all? But what if the fog of insanity was smothering Jem, making him unable to be seen or heard.

Then I *felt* the blackness creep into the jail as the sun sunk into a sea of night, and I could feel a finger of fear trace its way down my back. Suddenly I didn’t think Jem so far gone- maybe he was just hyper-tuned to feel the blackness.

I remembered one night as a child- I couldn’t have been older than seven- and I had felt this same blackness. It had taken the form of a monster, a monster I had known was lurking in every dark corner. I glanced around nervously. I felt the same monster peeking over my shoulder.

I shook my head. Jem’s insanity was getting to me.

John’s voice broke into my thoughts, and I jumped. “It’s on nights like these when you really wonder, ain’t it?” His voice wasn’t grating as it usually was. The falling of night had changed him too.

“Yes... I mean, wonder what?”

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John chuckled. “When you wonder if the blackness is just in Jem’s head. When you wonder if it might be real, realer than real.”

I stared out the window at the moon, which was just rising. It was full. “I know what you mean.”

“It only happens once in a while, though... the other nights you feel just fine and think that Jem’s the biggest nut to ever walk the earth.” He shook his head. “I feel bad for you. Jem’s always the wildest when the blackness is strong.”

“Wild?” I looked at it, cowering on the floor. “He doesn’t look overly wild to me.” I said this with a trace of sarcasm.

“Just wait til’ the moonlight hits ‘em.” John grinned. “Popa would say he’s ‘moonstruck’.”

“So... moonlight makes him go nuts?” I frowned. “Interesting.” I studied its cell. “Have you tried covering the window?”

“What?”

“Covering the window, so the moonlight doesn’t get in.”

“I wasn’t serious. He’s just as bad when there’s almost no moonlight.”

“Ah.”

“Besides, even then, he would still be scared of the blackness. I can’t say I blame him.” John glanced about the jail and shivered. “Sometimes, in the middle of the darkest, loneliest nights, I feel like I could easily go mad. Sometimes I believe I *am* mad, I just haven’t realized it yet.”

“As the Overseer would say, that’s proof you aren’t over the edge yet.”

The moon rose higher and higher into the sky. A low whine came from Jem’s cell, never stopping, always getting louder and higher. I couldn’t bear it. I clapped my hands over my ears and turned away.

Then the edge of the moon broke over the edge of Jem’s window, and the whine went dead for a second. It raised its blank eyes to the moon, and just for a moment, the dead discs reflected the circle of the moon, lending them an eerily lifelike look.

Then Jem screamed, and such a scream I had never heard before nor since. I was like the screams of owl, wolf, and woman brewed together, meshed together, screamed together. The thing, the screaming thing, began to thrash about the cell, its voice raised in hair-raising screeches. I plugged my ears with my fingertips and turned away, I couldn’t bear to watch.

Then I realized that I had to watch. If I wanted to have any chance of saving Jem from this thing that held him, I first had to know from what he suffered. I made myself turn back to him, and tears came to my eyes as I watched what it was doing to him. The mother in my heart drove a dagger deeper and deeper, twisting and ripping through my soul. I couldn’t bear to watch this. But watch it I did.

The thing screamed like a banshee. It seemed to never stop, never waver in volume or intensity. It only stopped for one blessed second of silence to catch its breath, and then another eternity of noise would rise. It threw itself from one side of the cell to the other, like it wanted to tear itself apart. I now knew why he had put himself in chains. He had told me it was to keep

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from hurting himself, but I didn't believe him- not right then, at least. I had thought he was going a bit overboard. But now I knew. HE wasn't going over at all. In fact, I suspected that he was undershooting a bit.

The shackles bit hungrily into his wrists, and, I could see, illuminated in the orange candlelight and cool white moonlight, a dark, thick liquid beginning to seep out from under the metal cuffs. I felt sick, both in my heart and in my stomach. So *that's* where the scars on his wrists came from.

The moon went behind a cloud, and all went dark for a moment. The thing stopped, just for an instant, and it stared down at his hands, at the blood running down his arms, and he slowly looked up at me. His face was white, and there was sanity in his eyes. Furthermore, there was *Jem*, and that comforted and terrified me more than any other thing.

"Help me," he whispered, his voice squeaking with terror at the thing he had become. Then, the moon came out and shone down in all its terrible beauty, and, as Jem glanced up at the light, his face drained of him, revealing the thing. He screamed.

Simon came staggering out of the back room. He took in the scene- the thing raving in the cell, John cringing and plugging his ears, the look of blank horror on my face, and groaned. "Oh, the first time I've actually been asleep." He noticed the look of drawn terror on my face and grimaced. "Sorry to put ya through this, Miss Wright."

"Call me Kate," I said, never taking my eyes off Jem. "How long has he been like this?"

Simon shrugged, then winced as another shriek split the air. "He showed up here a week ago, but I think he's had this problem for longer. It just finally got bad enough that he had to contain himself."

"And I haven't got a bit of sleep since then," John said, "It's officially gotten annoying." The irony in his voice perfectly underscored the situation, and I couldn't help but laugh. The mood and tension immediately tightened and loosened.

I listened to the screams for a moment. Then, a bit of recognition flashed in my ear.

"He's yelling *something*," I said, catching a word in the screech, "There are words coming out of his mouth."

"How can you tell?" John asked, yelling to be heard over a scream. "It all sounds like a scream to me!"

I shook my head. "*Listen!*"

They did listen. Suddenly Simon gasped. "*She's right!*"

John frowned. "What?"

Simon held up a finger. "Listen- just now he said something about blackness- blackness." He closed his eyes in concentration. "That seems to be about all he's saying. Just 'blackness' over and over."

The moon was concealed in clouds again, and a scream died in Jem's throat. He looked up, and I could see that he was himself once more.

"Help...ME..." he said again, his voice panicky and high, "I'm sorry!"

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Then the moon came out from behind the cloud, and another scream shook the jail.

I started. "He *is* moonstruck!"

John frowned at me. "You sound like Popa."

"No, really! When the moon goes behind a cloud, he returns!"

"Now, Kate," John said, in a disapproving voice.

But I didn't stop to listen. I ran to my cell and snatched up a blanket.

"Miss, what are you..." Simon began, stepping forward.

"You, Simon," I said, pointing a finger at him, "Are staying right here. I got this."

I darted out of the jail and circled to the window I knew was Jem's. I peered inside the barred window and was immediately confronted by a wild face in the window.

This was the first time I had seen it's face up close, I stifled a scream of horror. The chains were failing to keep it from hurting Jem- I saw scratches, red with blood, decorating the sides of his cheeks and ripping down his neck. I shuddered at the blank insanity in its eyes. What did I tell him about not being too far gone? Scratch that. He *was* too far gone, completely gone and overcome. The Overseer's insanity paled in comparison to this creature's madness.

It stopped screaming and stared at me, silent. I stared right back at it, determined not to let it see me fear, to not relent or break my gaze. Maybe, I thought, Jem would be able to break through.

It blinked, and then it opened its mouth, as if it was about to scream again.

I never gave it chance to. I threw the blanket over the window, blocking as much of the moon as I could. I jumped up, trying to stuff it in the cracks above the window frame. I couldn't reach it. I simply wasn't all enough, and my arms couldn't reach, leaving me helpless.

Then, I felt two hands grab my waist and hoist me into the air. I gave a short scream and began to kick.

"Calm down, miss," a voice said from the darkness. "Just giving you a boost up.

I took a deep breath and realized, yes, the hands weren't trying to drag me into the darkness. They just held me, upright and still.

I put aside my fear and surprise for a moment and stuffed the blanket in the cracks in the stone, securing it as well as I could.

I set my hands on the arms that held me. "Down, please."

My helper obliged, setting me on the ground lightly. I smoothed my skirts. "Thank you, sir, I-" I turned, and there was no one there. I looked back and forth, barely catching the glint of moonlight of a shoulder as someone rounded the corner down the road. I contemplated following, but only for a moment. That was a terrible idea, I knew. Besides, the jail needed me, and I needed to see if my experiment worked, if Jem was any better.

I ran to the door and almost knocked over Simon, who had come slowly hobbling after me. He stumbled back, and I barely caught him before he fell to the ground.

"Are you alright?" I asked him, pulling him completely up and steadying him.

"Are *you* alright?" he asked, panting. "I heard you scream."

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I shrugged. "Someone showed up out of nowhere and startled me. That's all." I wasn't sure I wanted to tell Simon *everything* that had happened outside. He might think that someone was trying to kidnap me or something.

"Really? Who?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know who- I'm new here, remember? He was gone before I could see him."

"How do you know it was a 'he'?"

I could feel myself blushing, even though the dark didn't let Simon see. "Because his voice definitely did not belong to a girl."

"He *spoke* to you?"

"Yes. He did."

"What..."

"How's Jem?" I interrupted, desperate to change the subject.

"Jem? I forgot about him, actually..." He cocked his head. "I don't hear him..."

That's when I noticed the silence. There were none of the insane shrieks, none of the wild screams.

I pushed past Simon and ran to Jem's cell. I looked in, hoping hard that *it* wouldn't stare out at me, a mad scream of "*blackness*" frothing on its lips.

I didn't, and I heaved a sigh of pure relief. I wasn't sure if I could take one more scream, or I might scream right back at him.

Instead, Jem, *truly* Jem, not the thing that held him, was curled into a fetal position in the corner of his cell, staring out at nothing and shaking. But his was still *in* the jail, though, not somewhere far away.

"Jem?" I said softly, trying not to startle or spook him.

He looked up at me, then immediately down at the blood streaming down his pale arms. The dark, sticky streams looked black in the candlelight, and the long runs of black blood on his face looked truly ghastly. "Miss Wright."

I looked him over- from the chafing wounds on his wrists to the trickles of blood creeping down his face and neck. He needed help, now.

"That's it," I said, shaking the lock on the door. "I'm coming in."

Terror flashed on Jem's face. "No, no, Miss Wright. I-I'm dangerous- I might hurt you." He held up his bloody hands for proof.

"You're in greater danger than I am," I said firmly, "I'm willing to take the risk."

"Miss Wright," Jem said, trying to leap to his feet and cling to the door, but the chains, catching his halfway, dragged him back to the floor again. The jar stunned him, and though his wrists bled all the more, I felt like he was safer now than before. He lay still, breathing deeply and raggedly.

"Simon," I said, turning to the old jailer, "If I'm going to be the jailer in your place, I need the keys."

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“Miss Wright-”

“KATE.”

“You don’t correct Jem when he calls you “Miss Wright,” John quipped from his cell. “Why should you pick on poor old Simon?”

I whirled and scowled at him. “Oh, be quiet. ‘Tisn’t the same thing at all.”

John raised his hands in surrender, a look of absolute boredom with the world on his face. “Whatever, Miss Wright.”

I ground my teeth at him, then turned back to Simon. I placed one hand on my hip and put the other out flat, expectantly. “Keys, please.”

“But, Mi- uh, Kaate...” Simon said, remembering and drawing out my name. No doubt it sounded strange on his tongue. “Kate,” he repeated, sounding more confident this time. “I can’t let you go in there. The man is mad!”

“He’s not *mad*, just... “ I groped for a moment, then, mustering all confidence and determinedness I had in me. “Just *moonstruck*.”

“What?” Simon asked, giving me a strange look.

“Moonstruck. His mind’s been affected by the moon’s light, that’s all. Very different from being mad.” I hoped nobody would ask me exactly *how* being moonstruck was different from being mad- to be honest, even I wasn’t exactly sure. But my affected confidence must have paid off, for Simon just stared at me for a moment, then nodded. He unhooked the ring of keys from his belt and placed them in my palm.

I walked to the cell, stuffed what I hoped as the right key into the lock, and twisted. The lock, rusty and unused, groaned like an animal in pain as it turned.

I pulled open the door, straining against the heavy iron bars and stared inside. Jem still lay there, knocked cold.

Ducking out of the cell, I pulled the key to the chains off the wall and quickly the shackles that squeezed unmercifully at Jem’s wrists, I cringed at the blood. *Good thing I’ve never been queasy.*

AS I stared at the bloody chains, I promised Jem something, right then. I promised it to myself, too. I vowed that no one, no one, would *ever* spend a night in irons again. If they must go into a cell, well, I guess they could, but no one would pass the night in these torture instruments, not even if they wanted to. I would not allow it.

I glanced up at Simon. “You can go to bed now. I have this under control, thank you very much.”

Simon shook his head. “No, no, NO, Kate, no. I’m *not* leaving here, no. You *don’t* have *anything* under control.”

“I have Jem under control, right?” I shot back.

“He’s *knocked out*,” John interrupted, “Anyone, even a baby, could say that they had him ‘under control?’”

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I focused the coldest gaze imaginable at the overly-sarcastic John, then looked back to Simon. “Well, if you *must* stay, could you bring me some water and a rag?”

Simon nodded and hobbled back disappearing into the back room. He reappeared moments later, holding a rag and a pitcher. I immediately fell to washing the wounds, cringing at the raw flesh and deep gouges in his wrists. I sponged off the blood from his neck and chin, wincing.

Jem stirred and groaned, rubbing his forehead as he rolled over. He opened his eyes and looked at me, though I wasn’t sure if he fully understood what he was seeing. His eyes seemed glassy and removed.

“Jem?” I said softly, “Listen, brother. I’m here to help you, don’t worry. Don’t panic.”

Jem’s lips began to form words, but, for once, they weren’t mindless screamed repetitions of the word “blackness”. I couldn’t make out what they really were, but as long as “blackness” wasn’t among his mumblings, I knew we were making progress.

I heard John yawn from the other cell. “Well, as long as no one is screaming their blessed heads off, *I’m* going to get a good night’s sleep- or, at least, a better one.” He smiled at Simon. “I would suggest that you do the same, Si. Don’t know how long Jimmy’s gonna stay quiet.”

“He’s not the only one we wish would shut up,” I hear Simon mutter as he turned his back on John. “Suit yourself, John,” he said, louder. “I’ve gotta stay up and...”

“Nooooo...” I piped up. “You *need* sleep.”

“You *need* help.”

I stared at him for a moment. I hoped, for once, that John *would* come in with his sarcastic remarks. And, once again, he didn’t fail to make one of his signature sardonic quips.

“Help, eh?” He said this in the exact tone of voice that could make his word seem absolutely ridiculous and meant the exact opposite of what he said.

Simon went red. “Yes. Help-ing.”

“Oh. Of course. *Help-ing*.” The man was a genius when it came to sarcasm.

Simon glared at him.

Then I laughed. It was a short laugh, partly out of desperation, desperation born out of the extreme tension I had been under even since I left Grant Manor. But I wasn’t immune to the odd humor in the situation. John, viewed outside of the immediacy of the situation, was undeniably amusing. If we were just out in the world, and not having to spend every day right up against John’s humor. It was like fire- good for sitting next to, just to warm yourself a bit, but if you stayed by it, too close and too long, it would *burn* you.

My laugh broke onto stony faces. The room went silent, both of them staring at me with frowns. My smile began to fade as I looked from one, then to the other.

Then another laugh rose. Jem, still lying on his back, was laughing out loud. A good, human laugh, without a hint of insanity.

The laughter completely overtook him. And he shook. He laughed so hard that he went silent, only squeaks being able to be heard.

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I found myself laughing, too. My arms went weak from the force of my laughter and I collapsed against the cell wall, helpless in my mirth.

Simon and John just stared at us, not even a hint of a smile. Jem had rolled onto his stomach and now pounded the ground, with a fist. I laughed until tears came.

Finally, Jem rolled over and wiped at his eyes. "Oh..." he said, chuckling as he tried to recover his dignity. "Oh..."

"What's so funny?" Simon asked, clearly irritated and confused. This, of course, only undid all efforts we had made to pull ourselves together and reduced us to a worse state than we had been in before.

John threw his hands up. "Oh, great, now they've both gone moonstruck on us!" He crossed his arms and glowered at us from the corner of his cell. "What are you laughing at, you crazy fools?"

"Well," I said, gasping for breath, "You, for one."

"What? Think I'm FUNNY?" There was a note of masked pleasure in his voice, and suddenly, a whole new angle to his personality, the one craving acceptance, appreciation, jolted me into a sudden somberness, and I stared hard at him for a moment. Then, Simon, still flushed, walked in front of the cell and stared at me. I immediately fell on Jem's shoulder, weak with laughter.

Simon shook his head. "What's gotten into these two young one's minds?"

John shrugged. "Papa... and, I guess, Kate, would say that it's the moon's light. Makes people go clean out of their heads."

Simon squatted in front of us, and I could feel that he felt like shaking us until we got some sense back into our little heads.

"Now..." he said, voice quavering with suppressed frustration. "WHY. ARE. YOU. LAUGHING?"

I stopped for a moment to ponder the question, and Jem quieted, too. I frowned and looked up at the old grumpy jailer.

"I don't remember," I told him, my face brimming with sincerity. "AS a matter of fact, I don't think I knew in the first place." Then the ridiculousness of it all got to me, and I exploded into laughter again. We howled, Jem and I, simply howled.

And neither of us knew why.

Though laughter is typically contagious, this one didn't catch Jem or I. And, oh, did we have it, and have it bad. We weren't even sure what "it" was, but we had it.

"Then WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?!!?" Simon shouted, placing his hands on the top of his shiny, bald head in desperation. I'm sure he would have ripped his hair out in frustration- if he had any.

Jem became solemn for a moment. "Because we had to, Simon. Because we had to."

"What? Why did you have to?"

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“Because the air in here had gotten so dark, so cold, so sterile and dead, the laughs came up on their own. They came up in a defense against the unnatural anger and frustration. They had to come, or, quite frankly, we would have lost our minds.” 4795

Simon eyed him strangely, then looked at me. “Are you alright, Kate?”

“Totally fine, Simon,” I said, calming my laughter. “Totally fine.” I stood and smoothed out my skirts. “Now, go to bed, it’s late.”

“But...”

“Go. To. Bed.” An authority I never knew I had echoed from my words. “Really, I have this, Simon. I have this.”

“What if he goes crazy again?” Simon said, making a not-so-subtle gesture at Henry.

I laid my hand on the old man’s arm. “I have this. You. Go to bed.” I began walking him out of the room, escorting him to his bed. He protested, but I paid no attention to him. I pressed him down onto his mattress. He stiffened against me for a moment, but then I could feel his exhaustion taking over and his limbs went limp in my hands. He sunk down, still muttering something about how I couldn’t possibly do this on my own... and then his eyes closed and he was asleep like *that*.

I walked back to Jem’s cell and resumed my ministrations. Jem was awake now, awake and silent. He sat with his back against the wall as I washed his wound the best I could. I think he was past all resistance.

I scowled at the wounds. “That’s going to get infected. Wish I had a wrap or something.”

“You could go down to Richard tomorrow... or tonight, I guess,” John spoke up, in an uncharacteristically calm and earnest voice. “He’s open all hours, but... well, his shop’s a bit unnerving during the day, and I can hardly imagine what it’s like at night.”

“Ah.” I felt sleep pressing at my mind, and I wasn’t all that up for a visit to a creepy shop in the dead of the night. “I’ll stop by there tomorrow. He might have a wrap, and maybe some ointment.”

I glanced over at Jem, and saw that he had completely fallen asleep. “When ‘s the last time he slept?” I asked John, closing the cell door softly and locking it.

There was no answer. I looked over to see John, too, had nodded off. I shook my head at them, my two adopted twins, though they didn’t look a thing alike. Well, they had similar noses and face shapes, but John’s hair was a dark brown verging on black and Jem’s pale yellow. I turned into my cell, and, though I couldn’t have been as tired as everyone else, I surely felt like it. I wondered how many days these poor people had been without sleep, had endured long nights of screaming.

My thoughts slowly turned to the hands that had helped me block out the moon’s light and wondered who it could have been. I hoped that Simon wouldn’t ask me again about the incident tomorrow- I wouldn’t be able to answer without blushing.

I briefly wondered why, and then I was asleep.

Jailed Heart

Chapter Eleven

I woke with the sun the next morning, and it took me a moment to remember where I was.

Then I remembered, and I stood, staring ominously at the wrinkles in my dress's skirt, but, after a vigorous smooth with my hands proved as worthless as doing absolutely nothing, I gave up the fight.

It was still dark, and, glancing out the window, I saw that the sun wasn't quite up yet, with just the first hint of a round disc brightening on the horizon.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a wave of despair overcame me, and I sunk to the ground, burying my face in my hands. I didn't cry- I *couldn't* cry, but I leaned against the stone wall, breathing long, slow breaths against the pain in my heart.

I felt for my bag and pulled my satchel from its depths. I settled the bag over my shoulder and had a pang of satisfaction at the pleasant weight on my shoulder.

I unfastened the button that held the flap down and peered inside. A glint of blue shimmer arrested my attention, and I picked up my signet ring from the inside of the bag.

I held it up to the ever-increasing light, then immediately hid it beneath my hand as I glanced about wildly. I hadn't even thought to check to see if anyone of the prisoners were awake.

John sat, his knees drawn up to his chest and his head resting upon them. He was asleep, his back against the wall. I frowned, wondering how he could sleep in such an uncomfortable position.

I glanced at Henry and smiled. He was curled up in the corner of his cell, and his face was like a sleeping baby's, content and steeped in deep sleep. Only the scabbed-over scratches on his face gave any indication of the madness and rending of the night before. Watching his sleeping face, my mother-heart swelled and nigh burst.

I could still hear Simon's snores from the back room. I bet that all these people were exhausted. No doubt this was their first nights of true sleep in a long time.

Satisfied that all was as it should be, I uncovered my hand from the ring and stared at its smoldering beauty. It almost made me want to cry with a strangely silent sadness. That's why it was blue- the color of the pool of tears.

But it also was my only like to who I had been.

"No, AM. I AM still Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heir of Grant Manor and last torch burning in the Grant family line."

Then I stopped and wondered about my title. *Could* I claim the title of "Lady"? I knew that Mother was dead- even if the mob hadn't killed her, her sickness would have by now- but there a painful finality in claiming my birthright. I knew, down deep, that I never put my past far enough into the past to claim my title. The past was still very present, hanging on my shoulders and never-leaving. Maybe, eventually, the load would ease some, but, for now, it would be too

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much like forgetting and burying my mother. I would remain *Heir* of Grant Manor, I determined, never *Lady*.

I slid the ring on my finger and stared at it. It was too big for all but my thumb- Mother had big, meaty fingers. They were one thing that interrupted her otherwise perfect proportions. Otherwise, she was perfect. She had often wished for my fingers- long and perfectly tapered. The one other beauty I had, but, like my hair, it was all too often stuffed into a covering- a hat, or gloves- and hidden from the world. The only finger I could comfortably fit the ring on was my thumb, and that looked plain ridiculous.

I sighed and slid the ring from my finger. I opened the satchel and searched for a small pocket, a safe place for something so small, something that could be lost as easily as a ring. I found a small side pocket, sewn to the inside lining of the black fabric that made the satchel and secreted the ring inside it. There was nothing else in the bag, save the coin purse that the Overseer had given me and a few pretty stones I had picked up along the roadside on the way here. I pulled the keys from the pile I had carelessly tossed them into last night and pushed them inside the bag, too. Might as well keep them at my side as anywhere else. Weren't they safest there? I considered the threat of pickpockets but reasoned that a big, heavy set of jangling keys would be the last thing someone would want to steal. The clanging would draw attention immediately.

I opened my sack with the food in it and sighed as I stared at the one small piece of bread left. There were some crumbs left, but, other than that one small loaf, there was nothing.

I had a breakfast of that one small loaf and dumped the crumbs in the corner of the cell. They were my gift to the mice.

I folded my blanket and stood, determined this time. I had a mental checklist of the things I needed to do today and realized that getting something for Jem's wrists was a big one on my list. 3408

John had said something about "Richard"- how I could go to Richard for a wrap. I didn't know who "Richard" was, but there weren't too many people in this town- surely someone would know who he was.

The sun wasn't yet fully up, and there was little action or noise from outside, and I wondered if Richard would even be... doing whatever he did. But John had said that he was open all hours, and, though the sun wouldn't be fully risen for a while yet, I figured I could risk it.

I left the jail and strolled down the street, getting my first real look at the town I now called home.

There was nothing terribly particular about the town, but, just like every town, it had its own little quirks and traits. And, it definitely had a personality. I

There was nothing terribly particular about the town, but, just like every town, it had a personality. I could feel it pulsing from the walls of the haphazardly arranged houses, from the dirt streets. Though it was still only twilight, the town was beginning to awaken. A farmer,

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rubbing his eyes, drove a yoke of oxen and a wagon down the road, and, from the shoddy houses, I could hear the faint clatter of dishes. I caught a whiff of porridge, and suddenly I was incredibly hungry. I shoved my hunger off.

I ran to catch up with the farmer. "Excuse me, sir!" I said, loud enough to be heard, but quiet enough to not awaken half the populace.

The man brought his oxen to a stop, turned, covered his mouth while he yawned, blinked twice, and then smiled at me.

"What's the matter, Missy?" he said in a friendly way. "It's early, you know."

"I know, sir, I-"

"I'm not a sir, missy, so don't bother with the title." He laughed in an easy, laid-back way. "Just call me Allan."

"Um... alright... *Allan*..." I stopped to gather my thoughts. "Do you know where to find Richard?"

"You don't know where to find him? There was unmistakable amusement in Allan's voice.

"I-I'm new in this town. Someone told me that he could- uh, help me."

"Richard lives at the edge of town in his- er, *home*." He laughed again, and I immediately liked him. He reminded me of my father- warm and happy. "I'll drive you there." He pulled me up onto the wagon seat and settled me next to him. He flicked the oxen lightly with a thin stick he held in his hand, "Come on, girls." They began to lurch forward.

"So, why d'ya need to see Richard?" Allan drawled. "You look alright, yourself."

"Oh, it's not me," I said, slower than usual. Something about Allan made you want to slow down and take life in. "It's... for someone else." I didn't think that Jem needed the whole town to know about his self-destruction.

"Who?" Allan asked.

"Um... well, I work at the jail, and..."

"You do?" Allan asked, and there was suddenly a new interest and urgency in his voice. "You *do*?"

"Umm... yes. I *do*."

He leaned back in the seat of the wagon. "Well," he said. There was a hint of sadness in his voice. "Working there, eh?"

"Yes, si-" I caught myself just in time, and Allan grinned at me. "Yes, *Allan*," I said, staring at him hard. "I've worked there for about..." I reckoned in my head. "Fifteen hours. I showed up an hour or two before sunset.

Allan stared at me, and then he shook his head. "You stayed the night, didn't you?" He looked away. "I don't want to hear your answer, but I must have it." He looked back at me, a frightening sincerity and gravity in his eyes. "How bad do you think James is?"

"I..." I suddenly had no words. "He's... bad," I finally said, thinking over last night, "But I think I've found a way to fix it."

Allan suddenly stopped, dropped the reins, and grasped my hands. "Are you *certain*?"

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I was taken aback. “N-no.”

He sighed and let go of my hands. “Figures.” There was real disappointment in his voice.

I frowned. “Why are you so worried about Jem?”

Allan laughed. “That’s right, you’re new here.”

“Yes. I am.”

“Well, Missy, I’m James’s Popa.”

I stared at him. “*You’re* Jem’s father?”

He shook his head. “No. Not *Father*. Too fancy-sounding. His *Popa*.” 1282

“Oh, alright.” I stopped for a moment and looked him over. “So...”

“So...” Allan murmured, and I laughed. He was making fun of me, but I didn’t mind. He was like the Overseer- could have his fun with you all he liked, and he never made you feel hurt, he did it in such a gentle, jovial way. Much different from John or Becket, I thought. Anything, even a compliment, sounded like an insult from their lips. I wondered how on earth Allan could do it- and if and how I could somehow acquire the trait.

“Well, if you’re really his fath- uh, *Popa*,” I said, shaking my head. Getting my terminology straight wasn’t a task for the faint of heart. “I think I’m obligated to tell you about him.”

“No, no, no, Missy,” Allan said, grinning. “You’re never obligated to do anything for me. Trust me,” he said, looking away as his face grew sober, “Being obligated to do anything is never a place you want to be.”

“Yes- yes, it is, sir.”

“Allan, missy. *Allan*.”

“Oh, alright,” I said, laughing, “Well, I am obligated only by my honor, nothing more.”

“Fair enough. Your honor is the only thing that won’t be unfair with you, and if you follow it and it alone, you’ll always be respected.”

“Words of wisdom.”

“Comes with bein’ old.”

No, it doesn’t. I’ve known plenty of ancient fools.”

“Now, missy,” Allan said, frowning. But his eyes twinkled with laughter. “You oughtn’t speak of your elders that way.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re older than you, and deserve to be respected.”

“How come?”

“Because they know best.”

“Do they?” I asked, and the argument was won. Allan laughed hard.

“Well, I guess you’ve caught us old folk in our problem. We all know we deserve respect, just for outliving you younger ones, but you wouldn’t accept that, so we had to come up with somethin’ else.” He laughed. “But you make an excellent point, missy. Maybe, if we were wiser, we could honestly earn the respect due us.”

“Well, not all of us can be Overseers,” I mused, half to myself.

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Allan smiled. "Well, maybe the younger ones aren't *all* fools!"

"What'dya mean?"

"Welp, not many of the younger folks I know respect the Overseer." He rolled his eyes.

"They say she's crazy."

"She *is*, you know."

"Well, she's a bit odd, but-"

"Says herself that she's crazy."

"Well, *alright*," Allan said, throwing his free hand into the air. "Maybe she *is* a little bit crazy, but-"

"A litte bit more than a little bit."

"Would you stop interrupting?" Allan said, exasperated. "My trust in youth is going down as we speak!"

I threw my head back and laughed. Allan watched me out of the corner of his eye, chucking. He drew the wagon to a stop and looked out. "Well, here we are."

I glanced over to where Allan pointed and stared for a moment at the sight before my widened eyes. The hut was made from smooth river stones and mud, and plants sprouted from the cracks in the walls, budding flowers and vines. Oh, the vines, covering the roof and anything ugly that might lurk beneath. The inhabitant clearly had a way with plants. I could hardly imagine what the place must look like in springm when all those sleeping flowers would explode into glory.

"What fairy lives here?" I breathed, noting the creek and pond that flowed beside the house. This, I was sure, is what heaven looked like.

"Fairy?" Allan laughed. "Hardly a fairy. More like a troll. But still, a useful troll, though hardly a likeable one."

He jumped off the wagon and lifted me off the seat. I couldn't help but compare his rougher, awkward movements and grasp to the smooth, light touch of the Great Unknown stranger. But he couldn't help being who he was. Setting me on the ground, he gestured forwards to the door. "You'll have to go on alone- I have to get to the mill. Don't worry, you're perfectly safe. Troll he may be, but integrity and kindness to young ones are his strong points."

"I don't see how a place this beautiful could possibly be dangerous."

"Don't trust appearances," Allan called as he bounced off in the wagon seat.

I walked slowly, almost reverently, down the small pathway. I spun once, twice, looking at the amazing beauty around me. Finally, I dragged myself away from the gorgeousness all around me and walked up to the hut's door. I slowly raised my hand to knock, checking my dress to make sure I looked presentable. The wrinkles in my skirt were *still* there, but I had given up on them. All the same, I batted at the wrinkles that stubbornly remained out of habit.

But my hand never touched the door. The door, untouched by human hands, swung open with a creak of hinges. Then, it, all at once, occurred to me that this place might be enchanted or bewitched. I wasn't sure which was better-or worse- or if enchantments and magic were even

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real. I knew somewhere, in the back of my head, that magic wasn't real- but at a time when doors open spontaneously, you really learn the difference between "knowing" and "believing".

It was dark inside the house compared to the brightness of outside. I stepped inside, straining my eyes.

At a desk, across the room, a man sat. He stared at me, and I examined him.

He was an older man, black hair peppered with white. His face wasn't awfully wrinkled, but there were clearly defined lines across his sharp, angled features. He was dressed entirely in black and dark grey, but it became him, somehow. He looked like a pirate, with a stubble of a beard around his chin. Suddenly I was a little afraid of him.

His eyes flicked over me, piercing and shrewd. He seemed a very canny man. I felt like I was being measured, and I stood tall and straight, hoping to gain a few inches in his reckoning.

The man stood, and he was tall. He bowed from the waist. "Welcome to my shop, young lady," he said, and his voice, unlike the gruff, miserly growl I had expected, was a rich, warm baritone. All at once my fear evaporated, and I wanted to hear him sing- his voice was expansive, enfolding, comforting. It was like someone had put his voice into the wrong body by mistake- it didn't go with his weathered, beaten exterior.

"I... uh... I..." I stammered.

"Go on, I am with you so far," the man said, leaning back in his chair and placing his booted feet upon the desk. He crossed his arms behind his head and closed his eyes.

"I," I began, "Am Kate Wright, and..."

"Kate Wright, eh?" There was a twinge of sarcasm in his words, and I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I, my dear." he said, his eyes still closed, "Am Richard. Simply Richard."

"Richard..." Suddenly the pieces fell together, and I stared, pointing a finger as I groped for words. "You're... you're the Overseer's... you're the one..."

"And how do you know Martha? Unless I'm mistaken, you're new here. Wright? Wright? There's no Wright family in town. That is, if I'm right." He laughed at his own little pun.

"I met the Overseer... y-yesterday. She helped me find work.

"Work?" He *still* hadn't opened his eyes. "Now, why would a young lady like you need to find work?"

"Well, sir..."

"Richard."

"What's the deal with everyone in this town wanting to be called by their first names?" I said, frustration coating my words. "Even worse are the nicknames. Why?"

"Well, do you want to be called 'Miss Wright' or 'Katherine' every time someone addresses you?" Richard asked.

I thought back to all the times I had corrected someone who had called me "Katherine" or "Miss Wright", and suddenly I flushed. "I... uh... no?"

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“Ex-actly,” he said. “Don’t you think that us old folk like to have some of those identifying factors to them too? That when you call out their names they aren’t reduced to an everyday ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’?”

“The... the Overseer has no identifying factor,” I faltered.

“Richard finally opened his eyes, giving me a look of intense exasperation. “Really, Kate? Really?”

“What?”

“Why must you continually bring up Martha? Everyone else at least has the decency to not mention it in front of my very own face.” He shook his head. “I suppose she’s already told you everything. Holding her tongue is not a virtue of hers.”

“Not... *everything*... exactly...”

“How would you know?”

“I-” I stopped and thought tis over for a moment, then began to laugh. “I guess I’d never *really* know, anyway.” I swallowed a laugh and looked back at Richard. He was staring at the ceiling, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Do you still... love the Overseer?” I ventured, and immediatly regretted it. Richard’s face slowly drained of color and he turned weary eyes down to me.

“What are you here for, young lady?”

“Now, who’s calling by generic titles?” I shot back.

He rolled his eyes. “Lady *Kate*, then.”

“I-I’m not a lady.” *Just being friendly. Just being friendly.*

“You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?” he asked, sitting up and placing his elbows on the desk. He rested his chin on the knuckles of his fist.

“Wha- what are you talking about?” I asked, a lump forming in my throat.

Richard laughed. “Girl, I’ve always been able to read people, and I read you easier than most. You’re so... open and willing. Trusting. Friendly. I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Some crusty old geezers- so calcified, it’s night impossible to tell anything Jemond the most basic emotions: happy, sad, angry, hungry, and that’s about it.”

“What?” I was genuinely confused.

“Look... Kate... you don’t have to hide your true identity from me. I knew from the second you walked in that you *weren’t* an ordinary peasant girl. No, you stood too tall and straight for that. You’ve probably been trained since birth to have good posture. I know noble blood when I see it in a person’s eyes.”

My “noble blood” froze in my veins. “Sir, wha-”

“And there’s *that*, too,” he said, chuckling. “No ordinary girl would habitually refer to ordinary men as ‘Sir This’ and ‘Sir That’. It’s a dead giveaway- ordinary people say “Master” and “Mistress” if they think of it at all.” He cocked his head. “Besides, your speech is just too cultured.”

Jailed Heart

"I..." I considered playing dumb for a moment, but decided against it. He obviously knew everything about me there was to know.

"I suppose you know my favorite color, too?" I asked, disheartened.

"Blue," he said without missing a beat.

I jolted. "Are... are you a wizard?"

He laughed. "No, silly. Though I *do* know a thing about herbs and potions and poultices. But it doesn't come from magic. It comes from being out in the woods a lot, all your life. But please," and his face sobered. "Don't call me a wizard. Some people don't trust me already, and I've heard the rumors going around. There are dark powers in the world, but I would never, ever give myself over to them. Ever. I serve God and the people, never the devil. So I know a few things about plants- that means nothing. Bakers know how to make bread rise and brown- that, it think, is more magical than anything I do, but-" He suddenly caught himself, just as he was about to go overboard into a full rant. "Sorry, Kate. I preach a sermon when all you want is an answer. No, I am not a wizard."

"Then how could you possibly know my favorite..."

"Educated guess. I've noticed that blue is most girl's favorite color. That and purple." He shrugged. "You look like a blue person. I could have just as easily been wrong as right."

"Oh. A-Alright." I paused to look around during the lull in the conversation, and I suddenly wondered what *exactly* Richard did for a living.

The room was similar to the Overseer's chamber, in that it was relatively dark and there were cluttered shelves everywhere. But, unlike the Overseer's office, which was piled full of papers, this room was covered in pots and vials and bowls- everywhere. It looked like an alchemist's lair- the fire, a bubbling stew over it, only added to the effect. A mortar and pestle set on Richard's desk.

"So... what *are* you?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

"I, my dear-" the way he said "my dear" threw me into a vat of mixed feelings. It got under my skin made my teeth stand on edge, but I could tell he didn't *really* mean to belittle me. He was oblivious to the hurt he caused- or maybe he was just so calloused against life's pleasures that he couldn't feel empathy anymore. The man looked like he had a hard life- there were frown lines on his forehead and a thin white scar running down his jaw as proof of that.

"Well, my dear," he said again, "I am an herbalist, a practitioner of the healing arts. I was trained by my father and his father before him in the secrets of the wood, the hidden secrets of the fairies." He lowered his voice as he said this, and suddenly I could practically see a pixie peeping out from behind a mossy tree, mystery in the air, around every tree and bush.

"Oh," I breathed, and, with the marring sound of my voice, the enchantment was broken and I found myself back on the floor of the cluttered herbal shop.

He laughed at the shocked look on my face. "Don't be so surprised- every town needs an old wise man- or woman." He shrugged. "If the fairies speak to, it doesn't matter what you are."

Jailed Heart

“The fairies... *speak* to you?” I asked, disbelieving, but convinced that there was a good deal of difference about this place. If fairies existed, and spoke to anyone, this would be the perfect spot for it.

Richard nodded seriously. “Yes. The fairies.”

“You... believe in fairies?”

“Yes, but-” He laughed, “But don’t think I have any proof. It’s all a feeling- you know,” he lowered his voice and leaned forward, as if telling a deep secret. I leaned closer, entranced. HE placed his fingers together and held them under his chin. “You’ll think I’m crazy, but...” he paused dramatically, “Sometimes, when I’m out foraging, I get a tingly feeling all up my arms and I feel positively... eerie.”

I shivered, and a bit of my old fear of him crept back in. Just enough to give me a healthy respect.

“So...” I crossed my arms behind my back and took a step backwards. “So you believe in magic and charms and fairies and elves and all that?” I put what I hoped was the right amount of sarcasm on my words, just enough to convey my skepticism. “I believe in God and the supernatural, but... fairies? That seems a bit much for me.”

“What if God created fairies and elves just like he created us?” Then he laughed. “Never mind. If you don’t believe in them, there’s no point in trying to convince you otherwise. You either believe or you don’t.”

“You believe. You’re that type of person, eh?”

“*That* type?” He rolled his eyes. “You mean the odd type, the overly superstitious ones, the ones who still believe in a little bit of magic?” He rolled his eyes again. “Well, if that’s what you mean, then, yes, I am. Am I a wizard? No. Do I believe in wizards? Yes. There were wizards and witches in the Bible, Kate- it’s not contrary to Scripture.” He abruptly shifted topics. “Come closer. I have bad eyes. I can’t see your face, shadowed like that.”

I obligingly, if somewhat fearfully, stepped forward. I didn’t believe for a seconds that he had bad eyes- his eyes were cunning and black, and there wasn’t a hint of clouding or fogginess in them.

He held a candle up to my face and suddenly started. He choked. “What is this?” I heard him mutter. Suddenly any warmth he had turned icy cold.

“What do you want?” He asked, standing up stiffly.

“I... uh...” the conversation had so quickly changed from fairies to business that the ground that I was standing on, seemed to shift under my feet, like a rug yanked out from under me. I paused and regained my balance.

“I need a wrap,” I said, “Something to fight infection.

“Ah, so you *do* have a legitimate reason for being here.” This snub was intentional, and I bristled.

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“Yes. I did. I did *not*, remarkably, come here to chat about fairies and rainbows and such childish nonsense with an old man,” I said, returning snub for snub. I could be just as crisp and cool, if not more so.

Richard stifled a laugh with much effort. “Well played, young Katherine. There is hope for you yet.”

“I was never *quite* a lost cause,” I said, grinning in spite of myself. Richard was like John in his sarcastic bit. However, Richard had a sense of humor, and that had preserved him from the undiluted cynicism that had embittered John. In fact, I found myself liking Richard. If Allen was a grandfather, Richard was that cousin who always kept you on your toes, the one who would be both fun and hyper-annoying at the same time.

“A wrap, eh?” He began to move his hands, though there was no particular thing he was doing. I got the feeling that this was a habit of his, as he played at things that he hadn’t done yet, thinks he was only thinking about.

“Wrap, wrap, wrap,” he muttered as his eyes roved the hut. *Was everyone in this town just a wee bit cracked?* Maybe I had just met all the odd ones first.

He finally began to move, walking in a carefully planned route around the room. He pulled tightly wrapped rolls of fabric off this shelf, a bottle of creamy yellow-white ointment off another. He finally came to a stop before me and held out his hand. “Payment, please.”

“Um, a-alright,” I said, peering into my satchel. I pulled a coin from the packet the Overseer had given me. “Is this enough?”

He squinted at the coin in my hand and scowled. “Oh, you sicken me, you who think that you can come in and steal from an old man, you....”

He was never able to finish his sentence. The door swung open softly, and I turned to see a little peasant, barefoot, and with tearstained face. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, and he wrung his cap in his white-knuckled fists. My mother-heart went out to him before he even spoke.

“Please, Master Richard,” he said- well, Richard hadn’t been lying when he had said he preferred to be called by his first name, and about how common people said “Master” instead of “Sir”- “Richard, please help. Mum’s got the fever, and she ‘most ready to die, I think.”

“How long has she been sick, my boy?” Richard said with surprising kindness.

“Jus- just today.”

“Then I don’t think she’s all that close to death,” Richard said, setting down the fabric and cream and hurrying to the shelves. “Usually,” he went on, no doubt talking more to himself than anyone else, “It takes a few days for a person to die of fever. All we have to do...” he fell to muttering as he browsed through the bottles and jars, pausing to read each handwritten, hastily scrawled label. He shook his head and pushed a jar to the back of the shelf.

“And,” he called, and I wondered again if, perhaps, he was a bit crazy too. But maybe he was just dedicated to his job- I once heard a ballad about a cobbler who was so devoted to his trade

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that he acted a bit mad at times- possibly more than a bit. But Richard's eyes weren't a madman's eyes. They were intense, yes, but they hadn't a trace of insanity about them.

He turned back to the boy and handed him a bottle of sticky-looking dark liquid. "Now, listen carefully, my lad," he said kneeling before the boy and placing his hands on his shoulders. "Listen carefully."

The lad leaned in, anxious for instruction.

"Twice a day, a heaping spoonful," Richard said, tapping the bottle, "Say that back to me."

"Twice a day, heaping spoonful," the boy said, wiping away a tear that was running down the bridge of his nose.

"Now, listen, my boy, listen," Richard said, and the intense sympathy and true feeling rang through in the golden motes of his voice, "Don't be afraid. I'm going to do everything I can do to keep your mum with us. And even if she does fly, she's not really gone."

"What?" the boy asked.

"She'll fly to heaven, and live with the angels forever," Richard told him gravely, "And she'll be waiting for you and watching out for you there."

"But I'll miss her while I'm here," the boy said, and it struck me to the very deepest part of my heart. The boy was wiser than Solomon- in only one sentence he had captured the misery of us survivors, of us orphans and widows.

"But I'll miss her while I'm here." Yes, yes, Mother, I miss you.

"Exactly," Richard said, "Which is why we're going to do everything we can to keep her here, so she can be the very best mum she can be to you. Now, what are you supposed to do with this?" he asked, tapping on the bottle's cork.

"Give it to Mum twice a day, give her a heaping spoonful," the boy answered.

"That's my boy," Richard said, tousling his hair. "There, run along, I'll be around shortly.

The boy scampered off, clutching the bottle to his chest as if life depended on it. Then, I realized, life *did* depend on it.

"So... what were saying about robbing old men?" I asked, grinning wryly.

Richard smiled wanely. "I have a soft spot little children, especially fatherless ones."

"I don't have a father, sir. Or a mother. Or brothers and sisters, either," I said quietly.

"I know. I just... uh... just took an irrational dislike to you. I rarely charge peasants for my services." He laughed. "I have few needs."

I stared at him for a moment, and he sighed. "Take it," he said, languidly waving his hand at the medicine, "I'm sure you need it far worse than I do."

"Thank you, Richard," I said, picking up the rolls of fabric and holding the jar of cream up to the light. "What am I supposed to do with this?" I smiled at him. "Twice a day, a heaping spoonful, right?"

"Oh, heavens, no," Richard said, starting. "No- it's poisonous if you swallow it."

"So... how am I supposed to give it to... uh... the person who needs it?"

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“Well, this *person*,” putting sarcastic emphasis on “person”, as if highlighting my intentional ambiguity, “Has open wounds, yes?”

I nodded. “Yes. Big ones.”

“So, here’s what you are to do,” Richard said, talking to me like I was a three-year-old, “You should smear this cream over the wounds, then wrap them with the fabric. Wash the wrap every day, and make sure it doesn’t get dirty or dusty or anything like that. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, “Put it on the wounds. Wrap it up. Wash the wrap every day.”

“You got it. Now...” he said, stiffening, “If you’ll excuse me...”

“You *mean*, I can be excused,” I said, “That’s what you *meant*, right?”

Richard laughed. “Oh, *you!* One can’t help liking you. That snap and wit.” He chuckled again. “Most girls just think I’m a scary old oger and are scared to death of me. You, though. I haven’t met someone brave enough to strike back at me since... well, uh...” He blinked suddenly. “A long time,” he finished.

“I have nothing to lose,” I said quietly, “Back when I had appearances to keep up, I was as mild and shy as anyone. But now...” I paused. “I have nothing to lose.”

“Oh, you have something to lose, my girl,” Richard said, laughing quietly. “We all have something to lose. The stakes are always high. Always.”

I stared at him for a moment, then began edging away. “I... uh... have to go now.”

“Go on, then,” he said, falling back into his chair as if all of his snap had suddenly gone out of him, leaving him limp as a flower after frost. Then I realized that meant I had just compared Richard to a flower, which struck me as funny. It would be much more accurate to describe him as the frost.

As I closed the door behind me. Stepping out into the idyllic garden, I thought I heard a groan, a groan of heartsick agony, echo from the behind the closed door, and suddenly the world lost a shade of color.

Chapter Twelve

I groaned as I rolled over. My back ached from scrubbing floors. *And I thought WALKING was hard work!*

I had taken it upon myself to bring the jail bak into the realm of sanity and sanitary, Though, quite frankly, I wondered if, in the quest for sterility, I had, perhaps. Began to edge off the the cliff of sanity. And then I would laugh at my own ridiculous play on words, making everyone else (sometimes, very possibly including myself) wonder if *perhaps* a few too many nights locked in a jail with a lunatic, a crippled old man, and a scathingly sarcastic debtor was beginning to wear my mind to shreds.

But I knew I wasn't losing it- not entirely, anyway. But I *had* discovered hard labor, and suddenly I had a whole new respect for the serfs.

I hoisted myself up off the spotless yet cold stone and stared out the window. I had long since stopped noting the bars that criss-crossed the window and now could only stare at the sun. "*Stay down!*" I grumbled in my head. Oh, now I was realizing how cushy a life I had lived up to this point, and I knew that many of the peasants that worked every day in the freezing cold or burning sun would consider my lot "cushy". After all, here I was, inside a secure and sheltering building, provided with food and clothing, with almost nothing to do and only two lame prisoners to guard. But to me, the one who had so recently beans sitting in luxury's own lap, it seemed nigh impossible to function as a functioning person with a functioning job.

Jem had proved my theory correct. He was, indeed, moonstruck. I kept the protecting blanket securely over his window, and though he still acted strangely, definitely different than he did during the light of day, he was still definitely *Jem*. He hadn't been stolen away by the moon's light.

But we all knew, however thankful we were for the nights of sleep, that Jem wasn't cured. One night, when there was an especially wild wind, one of the blanket corners gave up its hold on the window and flapped loose. It was only a little moon, a tiny crescent, and only a single, tiny beam fell on Jem's cell floor.

But he saw it, and suddenly a howl went up from the cells. I leaped to my feet. "Jem, NO!"

But it was no use. Jem had left us, or been covered over so completely that there was no hope of reaching him.

I noticed the loose flap and darted outside, but, once again, I wasn't quite tall enough to reach.

I spun and glanced around into the night. *Oh, where are those warm hands?*

I caught a glimpse of movement down the street, only dinly in the tiny light the moon afforded. I took a few steps forward. "Sir," I called softly, "A bit of help?"

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“Why, what are you doing out again?” a voice called out, and suddenly, a rush of blood surged up my neck and into my cheeks. It was, undoubtedly, the sane voice, rich and warm, like honey flowing over his tongue. I strained to catch a glimpse of this person, but the moon hid behind a cloud and drowned what little light there had been before.

“It’s.... You again?” I asked.

He laughed. “Yes, me again. I walk by here every night. Looks like you need a hand up.”

Another one of Jem’s screeches split the air, and I winced.

“I-I’m sorry, sir,” I stammered. “The- the wind blew the blanket down.”

“Ah, I see.” I felt those hands circle my waist and let me into the air. I stuffed the offending blanket deep into the crack.

“I’m good,” I told him, “You can set me down now.”

I was set lightly on the ground, and suddenly he was gone. I almost called out after him, but stopped myself. I turned decisively on my heel, pushing the butterflies in my stomach firmly down.

At least Jem’s screams had stopped. AS I walked into the jail. I heard a moan from his cell. He was sitting, shaking, and staring at the ground.

“I can’t do this...” he mumbled.

No, he couldn’t. We all knew we had to face the fact- Jem’s symptoms were able to be cured, but the cause was still there. We couldn’t pluck the moon from the sky, and, if even the slightest hint of moonlight caused him to go berserk, then he really wasn’t cured. If anything, this only increased his misery.

His wife, Ellen, came to visit us one day. A pretty little creature, not incredibly pretty, but a hard working, good tempered little thing. I could see that Jem adored her, and she loved Jem with all her heart. They kissed through the bars of Jem’s cell, and, the second their lips met, I suddenly felt something rise up in my heart, and I had no idea what it was.

Father and Mother loved each other, yes, but they weren’t around each other all that much. Father was always gone off on a visit to some other castle or manor, or surveying his lands, or Crusading, and, even when he *was* home, he was always so busy. Mother and Father had always told me I was their miracle child- I thought it was because Mother was barren, and my conception was a miracle- but as I grew older, I began to realized that the true miracle was that they had found the time to be together at all.

I knew *love*, yes, but not *passion*. And that’s what I saw in Jem and his wife. I saw love, not the still, soft love of Mother and Father, but love, love kindled with pure passion and fervor. It seemed to burn brighter every moment, I wasn’t sure what caused the feeling I had in my heart now, but I also wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

It was like the good ache- it hurt somehow, bu there was also a ethereal sweetness to it. My little maiden-heart didn’t know what to make of what it was feeling, but it decided that it liked it- in fact, craved it.

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But the world went on, ache or no ache, pain or no pain. Life was hard for me, but I slowly began to fall into a routine, a rhythm. I began to get to know my prisoners better, my job better, got to know the jail itself better. Finally, for the first time since my world had been destroyed at the manor, I was beginning to feel like life was returning to normalcy. I knew, somewhere, that life would never be entirely normal ever again, but I could adjust. I could adapt.

I was wrong. Something (or rather, someONE,) was about to turn my whole destiny upside down.

Chapter Thirteen

I was on my hands and knees, vigorously scrubbing the floor yet again. In my quest for the Good Ache, I had discovered that scrubbing floors was a recipe for a Good Ache on top of Good Ache. And, I had also found more layers of dirt on that floor than I had ever thought humanly possible. Just when you finally thought it was all clean, you found another layer of dark-hued shellac. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had cleaned this floor, and then I would wonder why I was cleaning it. After all, the jail wasn't supposed to be a place that you would *want* to go. That's why, I believed, the place was so disgusting. But I couldn't let it remain that way- I knew I had to keep it clean, just for Jem and Simon, and, I would grudgingly admit, John. I liked John less every day- no *wonder* Jem had been driven insane- John was driving me batty. But I soldiered on.

I scrubbed at a dark stain, trying to keep all possibility of what it might have been out of my mind. I told myself that this jail was going to make a comeback under my rule. I would be a good mother to my twins, as I called them. They both hated it when I called them that, but I would only laugh at them. I gloried in spiteing John, and Jem... I would say at least I wasn't calling him Jimmy, and then he would just draw his lips into a tight line and sulk for a moment.

I sighed and set my brush down for a moment, stretching my aching back. I was tired, so tired.

Then there was a noise from outside. Faint voices, but loud ones nonetheless. My hand was halfway up to brush a stray lock away from my face, but I froze, stopped, and listened, my hand held in the air.

I heard voices, angry voices, coming closer. Suddenly, I was caught up in a whirlwind of memories, and suddenly I was back amongst those murderous peasants, holding knives and fists aloft, ready and unhesitating to burn and kill and destroy. My hand slowly sunk to the ground, and I knelt there, paralyzed, unable to move.

The door to the jail busted open, and I cried out. Peasants, angry peasants, stormed in a sea of confusion and anger. My eyes couldn't take it all in. I watched the events unfold, transfixed and powerless to move.

Outside the jail door, a man was restrained by two others. He raved with anger and pulled against them. He reminded me of a snapping dog, chained tight but still looking for that one weak link.

Two men were having another into a cell- I heard shouting from outside. One of them thrust a hand in my face and barked something- I don't remember what, I was too dazed- I remember handing him the keys, as if in a dream. A cell door slammed, and suddenly they were all gone.

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I stared at the wall for a moment, stunned at the rate and volume at which all had take place. I blinked, lowered my head, and ran a hand over my face.

Then, in the shocked silence, I heard a slight noise come from the cell. I shook my head, clearing my thought and looked up slowly, my eyes meeting shocked blue ones. Suddenly my stomach twisted strangely.

It was a boy in the cell. He sat motionless, staring at me, though the shocked look in his eyes told me he wasn't really *seeing* me- He was looking right through me, unseeing. But I could see, and this is what I saw.

I saw a boy, no more than eighteen or nineteen. He wasn't wearing peasant's attire, nor noble's attire, either. He looked like a firm middle-classer. Still, he was tanned from working in the sun, and dark brown hair had streaks of sun-bleached golden tones.

He blinked, and suddenly he seemed to focus his eyes. He stared at me, this time truly *at* me, though I didn't know if he was fully comprehending what he was seeing.

He blinked again, and this time he became truly present. He suddenly shivered and glanced around the jail, calm but also terrified.

"What just happened to me?" he murmured, and suddenly more than my stomach lurched. I suddenly became keenly aware that my breathing had just become shallow.

I knew that voice. That was THE voice. That was the voice of the hands. That was the voice, the one that made me inexplicably blush.

I pointed a finger at him, noticing that it was trembling. "It's you."

He looked back at me and smiled thinly. "It's you." Silence fell for a moment as we studied each other.

John was the first to break the eerie quiet. John seemed to think that no silence could ever be golden- he viewed silence as leaden. "What... just... *happened?*" he said, for once, shocked into an inoffensive tone of voice- well, inoffensive for John. Somehow, even when being sincere there was still a unerasable twinge of ingrained sarcasm. No matter how hard he could try, he would never achieve the voice of Richard, for instance... or this young man. That's when I realized I didn't know his name.

"I really don't know," the boy said, again smiling wanely. "I picked up on a few things, but I still am mostly clueless."

By now I had recovered my senses. I stood and shook my skirts down, keenly aware of the wrinkles and the dirt. I put it from my mind and strode up to the cell. I stopped at the bars, and the boy stood.

"Hello," I said, extending my hand through the bars, "I'm Katherine Wright, but please call me Kate."

"Hello," he said, taking my hand and shaking it. "I'm William Osmond," he said, "But please, call me Will."

I secretly had hoped he would bow and kiss my hand instead of merely shaking it- then I berated myself for the thought- then I drew back in horror at the realization of my feelings. I

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suddenly drew back, but I didn't have the heart to yank my hand away from his. Really. My heart would not let me, keeping me helplessly in his grip. I wrestled with my emotions. "No, Katherine, NO!" I told myself.

He finally, in what seemed like an eternity but, I'm sure, in reality, lasted only a few seconds, let go of my hand. I stumbled back a few steps, still staring at him. His blue eyes seemed to hold me in, lock on me. I closed my eyes tightly and shook it off. I had to keep my head.

"William Osmond," I heard Jem say, and I turned to stare at him, wide-eyed. There was an uncharacteristic hatred and hardness in his voice, and there was a good measure of John's sarcasm.

"William Osmond," John repeated, but there wasn't sarcasm in his voice. I frowned at this sudden change in personality- it seemed a near switch. Now John was respectful and Jem sarcastic?

"Monsieurs Millersons," Will said, nodding his head. There was a tiny hint of hostility in his voice, but... *wait, what...*

"No, no, no, no, NO," Jem said, scowling at him. "I'M Millerson. He's Middleton."

"I had some trouble with their names, too, at first," I said at the confused look on William's face. "Just call them Jem and John."

"I don't think they'll let me... well, Master Millerson won't. I think Master... Middleton, is it?" he asked, looking at John with a slightly bemused expression and the tiniest hint of a crooked smile.

"Yes. *Middleton.*" He cast a glance at Jem. "Even if I *wanted* to be a Millerson, which I most certainly do *not*, they wouldn't let me. Not at all. Isn't that right, Jimmy?"

Jem just glared at him. "Yes, it's right. So very right."

There was a moment of silence. I was a bit confused, but I shook my head and looked up. "So... what was all that about?"

"I... don't really know," William said, closing his eyes and falling back onto the cold and hard stone floor. He discovered just how hard it was, wincing and rubbing his back as soon as he hit the ground. Relaxing against the wall, he opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. "I'll tell you what I *do* know, but I'm afraid it won't be much help to you. Maybe it will help me figure out why I was thrown into this jail, if anything."

"You *really* don't know why you're in here?" Jem grumbled. "Wow. And I thought the Osmonds were clever. How can you not know why you're in here? Even *I* can figure out why."

"Then, why, praytell?" John shot back.

"Because he did something wrong!" Jem almost shouted. "He probably just followed the family tradition. Once a villain, always a villain."

"I never was a villain, and there is no tradition of evil in my family," William said quietly, "No matter what everyone may think."

"Why do you think everybody thinks it? Huh?" Jem said, spitting venom. I drew back. It wasn't nighttime, and the moon wasn't in the sky, but I still felt that Jem had left, just like he

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did at night. This wasn't Jem- it *couldn't* be Jem. Jem was nice, not hateful. And John? Since when did he stick up for anyone other than himself? William had turned the jail's whole chemistry upside-down.

And, I thought before I could stop myself, how that wasn't the only chemistry that had been flung topsy-turvy.

Then I firmly blocked any feeling. I *would not* become one of those fawning, doting girls I had seen following boys, chasing them hard. I had fought this hard for my independence, and I wasn't about to let it go now. Besides, I reasoned, any boy this good-looking was probably already spoken for, if not married already. I plugged my heart with logic and determination.

William didn't answer, just stared at Jem with a look of haughty self-righteousness. "I will tell you what I know, but *you*," he said, pointed looking at Jem. "May. Not. Interrupt." I could sense a great anger seething behind his words, but he veiled it with a cool politeness. Then, in a odd way, it wasn't veiled at all. He was clearly displaying it, showing us all exactly what he thought of us.

"Every morning, you know," he began, "I go for a walk. Helps clear my head."

"Which was black as night to begin with," Jem muttered.

"Jem, stop it," John said, standing straight and glaring across the hallway. "Let the man speak. He *told* you not to interrupt."

I went from surprise to total shock. *What is going on here?* I felt my jaw drop slightly and hang loose.

"Thank you, John. You're a true friend," Will said, smiling at him.

Jem rolled his eyes, in an overly exaggerated way.

"NOW," Will said, closing his eyes as if to block out Jem's sneer and concentrate, "I'll start again, no interruptions. And I mean *NO INTERRUPTIONS*," he said, opening his eyes and glaring at Jem.

"Fine, *fne*," Jem said, throwing up his hands into the air before crossing them sourly. "I'll just sit over here in the corner and sulk." Which he proceeded to do, sulking as good as no one I had ever seen. He was an expert at sulking, even better than Mother- and *she* was good at sulking. I loved her, but she could pout with the best of them.

"Now," Will said, beginning afresh with his tale. "Every morning, I take a walk to clear my head. The longer I live, the more muddled things become, ya know. Comes with age." He winked at me, and I couldn't help myself from laughing.

"I'd hardly say you are 'aged' and 'old', Master Osmond," I said, smiling.

"Not outside, I'm not, but, in here," he replied, tapping his temple, "I'm older than all of you combined."

"Yes, you are. You've gone old and senile," Jem interjected. Will just rolled his eyes at him.

"Anyway, because I am so old- *and wise*, Jem old pal," Will continued, "I have to take very long walks to clear my head. This morning, I woke up feeling very muzzled, and so I set out before dawn. I was walking around the hills, when I happened upon a sheepfold. The shepherd

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wasn't anywhere around. I was tired, so I stopped to rest. I looked down at the sheep, resting my weight on the fence, when..."

He stopped and shook his head. "Then, I was just standing there, see, and suddenly these three girls came charging out of the woods close by, screaming at the top of their lungs. I could barely even figure out what they were saying, they were so shrill and high." He winced, as if hearing again the girls' screeches.

"I couldn't understand most of what they were saying, but I definitely caught the word 'thief'. Then the shepherd appeared- oh, was he mad- and then a bunch of men came and dragged me off here." He buried his face in his hands. "I don't know why. I didn't take anything. I think they said I stole a sheep- I didn't even touch one!"

"Like anyone is gonna believe *that*," Jem said cruelly.

"Oh, STOP IT!" John shouted, jarring in his suddenness and volume. "Let the boy go, *Jem!*" The particular way he said "Jem" made it sound like the ultimate insult.

Jem was on his feet now, fists clenched. "Listen, *brother dearest*," he said, "Osmond hurt us. You continue to betray us all- what has he ever done for you?"

"So much," John said quietly. "You don't know the half of it- he's kept me alive."

"I'd rather that he didn't," Jem snarled. Then his hard voice gave way to a muffled sob rising in his throat. "Why? Why'd you go, John? Why?" There were tears in his eyes.

"I *went*," John said, cold to Jem's sorrow, "For so many reasons. And you were a big one of them."

"What did I ever do to you?" Jem said, sinking down against the wall and putting his head between his knees.

"Nothing- you *never* did anything. We were both the responsible ones- You were responsible for everything good- I for everything bad. If something good happened, you were praised as a *responsible boy*." The sarcasm in John's voice wilted Jem. "Yet, if anything bad happened, I was always the *responsible boy*." He suddenly seemed to remember that there were others present, and fell into a brooding silence.

I slowly sank to the ground, shocked. My mind was going into overload. The world suddenly began to flash black at me, blank spots appearing.

"Miss, are you alright?" I heard William say, but he sounded far away. I tried to take a deep breath, but only managed to gasp shallowly.

"I think... I'm going to faint," I said, and, as my head spun, the world spun with it, spinning threads of black across the world until, finally, those black strings roped around my neck and tightened, forcing the air from my lungs and thought from my mind.

Chapter Fourteen

I think I was only out for a few minutes at most, probably no longer than thirty seconds, but it only seemed a fraction of a second before I was awake again, gasping for air. Both my lungs and my mind burned, and the world still seemed muddled. It was also silent. More silent than I had ever heard it before. And blank, too, like the sky on a cloudy day. I felt nothing, save the dull vibrations of my heartbeat. *Am I in... heaven?*

Then a buzzing, soft at first, then louder and louder. I shut my eyes (though it didn't do a thing, considering the blankness all around me) and squirmed as it grew painfully loud. Then, I faintly heard a voice in the noise. Someone was calling my name.

Then suddenly I was cast back into feeling, thrust into seeing, thrown into hearing. I felt the cold of the stones seep into my back, and saw a frantic face hovering over me. I snapped upright, almost knocking Simon over in my haste.

"I'm fine," I said, "I'm fine."

"Kate, you're *not fine*," John said, showing real concern.

"I'm *fine!*"

"You literally just passed out on the floor," Jem said, "You are *not fine*."

"I'm *fine*, just... tired. I haven't slept much lately."

"No, you haven't, and you've been working your fingers to the bone," Simon said. He took a closer look at me. Then his eyes widened. "Why, you're scrawny! Absolutely starved!" He stared at me with true worry. "Girl, when's the last time you ate?"

"Not too long ago, only..." I trailed off, unable to lie. My food had given out long ago, and though the pay I had received a week and a half ago was a help, it had also given out. I knew the only thing I'd had in the last two days was a chunk of bread. I hung my head. "It doesn't matter, I'm fine."

"Have you been starving yourself?" a voice said, and I looked up at William.

I felt anger rising in my soul. "Starving? No- not intentionally anyway." My face darkened. "No- no- no- It's just that, you see, food is something that nobody needs!" I stopped and buried my head in my hands. "That didn't even make sense to me." Now I was truly worried. I really *was* losing it.

"Alright," I admitted softly. "I'm a proud person, but..." I stopped and remembered all the strangers I had begged from on the road. I wasn't ashamed then. But that was different. I knew I was, in all probability, never going to see those people on the road again, and, that, even if I did, they probably wouldn't recognize me. This was much, much different. These were people I was going to spend a lot of time with- and to stoop to Williamity from them was something that I abhorred. *You are Katherine Elizabeth Grant, and you are noble.* Yes, I remembered who I was,

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and then sacrificed the last of my pride. If Katherine Elizabeth Grant wanted to keep who she was, she would have to stay alive and sane.

“Please help me,” I said softly, “I need help. I need food, and I’ll work for it. I need help.”

“Look, Miss,” Simon said, smiling, “I never reached my dream of being a knight, but I still follow the code of chivalry- when I can, at least.” He glanced at the chains hanging from the walls, but then he looked back to me. “I’m ready to help you,” he said, “Sit here.” He gently set me by the wall and hurried off- well, as much as a crippled and sick old man *can* hurry. I knew he shouldn’t be walking, but I also knew I couldn’t stand to help him. My legs and arms had gone numb, slowly regaining feeling from my toes and fingers up. It burned with an icy fire, like a million bees had stung at once. I knew that if I tried to stand, I would immediately topple to the ground once more, very possibly injuring myself again, and worse. Hunger twisted my stomach again, and I tried to focus my eyes on William. But he seemed to blur as hunger dragged me down again.

“Katherine,” he said, and his face came into focus again. It was set and determined. “Stay. With. Me.”

I tried my hardest to do as he said. He kept his gaze levelled with mine, and I spent what felt like an eternity staring into his face. His eyes were electric blue, with streaks of pale ice like lighting cutting through them. They were beautiful and unusual eyes, and I suddenly wondered what he thought of my pond-water eyes. They were flat brown, but a brown with an ugly moss green and greasy yellow mingled into them. Pond water was really the best thing to compare them to, a smelly, scummy pond. I almost glanced away, trying to hide them. They weren’t worthy to meet such eyes as these. But Will held me, and I stayed with him, though, every second, I had to sharpen my focus all over again. I knew, somewhere, in the back of my mind, that I wouldn’t be able to hold off the black ropes much longer, but I pushed it from my thoughts and rallied myself.

Simon came hurrying back out- and, again, I use the term “hurry” in the context of a turtle and a sick old man. Will glanced up at him, and I was able to look up as well. He was holding a loaf of bread and a clay cup.

Bread. I reached for it, and I saw my hands were shaking. Simon set the bread into my hands, and I began to eat, slowly at first, so as not to appear overly desperate, but my rate began to pick up as I realized just how hungry I was. The bread disappeared, and suddenly I felt drowsy. Exhaustion caved in on me.

I tried to snap myself awake. “Stay with me,” I murmured, half to myself. “Staaaaay with me.”

I felt my eyes closing, but there were no strangling black cords this time. I still fought against it, but there wasn’t much urgency in my resistance. I wanted to stay awake. I wanted to ask questions. I wanted to figure out so much.

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But there was no time. My thoughts began wavering, and suddenly, I was opening my eyes to a sunrise. I blinked against the light, but I felt better. So much better. I closed my eyes again, not wanting to wake up.

“Kate?” I heard Will say. He was farther away. *I must be in my cell.* “Kate?” he said again, “You awake?”

I held perfectly still, trying to breathe in a relaxed way. I knew I didn’t want to wake up- there was something about laying abed that I just adored. I hadn’t done this since before Mother was sick.

I heard Will sigh. “Oh, my. She’s *still* asleep.”

“She was tired, eh?” It was John.

“Who *is* she, anyway?” William asked.

A sigh. “I really don’t know,” John said, “She just showed up one day- the Overseer brought her here. Said she needed a job. I don’t think she has any family, anywhere left to go. She’s as poor as dirt- you saw. Needed food. Huh! Tough as nails, though. She’s got the pride of someone higher-born, if nothing else.”

“Yes, both the pride and the manner. I’ve mixed with all sorts in my travels- she talks like someone from the north, and she doesn’t talk gritty English like you or I.”

“You talk gritty English?” John said, bemused. “You talk higher than I do.”

“I’ve trained myself out of it- but I still drop an occasional ‘ain’t’, and I still have a country twang. *She* doesn’t.”

Now I was becoming truly frightened. If they kept this up, they might stumble on the truth, and I *couldn’t* have that. So I chose that moment to “awaken”, and I played it up, acting as natural yet flamboyant at the same time as I could. *Not* an easy task, if you ask me.

“Well, look who *finally* got up,” I heard William say. I sat up slowly, propping myself against the wall.

I gave him a sleepy smile. “And a good morning to you, too, Master Osmond.”

He waved his hand in the air, a bored, disinterested look on his face. He reminded me of a duke I had once seen- aloof, treating the very ground as if he were high above it. Which he was, but he had no right to be. A snivelling bootlicker if I ever saw one, and, when you’re involved even marginally in politics and such goings-on, you’ll see many dedicated flatterers and backstabbers.

“Don’t mention it,” he said, in a high, snarky voice- he sounded *exactly* like the duke- “And please, if you *must* address me, call me ‘William’ or simply ‘Will’.” He smiled at me, the condensation in his smile was almost unbearable. I would have screamed at him if I hadn’t known it was all in good fun. If *he* could be superior, why, then, so could I. Surely I had more practice.

“Very well then, *Master Osmond*,” I said, stressing my syllables in the aloofest way I could. “I trust that you will pardon my use of your full name- it feels absolutely *improper* to refer to such an *illustrious* personage by their first names.” I paused and raised my nose prissily.

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“Improper?” John laughed. “Sez the girl who begged for a job at a stinky, dirty jail. If you were all that worried about *proper*, you would be married off to someone now, probably with child and working to keep your house. That’s *proper*.”

I felt ice enter my heart. I couldn’t think of a worse existence than being “married off”- a term I despised but had heard all too often- pregnant- at only eighteen!- and keeping a house.

Scratch that. I could think of a worse existence. I could work in a jail, an orphan, alone, lowest of the low, starving and cold, with a raving lunatic less than ten feet from me at all times.

It could get worse. I had a sneaking suspicion that it could always get worse.

Then William broke his front and laughed, and his warm laugh thawed the ice in my soul. I smiled with him.

“*You... Kate, wasn’t it?*” I nodded. “*You, Kate, are definitely different,*” he said, grinning and running a hand through his hair. “*You’re not fluttery, like most of ‘em are.*”

Oh, wow. Can’t imagine why any girl would be fluttery around you, Master Osmond. I cringed at my thought, then gave up and let the musing pass objectively. It seemed the harder I tried not to think of a thing, the more I thought about. I had decided to treat my feelings towards William like any other emotion- as they were, not making more of them, not making less of them. But the wall protecting my heart of hearts screamed against my seeming recklessness. It was scared of what might happen if any emotion pierced too deep. So I blocked out any feelings of lovey-dovey. It was just a reaction to what I deemed a handsome face. Nothing more. Love was an illusion, and I was sure to regret it. *Trust no one. Trust no one.*

But I couldn’t *help* but trust people. I couldn’t go through life not trusting anyone- I couldn’t *live* like that! But I knew I had to, so I stiffened my upper lip and dove in, keeping my feelings cold and dead, inert and lifeless, frozen in a block of ice so thick and hard I was sure that nothing could get through it.

And how long did it take for said impenetrable block of ice to melt to absolutely nothing?

Well, Will’s laugh was like a fire, heated seven times over, and placed right on top of my icy heart. It took only minutes of light talk and playful banter- both of which he was incredible at- for his flame to melt my resolve to water and warm the snow from my veins. But, though it was a pleasing feeling- I could feel the flickering heat bouncing off my heart-walls as truly as if the bright fire was really burning there- it also burned. I cringed behind my every smile and laugh. It hurt to steel myself against against someone so... endearing.

“So... Kate...” William said, looking up at me after a thoroughly enjoyable fifteen minutes. “What about you? Why are *you* here?”

“I... uh...” I blanked for a moment, then rallied with an answer, the same one I had given Simon. “I’m here for a job.”

“Why?” William was slippery, that was for sure. “Why would someone like you be here? You should be at least engaged by now.” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “*Are you?*”

“N-no.” *Brush it off, brush it off, Katherine. You are Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heir of-*

“Why?” He leaned back and put his hands behind his head, relaxing against the jail wall.

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“Because... I have no family or money or... anything.” I was scrambling for an explanation, and now was desperately stalling.

“No family?” He laughed, and I bristled. That’s when I identified an annoying tendency about him- one I would rely on to keep my heart suspended out of the hot, sticky nectar of love- his inclination to treat everything as a joke. “No family? No money I can believe- but no family? Not even an aunt or uncle- a godmother, or even a kindly neighbor?”

I shook my head. “The fever came through my village. It was either run or sicken and die.”

“Really? Did... anyone come with you?” I shook my head. “Where *did* you come from? You have a northern accent.”

“I... uh... come from a manor village that is... yes... up north.” I smiled, bemused. “How’d you know?”

“Well, your accent was a dead giveaway.”

“Accent? What accent?” I listened to myself speak. “I can’t hear how my talk is any different from yours.”

“Just a little twinge. I’ve traveled far and wide- even to France, once- and I’ve learned to identify the many different dialects and accents.”

“Really?” I sensed a chance to shift the conversation away from my roots, and I leaped for it. “Why did you have to travels all over?”

“I’m a merchant by trade.... Well, more by birth. There wasn’t much of a choice- I’ve been travelling since I was small.” He shrugged. “I was born in a wagon, and, if Papa had his say, I would have died in one too.”

The tone in his voice was a bit more than just plain old telling. There was a hint of sadness and anger in his tone. I dared a question. “So... what’s happened? You’ve stayed here for at least a month, if not more.”

“I never wanted to be a merchant,” Will said, sighing. “Once you’ve seen one back road, once you’ve seen one castle fair, you’ve seen them all. Same old, same old, ‘unpack the wagon, boys’, people, people, people, ‘Stop thief’, then pack up and do it all over again.” He made a gagging noise. “I’d like to find out what a normal life is for once.” he glanced around the jail, a dismal look in his eye. “Guess I’ll never see one now.”

“Ever,” John said, graveness echoing in his words.

“What?” I shivered at the tone of finality in his voice. I tried to laugh it off. “Don’t be silly- he’ll be out of here in no time.”

He smiled sadly. “He’ll be out of here, alright.” He paused and looked me right in the eye, a look of grave sincerity in his face. He glanced at Will, and I saw a look of fear pass through the boy’s eyes. John shook his head. “You really don’t know much, do you?”

“Know... what?” My stomach lurched.

“Kate... he’s accused of stealing a sheep, of robbing a man.”

“Yes...”

“Kate, that’s worthy of death.”

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My ears suddenly buzzed, and I felt like I might faint again. I stared at him. "Death?"

William made a choking noise. "What?" He sounded like he was being strangled, his ordinarily rich voice coming out in a desperate squeak. "What?" he said again, a sob in his throat.

John nodded grimly. "I'm sorry, Will. I, out of everyone, don't want you to hang, but I can't stop it."

Will looked as if he had been clubbed over the head after being robbed- and then someone told him his mother had just been murdered. "I thought it was bad... but not *that* bad."

"But... but he didn't do it!" I said, finally finding my voice again. It was as squeaky as William's.

William let his head fall and groaned. "No, no, no, not me!"

"But you *didn't do it!*" I cried. "That's got to be worth something!"

"Not without proof," John said. "No one in this village likes merchants or gypsies- and especially not merchants with the last name of 'Osmond'."

"Why?"

"Reasons," was John's clear and defining answer. I didn't press the matter further- it obviously pained both John and William, and, besides, John's answer clarified so much, I would have to be as dumb as an ant to require further explanation.

"Either way," William said, his face growing pale, "It's my word against theirs! I can't do a thing to defend myself, and one of the shepherd's sheep *was* stolen!" He buried his head in his hands. "What am I going to do? I can't die! I can't!"

"Thousands have done it before you, Osmond," a voice piped in, and Jem entered the conversation. "You'll find that you have to do it too."

"I'm still so young!"

"Babes have died younger." Jem was heartless, and suddenly Will's way of treating everything as a joke seemed a meager front for the despair he was battling.

"I didn't do it!" William whimpered, curling up in the corner and hiding his face between his knees.

"That would be an alright defense if it were true."

"I *didn't!*"

"Don't expect anyone to believe that. Everyone can smell a rat just by looking at one."

"I believe you are mixing up your senses, Jimmy," John said. "You don't smell with your eyes."

Jem stared coldly at him for a moment. "I wouldn't expect *you* to understand such a complicated matter as hyperbole, now, would I?"

"That's a metaphor," John said.

"What happened to *you*, Jem?" I cried out, sick of the intrigue in this jail. "Now suddenly John's the nice one and you're hateful and rude?"

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"I have every right to be as hateful and rude as I have to be," Jem growled. "That *thing*," indicating William with a nod of his head, "Has done more to hurt me and my family than anyone else ever has."

"Like *what*?" I asked boldly.

"Like... well..." He stammered for a moment, then came back. "It hurts too much," he claimed, "To tell all of what his family's done to mine."

"Family?" I sensed a buried meaning in those words. "Answer me this, James Millerson- *has William Osmond actually done any harm to you?*"

"Well, I- uh..." He stammered again, and I held him with a furious gaze. "No," he finally admitted flatly, "But his very own father did my father much harm. And this one..." pointing an accusing finger at William, "Was the one who led my brother astray. I will not cease my attacks until he is hauled off to be executed. Then, I may hold a small party in honor of the occasion."

The jail went silent. John whistled softly. "I never thought you had it in you, Jimmy."

"Had what in me?" Jem retorted.

"The depth of hate that you do," John said quietly, "Or the capacity to hold a grudge for so long. But I guess you do, and you aren't the man I thought you were. I may be rude and scathing, but I hate no man, and no man hates me."

"I hate you," Jem said, unremorseful. "My father hates you. My brothers and sisters hate you. Everyone hates you."

"That's what you've told me for years, but I've never believed it until now. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Oh, it will be gone, as soon as the Osmond gets out of my sight and mind. Then this mad hate will be gone."

Another silence. "*Maybe this "mad hate" is what drove you out of your mind,*" I thought to myself but kept my mouth shut. I didn't want to risk Jem's hate, but there was a declaration I had to make.

"I believe him."

William turned watery eyes to me, Jem angry ones. "You can't trust anything these shifty traitor Osmonds say!" Jem shouted. "They'll look you in the eye and lie."

"I believe him," I maintained. "I trust him." Immediately my heart burned. *Trust no one. Trust no one.* But it was far too late now. With this public confession, I had broken the ice of my pact with myself by actually trusting someone against the odds. I knew, though, in my bones, somewhere deep inside my stomach that William was innocent. Why? Because I trusted him. He had earned it, over just a night or two.

"Thank you, Katherine," William said softly. I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickle at the way he said my name. There was something so much more... romantic... about the way he said "Katherine" than the way he said "Kate". Almost like he was singing, holding a crystal, or something delicate and beautiful. It made me feel at my best.

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Since I've already admitted I trust him, might as well tell half of England that I like him, too. I stopped up my heart again, but I couldn't keep all of Love's perfume out. It got through in the chinks, in the tiny cracks in my wall of bricks. I could try to keep everyone out, but I was a dependent person. I could try as hard as I could to be a lone wolf, but I was always drawn back into the pack.

"Thank you," William said again, "That means a lot. No one's trusted me since I lost a silver coin when I was four."

"Probably stole it and spent the money on sweetmeats," Jem grumbled.

"CASE. IN. POINT." Will said loudly, and I laughed despite the gravity of the circumstances. The mood was only lighthearted for a moment, thought, before Jem peered at us darkly from out of his cell, scowling. The spirit went dead in an instant.

"So..." I thought through the question I was going to ask and decided there was no way to say this delicately, "How does this whole criminal-justice thing work?"

"Lord Russell and his council meet once a year to judge such cases as these," John explained. "But the Lord is off on the Crusade, and he won't be back for a long time."

"If we're lucky, hopefully never," I thought, before immediately regretting it. Lord Russell might condemn William to death, and the longer he stayed away the longer Will had to live, but Lord Russell also had a family, a wife, children. I had experienced firsthand how ravaging the death of a father could be, even a long-distance one. I couldn't wish that upon anybody, not even for Will's sake.

"When Lord Russell returns," John continued, "They'll try Will's case and make the verdict."

"Which, unfortunately," William said, gloom coating his voice, "Can only go one way-right to the gallows.

"Don't give up hope." I said, trying to comfort him, "There's always hope."

"That's what I thought too," he said, shaking his head, "That's what I thought too."

Chapter Fifteen

Then there was a brisk little knock at the door, and we all stopped our mourning for a moment and looked up.

In through the open door, like a breath of fresh air, a bright, smiling little fairy glided in.

Well, she wasn't *really* a fairy. But she looked the part. A bright golden head of hair that reached to her middle- with quality to rival my own-, and a little laugh. Thin and winsome, nimble fingers and dancing blue eyes. She stepped lightly, almost dancing on air.

She stopped when she saw us all and suddenly the light left her face. "Oh... hello," she said, and her voice sounded like fairy music. I could only stare at her, wondering if she was human or not.

"Oh... hello," she said again as if surprised to see me. Then I realized why- here I was, a girl, in a jail, sobbing on the floor. I stood up and, once more, swatted at my wrinkled skirts in yet another futile attempt to smooth the creases.

"Uh... hello," I replied, my tongue feeling thick in my mouth for some reason.

There was an awkward silence, us jail fol peering out at the girl. Then John spoke.

"Mary," he said calmly, "Mary Warren." A short chuckle. "I wondered how long it would be before you came tramping around again."

Tramp? That would hardly be the word I would use to describe Mary's form of walking- if it could even be called walking. It was more like floating- "walking" seemed to vulgar a term for it.

"John Millerson," she said, calmly nodding her head in his direction. "I remember you."

"You obviously don't. I am not John Millerson. I know no John Millerson, though, whoever he is, he must look nigh to my twin, people mistake me for him so often." He shook his head at her. "I don't hold it against you- most people seem to mistake me for Master Millerson."

"Well, I can't imagine why." There was enough cold sarcasm in her voice to rival John's, though I didn't understand it. Was there a joke I wasn't getting here?

She turned her gaze on me. "And who might this fine young girl be?" she asked, her voice brightening.

"This, Mary," John said, "is Katherine Wright. She's... ooh, how do I say this..."

"I work here," I finally found my voice but realized as the words were out of my mouth that I had left my tact far behind.

"Do you, now?" Mary said, her eyebrows arching. "Well, that's quite interesting."

"How so? An peasant orphan needs food just like the rest of us!"

I knew that John was only trying to stand up for me, for which I was grateful- he had a kind streak, buried somewhere deep inside him- and I knew that, in a way, all of what he said was

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true, but it still hurt me. Remember. Remember. You are Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heir of Grant Manor and last burning flame of the Grant Line.

"Oh, I understand completely," she said, laughing merrily. "I have no grudges against working girls- they do need to eat, same as the rest of us." She walked- rather, gilded forward a few steps and held out her hand in greeting. "I am Mary Warren, and I am delighted to meet you. It will be nice to have a girl around the place. It needs a woman's touch." She laughed again, and I could feel myself being drawn to her.

I glanced over at William. He was facing sullenly away from us, Mary glanced over at him, too, and her face twisted into what might have been called a scowl- though what she did was much prettier than a scowl.

"Why, William Osmond," she said. He couldn't see her face, and, though her face was annoyance verging on anger, her voice was still light and chirping. I marvelled for a moment at this complete control she had over herself.

"Why, Mary Warren," Will said flatly back to her, and, from his tone, I also gathered annoyance verging on anger.

"I heard you were in here last night. Stole a sheep?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Nothing."

"Fine. What were you accused of doing?"

"Stealing a sheep," William admitted grudgingly.

"You know I don't believe you did it," she said, and, as he slowly turned to face her, her face immediately spring into a look of pure concern and gravity. I, once again, marvelled. Not only could she control her voice within a tiny range of sound, she could make her face obey her commands in an instant. Suddenly I was the tiniest bit afraid of her.

William leaned his forehead against the bars and stared at her. "What do you want?" The bars pressing into his skin left big white patches of pressed-upon skin.

"Want? Nothing." She laughed. "Scratch that. I do want something."

"Don't ask for the moon, that's a bit out of my reach."

She laughed again. "I think if you tried, you could reach it." Her face grew somber once again. "But seriously. That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here?" He sighed. "Really, Mary, I'm tiring of this little game we're playing. Just answer my questions, and answer them straight. You're getting nowhere with this small talk."

"Alright then. What I want is to bring you some food." And with that, she reached into the basket she held over her arm and pulled out bread, white bread, not the brown, gritty loaves I had been eating for the last month. My mouth suddenly watered, and my stomach twisted in on itself for a moment. She pulled out more, a pie, a cold duck, and even a beaker of milk.

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“Where’d you get all that?” William was desperately trying to sound unimpressed, but I could hear the hunger in his voice.

“Oh, here and there.” She grinned. “There are certain advantages in having a castle steward for your father.”

“Becket’s your father?” I gasped. I couldn’t wrap my head around the idea that such a growly bent thing like Becket could spawn something like Mary. Could ogre foster fairy?

“Yes,” she said, “Becket is my father, why do you ask with such a surprised look? Is there more than one castle steward?”

“I... I just...” I was now embarrassed. I didn’t want to voice my personal thoughts about her father, but I also needed to come up with an excuse fast. I was not good at lying on the spot.

“She’s surprised. Becket’s such an ugly thing she wonders how you could possibly share any blood at all,” William said, dryness cracking around the edges of his voice. I stared at him and opened my mouth but no sound came out, save a horrified squeak. Then Mary laughed.

“You wonder rightly, little one.” *Little one?* Finally, an imperfection, an annoyance. But she laughed again, and all grating left her words. “I take after my father, yes, but not Becket. Mother married him when I was just two. My own father had died, and so had Becket’s wife. He already had some kids- Mother already had some kids- and we just mixed up and mixed in.”

“Al... Right...” I processed this family bramble in my head. “So, Becket’s your stepdad.”

She shrugged. “Technically, I suppose, he would be, but he’s the only father I can remember. He feels like a real father.”

“*Must be awful,*” I thought, but then stopped myself. Maybe Becket was different around his own kin than around random peasant girls pulled off the street. I’d known people like that. One way when it’s just you and them, another person entirely when it’s just you and them and fifty other people.

“So... you used your father’s elevated position as an excuse to pilfer lots of food from the kitchens, eh?” William said, smirking.

“No.”

“No? Then how did you get the food? Surely, if your father knew you were coming to give it to me, he would not have let you come. So how’d you get it?”

“I...” She suddenly came to a standstill, the wagon wheels of her mind spinning furiously but getting nowhere. “I used my father’s elevated position as an excuse to pilfer food from the kitchens,” she finally said. “Fine.”

“I thought so,” William said, turning away.

“So, are you gonna take it?”

The words hung in the air. William snorted. “I’d be crazy not to.” He turned back around and rolled his eyes at her. “I don’t want to, but I will for three reasons. One,” he held up a finger, “I need food. Two,” he held up another finger, “You’ll keep pestering me until I take it, and three,” he held up his last finger, “I want to see you get into trouble when the castle

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cook discovers a whole basketful of food gone. I'm sure your father will be very pleased with you."

She rolled her eyes. "He'll never find out. Even if word somehow *does* reach him, he'd never suspect me. You'd be shocked at how much I can get away with right under his nose." She smiled. "Only been caught once, and that taught me my lesson!"

William scowled at her. "I'm not sure it was the lesson you were supposed to learn."

She waved a hand at him. "Take it or leave it, buddy." Then she winked at me, and I couldn't hold back a giggle. There was something infectious in her air, something I wanted to catch. Charm and charisma were the germs of choice.

William took the basket through the bars. She had thought ahead far enough to make it a long, thin basket, able to slide between the unbending iron bars. William took the blanket off the top and stared at the food for a moment.

Then he looked up, first at Mary, then at the rest of us, eyeing the food hungrily. "You may all have some too if you wish," he said generously, "I know you're starved, too."

I was starved, but I wasn't about to eat their bread. I was able to make more money to buy food- they couldn't. They all just shrugged at me and dove in- for once, Jem actually stooped to accept something from William. Starvation makes a man do crazy things, I guess, things he would never otherwise do. I watched him, tearing into the meat of the duck, and I suddenly wondered if my principles were any stronger. Would I be able to hold up, to not give in? Or would I throw them to the side for a bit of meat, just as Jem had? I couldn't blame him. I wanted to tear into it just as bad. But my principles held strong, even if it was just for a little bit, and I spent the time chatting it up with Mary. She was even better at meaningless banter and fillertalk than William. She kept me thoroughly entertained

Then, as William handed her back the basket, she smiled at him, and he, for the first time, smiled back at her, really smiled, not smirked or jeered or scowled at her, but a real, true smile. And then I felt like I had been hit over the head, a club and a club and a club, all right on top of each other.

Why hadn't I thought of it before? It all made sense now. William and Mary liked each other. *That's* why she had come to the jail with food for Will- it was because she liked him. He treated her with disdain- but I was sure it was all a put-on. They really liked each other, and no wonder! With two as handsome as themselves, I was sure their children would look like angels, and outshine both sun and moon.

But, even as I realized this, there was a gnawing feeling at my heart, as if it was being eaten away. It hurt and writhed inside me, no matter how I tried to kill it. I knew what it was. It was a worm of jealousy. A very real part of me wanted William for myself, though I quailed from this confession. I argued with myself, once more. William was in jail. William could very easily be a thief and a liar. No one else seemed to like Will- this was probably for a reason. I barely knew him. I didn't know what type of man he really was. He liked someone else. Someone else liked

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him. I didn't know his family. I had too many secrets- that would ruin any relationship. No doubt he had a personality that would grate with mine.

But it didn't grate. I knew that. It was like a giant magnet, drawing me closer, closer, ever closer, no matter how I struggled to get free. I didn't *want* to fall in love! I liked my independence! But the magnet didn't listen, and I found myself mired deeper and deeper in the nectar. Soon it would break over my head, and then all would be lost. I DID NOT WANT TO LOVE. But here I was, knee deep, its fumes rising into my nostrils. It made me want to faint and scream all at the same time- and smile ear-to-ear while doing it- that was the thing- *it wasn't an unpleasant feeling*. In fact, it was extraordinarily wonderful, like a warm fire and a fuzzy feeling in my heart. But I had to resist. I was Katherine Elizabeth Grant, and I had a lineage to keep up. I couldn't muddy my blood by marrying someone so far beneath me. I owed it to Mother. I owed it to Father, I owed it to all the illustrious Grants who came before me. But I could feel the walls I had so carefully constructed around my heart begin to crumble under the onslaught of emotions. I threw up a few more bricks as hastily as I could.

Mary smiled down at him and took the basket slowly. Her fingers touched Will's and I thought they would never leave. The smile on his face faded. She looked inside, then back at Will, blinking slowly.

"Well, I suppose I must leave you now," she said, "It's a pity, isn't it?"

"Pity you didn't leave sooner," he muttered, his face falling into a scowl, but now I suspected it was false. How could anyone not fall for Mary, golden-haired angel, especially when she returned their affection? I was a fool to expect him ever to notice a shrew with the muddy brown of my hair. I looped a strand around my finger and scrutinized it harshly.

And, for the first time in my life, I wished it yellow.

Chapter Sixteen

Mary left, after what seemed an eternity. I knew I liked her- she had that touch about her- but she liked William, and, furthermore, I knew Will liked her back. That was the main thing. Having so many conflicting emotions in one heart is hard for anyone, especially a young girl, at the height of severability, and so I was glad when she finally left. I wanted to let the dust around me settle, to let my emotions calm, before I braved the depths of thought again.

Now there was no idle chatter in the jail. Mary's visit had loosened the tension slightly, but friction was still there, and it was only heightened by the pressing knowledge that everyone now had- the fact that William was condemned to die. WE all sat, alone in our own cells, silent and brooding.

I passed from active thought. I blanked for a few minutes- entirely blanked. It was the only way I could cope- that or lose my mind or scream at the top of my lungs for a few hours.

Then I finally touched down on earth again. My time above the clouds, in the airless ocean of nothingness, had cleared my brain of clutter and the whirling mess of confusion. I slowly began, thinking about one thing, and only one thing, at a time. I knew if I allowed any more, my brain would spiral wildly into chaos and confusion. So I kept my focus, making a mental checklist of the things I needed to think about.

Food was high on the list, at the very top of it, in fact. I needed food badly. I devoted my mind to this for a while. I came up with the same thing I had always known I would eventually have to stoop to- I would walk right up to Simon and ask for my pay.

But no, I couldn't do that. Simon had no pay to give me. The poor old man probably needed every penny for himself, anyway. Besides, he wasn't the one who had gotten me here. It was all the Overseer's doing- surely she would know what to do. After all, she had promised me food, shelter, and clothing, and I didn't think she was one to go back on her word or cheat me out of something. She wasn't that type of person- if the Overseer said it, then I believed it. It was that simple.

So, if I needed to go see the Overseer, then when would I do it? After all, I was technically the only working jailer now. Simon was spending more and more time in his back room. Once he had discovered that I was serious about jailing for him, and that I was quite capable on my own, he had relaxed as I was sure he hadn't done in years. The old man was close to dying, I knew it, and I wanted the rusty old knight to live the last of his days as no peasant could have dreamed. I knew that he wasn't *actually* a knight, but he deserved the true title of "Sir". The man deserved so much more than he got. He deserved a whole castle full of kingdoms and comfy mattresses. But Fortune and Fate had both agreed in his case, and so he was destined to a life of a serf. I felt for him.

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But, in his absence, I was the main jailer. How could I just up and leave? Wasn't I needed here? After all, no matter how harmless or trustworthy I judged my prisoners to be, there still was something seemingly wrong about deserting my post. But would it really make any difference if I was here or not? I was an eighteen-year-old girl- any one of these strong young men would have no trouble vanquishing me if they were to get out. There was really no point in my being here, when I looked at it that way.

I set the question out of my mind and took a minute to clear my mind of the clutter and fog that had accumulated during my thinking. Regardless of my point to keep other matters from seeping into my focus, they were still there, hovering like phantoms. I kept seeing them out of the corners of my mind's eye, but whenever I glanced over at them, they disappeared, acting like they were never there in the first place. But as soon as I turned my attention elsewhere, those ghost thoughts would materialize again. It was worse than if they had just stayed in one place and let me see what they were. Then I could safely ignore them. But it was the not knowing what they were that haunted me, that kept me from focusing in full force. But a cleansing sweep did me much good, and I started anew, with the next question on my list.

So, what do I do now?

I needed to do multiple things, I knew. I needed to get food (there went Question Number One, a phantom now tagged with a name. It would trouble me no more.).

I needed to get some more salve for Jem's wrists. Though the ointment Richard had given me was keeping infection away- 'twas really quite miraculous stuff, that cream- his wrists were still not healed entirely, and, in this age, with this level of cleanliness, I didn't want to take any chances with gangrene or worse. The last thing Jem needed was to lose an arm. I could only marvel at how his wrists had never gotten infected in the time before I came here- Jem was walking proof that the grave could be beaten.

I needed to help William.

I knew why this was so high on my list. It would be just as high for any other, I told myself, and in a way, that was true. It *was* for everyone else- the thought of death repulsed me, and my nursing instincts were much too strong to let death claim someone freely under my watch. It could have been anyone, a sour old man, a rebelling young one, anyone. Becket could have been in Will's place, and I would have done the same thing.

Though I wouldn't have been as committed or enthusiastic in my pursuits. It *was* different with Will. The thought of someone dying had always terrified me- and here I was, facing my third death in a short time. The thing I had always dreaded was chasing me, chasing me, following me everywhere I went. First, Mother's grueling illness. Then Father's death. Then Mother's murder. And now this. I, Katherine Elizabeth Grant, starving, in a cold jail, with the one she didn't want to like but did anyway about to be laid on the scaffold. I could see the sword poised in the air, could see the resigned look on Will's face, the whites of his upturned eyes as the blade fell to his neck.

I could hear a scream.

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I blinked the image away. My brain was getting muddled again. Thinking of black thoughts wouldn't help any. I needed to think clearly, not be mixed up in all this craziness. I focused again, this time thinking of, not Will's execution, but, rather, what I could possibly do to help him. This was a much more constructive and less terrifying subject than the other.

What could I possibly do to help an innocent (I thought) man, condemned to die for a crime he did not commit- I thought.

There was that everlasting doubt in my mind- *what if he really did do it?* After all, I only had his word to believe, and everyone else didn't like him. Could I trust someone who was accused of being a thief? Could I truly trust *anyone?*

I knew I couldn't. I could barely even trust myself. I knew I had made a mistake when I confided in the Overseer. I knew I had made a mistake when I trusted Richard with my secret. But they still had wiggled their little ways into my heart somehow, and I couldn't bring myself to push them out. I grudgingly allowed them a place in my heart, and tried to move on.

Those phantom thoughts lingered, and they would not stop bugging me. I could feel my focus and determination waning rapidly, and I briefly wondered if this was what it felt like to lose your mind. My thoughts began to drift, from one ridiculous thing to another. It was like sleeping, but I was awake. I was in one of those dreams where you are aware that you are dreaming. I did not close my eyes through all of it. I just stared at the wall, the grey stone blurring together as all lost its outlines and turned into a perfect canvas for my nutty fantasies.

"Kate?" I heard a voice calling to me out from somewhere. I blinked, and then I felt a shiver prickle my skin. Things slowly began to come back into focus,

"Kate?" the voice said again, tentative, like it was approaching a wild horse that could charge at any moment. I could almost hear an "Easy, easy, girl," in their words.

"Kate, can you hear me?" This time the voice was more frantic, with a note edging on panic. I took a deep breath.

"Yes, I can hear you." My gaze never left the wall. It was as if some spirit was speaking to me out of the mist. My voice sounded odd, hollow and echo-y.

"Kate! What's wrong?" This time it was truly worried. "Kate, come on, snap out of it!"

I blinked again, then slowly lowered my head, running my hands over my face. "What?" This time my voice sounded whole again. I felt like I was awakening from a long slumber.

"Kate, are you alright?"

I looked up at William. "I... I think so."

"What happened?" He was standing, grasping the bars of his cell so tightly his knuckles were whiter than superheated iron. Somehow, even though I had tried to stop it, I felt a thrill at his being so concerned about me. He stared at me warily. "I looked over at you, and all of a sudden your eyes got all big and black and then you were totally gone!"

"Not... totally," I said, glancing around the jail as if I was seeing it for the first time. I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, hoping to rattle my malfunctioning brains back into coherence. I somehow knew what I was seeing, what I was saying, what I was doing, but it

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seemed garbled, skewed. It was like a waking dream. My arms and legs felt like they were swimming through heavy water.

“Yes, *totally*,” William said, “Girl, you need more help than I do.”

How had he known I was thinking of helping him? Or did he not know, and was just guessing? My brain spiralled back into confusion.

“KATHERINE.”

“What?” I mumbled, rubbing at my eyes. “Jus’ leave me alone.” I could feel myself slipping, my words slurring. *What is wrong with me?*

“Kate, I am telling you to *stay with me*,” William said, standing straight. The authority in his words and tone caught my wavering attention and pulled it upright again. “Stay with me, Kate. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, pulling myself up on the walls around me. There was a little voice in my head, I knew, that was crying for my attention. *Stay awake*, it said, *you must stay awake*. Had it been there before? I couldn’t tell- it had been drowned out by the confusion and noise.

“Now, Kate, I’m telling you to sit down, slowly and carefully.” I began to move, slowly, my head sagging.

“No, Kate, *look at me*. If you’re going to stay with me, you have to know where I am.”

I raised my head and my eyes were locked on his in a moment. He was like a magnet, two icy blue embers burning away, holding my gaze without fear. I immediately felt my focus and resolve sharpen. I slowly let myself down to the ground, my back against the wall. My eyes never left his- they couldn’t leave his. It was like the long stare we had shared when we had first seen each other- only different. This time, instead of being shocked past anything, William was sharp and sane, as canny as anyone, and I was the one bordering on non intellij bitly. But, just like I had helped him before, he held onto me with his eyes, pulling me out of the mire I had slowly sunk into just with the power of his pupils.

As I sank to the ground, he followed suit, stretching himself out on the ground, one leg straight, the other bent. He stared at me. He knew the power of eye contact. He held that gaze during our entire conversation, never once dropping it. To stare right into the eyes of a person who very well might have been losing it takes courage, I could tell you that.

There was silence for a minute, just the sound of my heavy and uneven breathing and the gentle snores from the other two’s cells punctuating the stillness.

William was the first to speak. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but your eyes are the color of walnut wood.”

I flushed and wanted to look away, but couldn’t bring myself to it. *Just being nice, complimenting you to hold your attention. It’s nothing*. “Thank you,” I said, relieved to hear my voice holding one steady level of sound and not squeaking, as I feared it would. “Yours are the color of a frozen lake.”

“Thank you.” *Was that a flush?* No, just a trick of the light. And even if it was, it was just because of the awkwardness of the situation- a crazy girl commenting on the shade of his eyes

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when he was already given to someone else. In my mind, Mary and William were already as good as married. *Why can I not get my mind off this boy?* It was truly beginning to drive me crazy, over the edge, loco, cuckoo...

“Now...” His eyes seemed to pierce deeper into me every second. “What’s the matter?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Let’s start with the symptoms,” he said, with all the cool professionalism of a physician. “Separation from the world, fainting, paleness...”

Was I pale? I hadn’t seen myself in so long. I wanted to glance at my hands, to check for pastiness, but I couldn’t. Will’s eyes kept me penned in. And probably a good thing, too. If had had left his gaze, or not had his stare there to support me, to hold me above the quicksand of madness. But there was a drawback, too. The longer I looked at him, the closer I got to the bubbling magma of love. It was a choice between two evils- to fall into madness or to fall in love. Oddly, when I looked at them both closely, they didn’t seem all that different. To love *is* mad. I had heard many an old bachelor repeat these words.

“Disorientation, scrawny, hopelessly confused, staggering...” He stopped tallying my many symptoms on his fingers and smiled in a sideways way. “I think I have a diagnosis.”

“What?”

“Overwork and underfeed,” he declared. “You’re a delicate girl- I can see that from the look of you. You’ve probably had some sicknesses in your life, and, though you’ve survived them, they’ve weakened you. You shouldn’t be out here, working like a strong young man. I’ve seen some peasant girls stronger than me, yes, but you aren’t one of those. And I doubt even those girls could survive on the rations you’ve been giving yourself.”

“I’m... going to be fine,” I said lamely. “I just need to toughen up.”

“You don’t need to ‘toughen up’,” Will said, severe eye levelling on mine. “Toughening up is what got you in this mess in the first place. If you would have listened to your hunger, you wouldn’t be here. You need to know when to ask for help.”

“I don’t need help,” I growled, but I was grinning now.

“Which proves my point better than anything else you could say,” William said, all business, but with an elusive twinkle in his eyes. Then his face fell back into gravity again. “But, seriously, you *must* take better care of yourself, or...”

“Or what?”

“You’ll end up as crazy as that one over there,” he said, nodding towards Jem.

“What happened to him?” I asked. “How’d he get so mad?”

“He’s... um... well, I’ll try to explain what I know, which is mostly hearsay and gossip, but I surely know more than you.” He cleared his throat and began.

“Jem used to be fine. He was the oldest son of Alan, our miller. He-”

“Oh, yes, Alan,” I interrupted. “I met him. He’s like a grandpa.”

William nodded. “Yes, he is. I’m relatively new here, and he doesn’t like me, but I still get that feeling from him.”

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“Why doesn’t he like you?”

“He may look like a grandpa to you, but he’s still a crusty old man in some things. It goes back far- false accusations, missing items, the general distrust for merchants everywhere...” He shrugged. “It’s unimportant to the discussion we are having now.”

“Jem didn’t have an easy life, but it was a typically happy one. He was going to inherit the mill when Alan died, he had a lovely sweetheart...”

“I’ve met her, too.”

“Nice girl, isn’t she?”

“Pity her husband had to be mad.”

“I know. Little Ellen deserved much better. She’s a good, sweet, little soul.”

“I heard that, Master Osmond,” I heard Jem grumble. William just grinned sideways at me again.

“You have to admit, it’s true, Master Millerson,” he said. I could tell he was just leading Jem on, baiting him into a fury. There was a fiendish streak in Will. I couldn’t say I blamed him- it was mean, sure, but Jem had been much worse to him. I secretly found myself cheering for William, and not just because of his stunning good looks.

But Jem didn’t fly at him. I just heard a mournful sigh. “I know,” he admitted, “I know. She does deserve better, so much better. A lord, or a knight, or at least someone who could provide for her.” A son had welled up in his throat and garbled his last words. “I know. I know.” He lapsed into silence, and the jail went silent and sad for a moment. Then William spoke up again.

“Can I tell her the rest of the story? I’ll leave out any parts I don’t think she needs to know.”

There was a short, gruff laugh. “I don’t think she needs to know any of it. All she needs to know is that I’m mad.”

Another silence. I spoke slowly. “You know, Jem, the more I know about what’s wrong with you, the better chance I have of helping you.”

There was a sigh, a martyr’s sigh. “Oh, then, go on. Don’t mind me or my feelings. Just...” he coughed. “Please don’t go into *too* much detail, Master Osmond.”

“Call me Will.”

“I’d rather not, thank you very much, Master Osmond.” The sarcasm and derision in his voice was unmatched, much less beatable. Even under the circumstances, this struck me as funny. Maybe John and Jem shared more than I had thought. Right now, I would have a tough time distinguishing between their brands of sarcasm and tone of voice.

Will gave me a look of intense exasperation. He looked at me long for a moment, and, then, deeming me sufficiently recovered, he finally broke eye contact with me, looking up at the ceiling and pursing his lips. I let out my breath in a long sigh, half of relief, but half of it was the sign of a swooning girl. I could feel my heart pitter-pattering, each beat weak, but faster than normal.

“Where was I?” William asked.

“Um... at the very beginning, I think,” I replied.

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“Ah, yes.” He cleared his throat again. “I have told you of his prior situation, have I not? How he was going to inherit the mill, have a good life, all that?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, I will tell you the story of his fall. It all began, not with him, but with another.

“Alan has a large family- eight children. His two oldest, twins, brothers. Jem was born first. They both loved each other, with everything they had in them.” He looked over at Jem. “Am I wrong so far?”

“No.” The answer sounded reluctant and detached.

“Good. Please correct me if I say a thing untrue.”

“Trust me, I will.”

Will rolled his eyes, but then redirected his attention on me. “But then, something happened.”

“What happened?” I realized I was being drawn into this story, and I wanted to know how this happy boy had turned into this bitter madman in the cell next to me. What awful thing had happened to him? What could it possibly be?

“Jem’s brother began to grow far apart. He began to rebel.” He paused. “Someone once told me the story, a story from the Bible, where there was two sons, an older and a younger. The younger ran away and took a lot of money. He spent it all, wasted it all, and ended deep in debt. Well, that’s what happened here.”

“Jem was distraught, and his father disowned the younger one.” He shrugged. “I think that missing his brother is what drove him over the edge. Right?”

“Right.” Jem didn’t sound sincere.

“Wrong.” It was John. He was awake now, and I supposed he had been listening with as much interest as I. “Wrong.”

“What’s wrong about it?” William asked.

“Many things, but those are things that will remain between only us three,” John said, motioning at himself, William, and Jem. “But, Master Osmond, you did not gather all that from hearsay and rumor. I’m fine with not telling the whole truth- I do it many times myself- but I do not permit lying.”

William sighed. “Fine, then you take up the narrative.”

“No, no, no. As I said, I’m fine with not telling the whole truth, and I’m not going to tell it here.” He laughed. “Especially not here.” John directed his gaze on me. “Look, girl,” he said, “There’s more intrigue in this jail than could fill a whole mystery novel, but I’m going to set this straight. Will did *not* hear all that from rumors and gossip.”

“Then where did he hear it from?”

“Ah, that I’m not going to tell you.” He disappeared into the far reaches of his cell, where I couldn’t see him. “You’ll have to puzzle that one out by yourself.”

“Al... right...” I said. “So... is that it?”

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“No-ooo... there’s much more to the story. But that’s all I’m allowed to tell you.” He winked at me, and suddenly my heart and head took a quick trip above the clouds. My heart, which I had just gotten under control, flipped twice and immediately began pounding away, shallow but oh, so rapid! I felt the feeling I had felt before, when Jem’s wife had kissed him through the bars. It squeezed at my heart, and I felt sick. It was like the Good Ache, multiplied by a factor of three thousand. It was one thing to look on at someone else’s romance- quite another to be in the middle of one yourself.

No, I reminded myself, there was no romance. There had to be two, and only two, players in a romance. Any more and it ceases to be a romance and spirals into scandal. William already had his dancing partner, and I would be like *that person*, the one who awkwardly and rudely breaks into the dance and immediately begins to try to steal the best-looking boys. I would *not* be *that person*- *I would not*.

“So...” William spoke again, and this time there was inquisition in his voice. “We’ve told you all we can, and now, we’d like to know more about you. You haven’t supplied us with enough information.” He grinned and ran his hand through his hair.

“We?” John sounded bemused.

“Alright then, *I*.”

“Much better,” John replied. “Just know the difference, son, between *I* and *We*. So long as you know who you’re talking about and don’t drag all us innocents into it, I’m good as gold.”

Will sighed. “Alright, then.” He directed his gaze back at me, and suddenly I was paralyzed again. *Oh, his eyes are beautiful...*

“**YOU STOP THAT RIGHT NOW, KATHERINE ELIZABETH GRANT!**” I screamed at myself.

“Well...” I paused to consider the matter, and then I hit upon my solution. “Well, now, if you have the right to keep secrets from me, then I have the right to keep secrets from you, now, don’t I?”

“I... suppose...”

“Well, I also have an...” I searched for the word. “*Interesting* past. Nothing huge- I haven’t *murdered* someone or anything, but still, secrets, secrets that I keep to protect myself.”

“What do you have attacking you?”

My mind immediately flashed to the horde of enraged peasants. “I can’t tell you.”

William shifted and stared at me with new interest. “You have depth, don’t you?”

I was taken off-guard. “What?”

He just stared at me more intensely. “You have a background, don’t you? You made up that whole story about the village and the sickness, didn’t you?”

“I...” I scrambled for an answer, “Prefer to think of it as skewing the facts slightly.”

He just stared at me, one eyebrow down in disapproval. Finally, I shrugged. “Alright, fine, I did.” I was suddenly unable to meet his gaze, and looked down at my grubby traveling boots.

Jailed Heart

“Don’t be ashamed,” he said, and somehow, in the gentle cantor of his voice, I found myself able to look him in the eye again. “Don’t be ashamed,” he said again, “Don’t be! It’s wrong to lie, but now I see more of you. You have a background, and that make me feel better.”

“What? Why?”

He shrugged. “People without backgrounds are flat, and it always makes me feel uncomfortable. Someone who has lived in the one village their whole life, and had a unremarkable existence makes me nervous. They must be one of two options- either the most boring people on the planet, or, much more often, they’re hiding something even more sinister than we would have imagined.” He smiled at me. “I’d rather know that you have a secret past and wonder what it is than have no idea and be confronted by it all of a sudden.”

“Um... why?”

He shrugged again. “When you travel as much as I have, you meet all types. When you have to sell goods at markets, you also become a keen judge of human character.”

“Oh, my... that’s... profound?” I wasn’t quite sure what to think of the conversation I had just had.

“I know,” William said, donning a deeply scholarly expression. “Would you believe that my scholastic prowess goes even further?”

“Really? How so?”

“I can read, *and* write.” He seemed very pleased with himself.

I stared at him for a moment, and then began to quote. I quoted the Our Father in Latin. I had set myself down one afternoon and said to myself that I was going to learn it. I first learned it in English, and then I took on the challenge to memorize it in Latin. It was hard work, but worth it all, just for the look on Will’s face.

The jail had gone silent. “What... *was that?*” John asked.

“What?” I asked in complete innocence. I looked askance at Will, and saw that his mouth was slightly open, an eyebrow raised in an incredulous, shocked look.

“That was Latin! What was that? Where did you learn this?” John asked, his voice rising in pitch.

“From a book,” I answered evenly.

“You’re educated, aren’t you?” Will said, finally recovering his power of speech. I shrugged, but he wasn’t satisfied. “You’re a peasant girl, orphan, working in a jail for your living, and *you can read Latin.*”

“I... have my secrets, Will,” I said, smiling as winningly as I could. “Tell me all yours and I’ll tell you all mine.”

“I would, but...” He looked sideways at John and Jem. “They aren’t my secrets to tell. But *where did you learn to read? And read LATIN at that?*” Will said, desperate to know.

I grinned at him. THE mood stayed light and playful for just a moment, before Jem raised his voice.

“Not that it matters anyway, considering that you’re going to *die* soon.”

Jailed Heart

Immediately Will slumped. I stared hard at Jem, and I knew John was boring his eyes into the enemy as well. Jem didn't meet our gaze, just looked at his feet and muttered something.

"Jimmy," John said, and there was a cold, hard anger in his voice. "What are you talking about?"

Jem didn't look up.

"We do *not* act like that, Jimmy," John went on, in the gravest of tones. I had the feeling that John was talking to a misbehaving three-year-old, and Jem felt it too. He squirmed, and, oh, beautiful sight.

"Now, Jimmy, what do you have to say to Master Osmond?" John said, with more seriousness than I thought possible to muster. It brilliantly highlighted his condescending to Jem, and, despite the seriousness of what was going on, I found that, somewhere, there was an urge to giggle.

Then I glanced at Will, and suddenly any lightheartedness left me. He was huddled against the wall, head between his knees. His shoulders trembled as he took deep, long breaths. If my heart hadn't already been given to him, it would have gone out to him in an instant.

"It's alright, Will," I said, trying to comfort him. He raised his head and looked at me with teary eyes, and suddenly my statement was skewered on a quick thrust of truth. It *wasn't* alright. It would never be alright again.

It suddenly occurred to me that there would be a higher tragedy to William's death. There would be the tragedy of my heart. By now, I had given up trying to keep myself above admitting my feelings- I liked William Osmond, and not just in the oh-hello-good-to-see-you-again kind of way. No, oh, no, in the head-over-heels, world-spinning, i-really-think-i'm-losing-it kind of way.

Was it ridiculous? Of course it was. After all, here I was, floundering in 'like' with a person who I had known for two days, who was in jail on the charge of stealing a sheep, and was condemned to die, and was already had a... er... prior engagement.

Was it ridiculous? Of course it was.

Did that do anything to relieve this doomed infatuation? Of course not.

My brain had never had much control over my heart. Ever. Especially in matters that involved the heart as much as this. If I hadn't been able, despite my hardest efforts, to keep out of like, I wondered how much longer I could possibly keep out of... dare I say it?... love. I shied away from the word as much as I could. I was *not* in love with William Osmond. Just an infatuation, soon to be cut off. I cringed inwardly at my own sick, unintentional pun.

Will kept staring at me, and I was forced to drop my eyes. I couldn't meet that silent gaze. I was angry, angry at Jem for bringing up this horrible topic, angry at myself for being able to nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Then a thought struck me. What if I *didn't* do nothing? What if... what if...

I looked up at Will, able to meet his gaze this time. "Tell me how you got here again."

Jailed Heart

“*Kate...*” John said, under his breath, in a warning tone. I paid him no mind. Better Will hurt a bit now than be killed later.

William looked at me like he couldn’t believe what I was doing to him. This time, I took advantage of my stare and locked eyes with him. This time, I was the one steadying him, not the other way around. He finally sighed and began his story again. It ran the same as last time: He was walking along, stopped by the sheepfold, and then three girls ran from the woods, yelling and screaming. They said that he stole a sheep- and then, before he knew it, he was carted off to jail and tossed into the cell where he now sat. He sighed and dropped his eyes.

I chewed this information for a moment, and then I sat straight up. “Alright, I have one last question for you.” I stared at him. “Now, look at me.”

He did, and I was struck by the extreme helplessness in his eyes, like the helplessness of a puppy in a cage. It, strangely, empowered me. It drove in the realization that I was the only one who could help him, that I could, perhaps, save him.

“Now, Will,” I said, holding his gaze, “I want you to be perfectly honest with me. Completely and totally. I am on your side.”

Will nodded slowly. “What?”

“Did you do it?”

The question hung in the air for two agonizing seconds, and then Will answered.

“No,” he said, without flinching or looking away. His eyes retained the same burning helplessness and sincerity. “I did not steal anything.”

“Alright. I believe you,” I said, and, just as easy as that, I was on the case.

Chapter Seventeen

I had never turned detective before, and I had no idea where to start. All I knew is that I had to start at once.

I asked Will about the three girls, but he said he didn't recognize them. He couldn't even remember anything particular about them, other than that they were girls, young, and able to scream louder than anyone else he knew.

So that was all the information I had. I sat back in my cell and let my mind wander around the facts.

The first thing that I thought of: was the sheep actually stolen? I made up my mind to pay a visit to the shepherd and make absolutely sure.

And, assuming the sheep had been stolen, who would be likely to do it? After all, there were so many people in this town, and any one of them could have done it. Furthermore, who would have the motive to frame William? Was it premeditated? Or was he just the person walking by?

Jem hated Will. Could he have something to do with it? He was locked up in jail, but maybe...

I rested my head in my hands for a moment. This was harder than it looked. I didn't know anybody in this town, and here I was, setting out to find the culprit of a case already clearly solved, the criminal already locked up. It sounded ridiculous.

For a moment, I wondered if I was crazy, but I put the thought aside. I was crazy, and why I knew right well. It was that William Osmond. *That's* what was driving me crazy and pushing my heart to its farthest reaches. So I was crazy. That was an established fact.

Another thought crossed my already overloaded mind. Why was I doing this, again? I was sick over the question, but I knew that, if it was any other person inside Will's cell, I wouldn't be driven to do anything. I hated to admit it, but there it was, staring me in the face. My own selfishness was nauseating. I was doing this *just* for Will's handsome, well-formed face and charming manners. I never thought I would find myself in this position, but here I was, sticking my neck out for one already spoken for, already given. I had to laugh at myself, but I wanted to cry behind it all.

There was only one person who could help me make sense of the world around me now. The Overseer. She knew everyone in the whole village- surely she could help me find some likely suspects. And she probably would have a good earful of advice for me- maybe she could pour some good sense into me and cure me of this insane infatuation. Perhaps hearing the facts from another would set me at right and discourage me from an wild chase ending in heartbreak.

But I couldn't go to her now. She would be right in the middle of her work, and it wouldn't be offputting to interrupt her now. Besides, there was too much stuff going on right here at the

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jail for me to just run off. There were the routine meals of bread and water to dish out, floors to be mopped, and Jem's wrap needed to be changed.

I hauled myself up from off the floor, promising myself that I would go and see the Overseer first thing in the morning. She had invited me to come and bathe with her, after all. Maybe I would take her up on that offer.

I moved closer to Jem's cell and held out my hand. I was mad at him, yes, but I still had to tend to his wounds. "Hand, please?"

Jem stuck his wrapped hand through the bars of his cell. "Here."

I gingerly unwrapped the thin strips of cloth from around his wrists and frowned at the red scratches. "They are getting infected," I said, "I'm sure of it." I traced around a cut with my finger, and winced with Jem. "I don't know what else we can do but pray."

"You could go back to Richard and ask him to come here and help," Jem suggested. I could tell he was still mad at me for siding with Will, but we both knew that we still had to live with and help each other. There was no other way he could survive.

"I think I'll do just that," I said, turning away. "I don't want anyone dying on my watch." I immediately winced and couldn't help but glance out of the corner of my eye at Will. His head had sunk lower than I ever thought possible.

"I... I'm going to Richard now," I said, hurriedly taking a few steps back and looking anywhere but the faces of the people around me. "I'll be back in a minute."

"We'll just wait here," John said, closing his eyes and stretching out on the floor. Even with the low mood in the jail, Will and I couldn't resist a snicker.

"Oh, John," Jem said, "When will you ever learn?"

"Learn what?" John retorted.

"Uh... I don't know, maybe-"

"*Maybe* you should learn it yourself before telling other people to," John said, "You just admitted that you don't know what I'm supposed to be learning- well, *maybe* take the time to learn it yourself."

I bit my lip, trying my very hardest to hold in my laughter. I stole a glance at Will and saw that he was doing the exact same thing. *How can John keep a straight face through all his hilarity?* If I was saying the funny things that he was, I would be grinning ear-to-ear at my own cleverness. But then, I mused, it wouldn't be nearly as funny.

"I give up- with *all* of you," Jem said, turning away. "Don't try to get me to stop pouting- I won't. Just go and have fun."

I sighed. "If that's the way you want it."

"I do," Jem said, but there was not in his voice that told me differently. He was human too, though a sadly twisted one, and he wanted someone to care. But he scowled at me, and I turned away.

"Uh... Kate?"

I turned and looked at Will. "Yes?"

Jailed Heart

He beckoned me a bit closer with a finger. I stepped toward the bars and leaned in. “What is it?”

“I... uh...” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He lowered his voice. “I haven’t been feeling very good. I just... I have this upset stomach. Could you... could you get something for me from Richard’s?” He seemed embarrassed, like he was mortifying his pride.

“Sure, sure,” I said, putting on a look of concern. “No problem.” I turned to leave.

“Oh, one more thing,” he rushed to say, reaching out through the bars and touching my shoulder. I slowly turned back to him, eyebrow raised.

“Yes?”

“Don’t... don’t mention that it’s for me.”

“What if he asks me?”

“Uh... just don’t mention it.”

I eyed him for a moment, then nodded. “I’m going now,” I announced, slinging my bag over my shoulder and feeling for my coin purse, determined to pay completely this time. “Don’t go nowhere.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t,” John replied, “No rush.” He glanced at Jem out of the corner of his eye and said, in what was to pass for a whisper but loud enough to be heard, “Jimmy, got the file?”

“Jimmy” narrowed his eyes, but then smiled reluctantly. “Right under this hay.” He patted the straw beside him. “You got the food in the knapsack?”

John nodded. “And disguises.”

I rolled my eyes at them and grinned at William. “Keep an eye on those two, will you?”

Will leaned forward, eyes glowing. “Jem, did you remember to file on the *back* of the bars this time, instead of on the frontside?”

Jem laughed. “You know, William Osmond, there are times when I almost like you.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Come on in, young Katherine,” Richard called out, his rich, sonorous voice ringing out. I sighed and placed my ear against the door.

“I think I’ll just stay out here, thank you,” I called back.

“Huh? Why?”

“So I can just listen to you and not have to look at you. Just from your voice, I get quite a different picture.”

I heard a short laugh. “Come in, Kate. No more messing around.”

I opened the door and smiled at him. “Have you ever considered becoming a minstrel?”

“I *was* a minstrel.”

Jailed Heart

I considered him for a moment. “Really?”

“Really.” Somehow, I didn’t find it in Richard to lie.

“Then... could you play a bit for me?”

“I will not.”

I smiled. “Please?”

“There is only one person in the whole bonny world who could convince me to do something against my will.”

“Can’t I try to change your will?”

Richard looked at me for a moment, then laughed shortly. “Have I mentioned that I like you, girl?”

I smiled at him. “And I like you, too, Rich. In moderation.” I didn’t know why I was so comfortable around him. He was just a fun person to be around.

“In moderation? Why not in full?”

“Do you like me in full?”

His face fell. “No. I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Aaah... *reasons*.” He placed the tips of his fingers together and looked mysterious.

“Reasons? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a, what, eighteen-year-old girl, and you’re really asking me that?” He shook his head. “You should know better than anyone else that ‘reasons’ means ‘I really do have a reason but it’s too secret to talk about’.” He searched my face. “Right?”

“So are you going to play for me or what?” I said, bringing the conversation back around to its original topic. There was something oddly refreshing about this back-and-forth banter with Richard. After so much time in the heavy, hateful atmosphere of the jail, where one wrong word could lead to a storm of rage and accusations, it was delightfully freeing to be able to speak just what I wanted.

“I *said* no.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have a lute.”

“What? How can you be a minstrel and not have a lute?”

“I *was* a minstrel, dear. Not *am*. World o’ difference.”

“What?”

“Look, I don’t really want to talk about it,” he said shortly. “Now, why are you here?” It always started me how quickly he went from playful to straight and serious, and it always put my feet a bit out from under me.

“I... uh... I need to get a medicine.”

“Go on. What for, who for?”

“Uh, ointment, for Jem’s wrists. They’re getting infected.”

“Did you wash them every night?”

Jailed Heart

I nodded.

“Keep dirt out of them?”

“Tried to.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Tried?”

“We’re in a jail, alright?”

“That’s cleaner than a lot of places. After you got there, I mean.” There was a compliment hidden somewhere in those words- I just needed to puzzle them out. But there was another puzzle that caught my

“You... haven’t been to the jail.”

“You’re the type of person who would clean obsessively,” he said, “I can tell from the amount of dirt under your fingernails.”

I glanced at them and saw that, indeed, my fingernails were immaculate from the scrubbing I had been doing on the jail. I also noticed that my once-coveted hands were red and raw, despite being especially clean, and I hid them behind my back. Richard watched me with keen eyes, and I suddenly had the awful feeling that he read into my every move, my every twitch, and maybe, just maybe, he read into my mind. I looked askance at him, and he stared right back at me with those piercing black eyes of his. There was a beat of silence, and then I looked away.

“What do you want?” he asked again.

I pulled a coin from my satchel and laid it on his desk. “I want medicine,” I said, this time in full possession of the ground beneath me. “Two types. One for infection, the other for an upset stomach.”

“Upset stomach? That’s a new one on the list of symptoms.” He pushed his eyebrows together and looked down at the tabletop. “If the infection’s set deep enough to cause an bellyache, then I think it’s already too late.”

“No, no, no, it’s not... that’s not...” I shook my head and started again. “The stomach ache is completely unrelated to the infection. The two medicines aren’t even for the same person.”

He turned his eyes up at me, keeping his head down. “What?”

“I need two different medicines,” I repeated firmly, “One for an infection, one for a stomachache.”

“Really.” His hands began to move again, and his eyes darted around the room. “Who for?” I felt like he was only half paying attention to what I was saying.

“I can’t tell you,” I said.

His hands stopped moving and he turned his eyes to me once again. He raised his chin, looking right at me. “What?” He sounded incredulous.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because... I can’t say.”

“Secret-keeper, eh?” he grunted. “Well, what if I won’t give you the medicine until you tell me who it’s for?”

Jailed Heart

"The infection medicine is for Jem."

"And the stomachache?" His eyes bored through the back of my skull.

"*What did Will say to do if he asked me?*" I scrambled for an explanation. "Really, I can't say. W... uh, the person told me not to."

"Why?"

"I-" I stopped and thought. "I don't know."

"Look, Kate, just tell me."

I cast my eyes to the ground. "I don't know, I can't say."

He eyed me, but nodded. "Alright."

He pushed his chair back and fiddled with a loose thread on his sleeve. "You know, you can tell me more with your silence than you do with your words."

My face fell. "What?"

"What's wrong with William?"

I stared at him, wondering once again if he was a wizard. But I decided to play dumb. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, Kate, the whole town knows about his arrest. Word spreads fast."

"What makes you think that I'm asking for him?"

"Well, if it was John or Jem, you wouldn't hesitate to say it." He looked up at me. "What you don't say is as revealing as what you do say." He sighed. "Besides, I had a feeling it was William as soon as you started to speak. Only he would want to keep his identity secret."

"Why?" This was pure gossip fishing, but there was a cause. Maybe I could find out a bit more about Will's past.

"He thinks I hate him." Something was different about Richard now, I could tell. He seemed sadder, less defensive, and so I dared a question.

"*Thinks?* Is he wrong?"

"No... not exactly." He looked up at me with tired eyes. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to help." This was the truth.

"Help?" He laughed a dry, sad laugh. "He's beyond help now."

"*Beyond help? He's not beyond help- he just has a stomachache.*" Then I remembered- and suddenly the vision of the axe and the scream flashed once more before my eyes. I blinked the blood-colored vision away.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I said. I half expected Richard to burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of a young girl proclaiming that she would single-handedly rescue a boy from his own execution.

But Richard didn't laugh. He just looked me over, with a cool disinterest in his eye. "So that's how it is," he said at last. "Well, young Kate, I do not hate William. Not entirely, anyway. If he was anyone else, anyone else's son, I would get along royally with him. But he's not. So I can't. He's like you."

Jailed Heart

“Like me?” I suddenly stopped and shook my head. “Wait, what’s the problem with his father?”

“I think it’s better that you don’t know.”

“What does what his father did have anything to do with him now?” I retorted hotly. “He’s his own person.”

“Ever heard the saying ‘the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,’ or ‘like father, like son,?’”

“Using an old and tired saying doesn’t mean...”

“Why do you dismiss it because it’s old? You all go around saying ‘old and wise’ and then dismiss all the old sayings as fables and myths.” He shook his head. “It’s old and oft-repeated because it’s true.”

I stood stiffly, holding my satchel tight in front of me. “I need two medicines,” I said for the third time, but this time with ice in my voice. “One for an infection. One for a stomachache.”

“Fine, fine,” Richard said, throwing up his hands. “Whatever.”

I watched as he walked his predetermined route around the hut, the one he had, no doubt, been planning out the whole time. I admired the way he could segment his brain into parts, doing two completely different things at the same time.

He handed me the medicines and tapped the lid of one, a container of some of the same ointment from last time. The other was neither a paste or a liquid, instead a small bundle of strange, knobby roots, tied together with a frayed burlap string.

“What are these things?” I asked, flicking one with my fingernail.

“Ginger root,” he said, not looking at me. He hardly ever met my gaze- maybe he was allergic to eye contact or something. “D’ya know how to make tea?”

“Yes- somewhat.”

“Make a tea with that and give that to... uh, *said person*.” He licked his lips. “That should fix whatever’s wrong with his gut.”

I nodded and pulled a coin from my pouch. “Is this enough?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You have money this time.”

“I’m no beggar.” I didn’t mention that I had begged the whole way here.

“*Now* you say this,” he grunted. He pinched the coin in between his fingers and held it up to the feeble light, then smiled wanly. “I’ll take it.”

I felt the stiffness in the conversation and decided to take my leave of the place. As I walked down the path through the garden, I mentally added Richard to my list of suspicious people.

Chapter Nineteen

"I'm back!" I called out as I entered the jail, instinctively ducking through the low door frame. I didn't look up for a moment, and I blanched when I did.

Mary was there, standing in the middle of the cells. She was looking at me with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. I bit my lip and regretted my brash and sudden entry.

"You're back. Thank you for making us aware of that fact," John said. "It was crucial and easy to miss."

I flushed a deep shade of rose, but then decided to brazen it out. "Yes. And thank you for stating that fact. It needed to be stated, considering how obscure it was."

John lapsed into silence. Mary's face went from disapproving to pleased in an instant, and she delicately mimed clapping for me. I only blushed deeper and turned away.

"Well..." William said, obviously trying to turn the conversation around, "Did you get it?"

"Kinda."

"Kinda? How can you 'kinda' get something?" John asked.

"I have to make it into a tea before I can use it, because my life needed another layer of complexity."

"If it's too much for you..." Will said.

"No, no, no, no, no, it's just fine," I said, smiling and ignoring Mary's inquisitive glance. I couldn't make eye contact with her- if I did, I feared that she would find out about my infatuation with her man. "It'll be good to get to cooking again." This was a flat-out lie. I hated cooking. But something told me I would be glad to cook all my days for William.

"Do you like to cook?" Mary asked. I bit the tongue inside my big mouth. Fortunately, she didn't wait for a reply, instead breezing right on as if my answer was a given. "Me too! Maybe you could come over sometime and we could exchange recipes, maybe help the chef a bit."

That sounded like a bad dream.

"I love to cook, too," she said, reaching into the big basket she held in the crook of her arm. "In fact, I brought some of my confections along with me. To, ah..."

"Give to William."

Mary glanced at John. "Well, I, uh..."

"Don't even try to act like you were bringing something for all of us. We all know exactly why you're here."

Mary smiled. "I don't believe you do." She turned her attention to Will. "But, yes, dear. I have brought you wonderful treats!" She sounded like a sugar cube.

"I'm not your 'dear'," William muttered, but he was grinning. I turned pale green with jealousy.

Jailed Heart

“Here, have some,” she said, handing a pastry through the bars. Will took it, and I couldn’t help but notice that their fingers brushed ever-so-slightly as the pastry transferred from her hand to his. I turned away.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Mary said, chirping like a bird. “Kate, do you want one?”

I would not, even in my humblest hour, reduce myself from taking sweetmeats from Mary’s hand, like a duck being fed bread. “No, thank you,” I said, “I’m fine.”

There was a slight titter from John at this. “I’ll take hers,” he said, standing and reaching through the bars. Mary sighed loudly but relinquished the tart.

“What about Jem?” William said, motioning across the jail with his mouth half-full. “Give’im some too.” It was this type of thing that made it so hard to not like Will- these little acts of kindness to the person who had been meanest to him. I bit my lip and looked hard at Mary.

One by one, all of the food disappeared. Mary had saved an extra-large slice of cake for William, telling him it was for *just him*. Her favoritism made me want to gag, but I put myself in her shoes. If I had a boy in jail, I would want him to get the best of the best. William just shrugged, and didn’t make eye contact with her.

As soon as the jail door shut behind her, he set the cake down on the floor and stuffed his knuckle in his mouth. His shoulders shook with either suppressed laughter or sobs. I glanced at John and saw that he was cracking a wide grin and biting his lower lip.

“My goodness gracious, what’s the matter?” I asked.

John threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, it’s just that Mary. World’s worst flirt.”

“She did come on a bit strong, eh?” William’s voice was shaking.

“OY!” John exclaimed. “Maybe? She was strong enough to kill a bear!”

“She gets worse and worse.”

“Wha-?” I looked from William to John and back. “I thought-”

“You thought what?” Will said, suddenly stopping and staring at me.

“I thought... that, uh, you and Mary... um... cared for each other.”

The jail went dead silent for a moment, and then exploded. John burst into hearty guffaws, Jem clapped his hands in his glee, and Will just stared at me, looking as if he was about to hurl.

“*What?*” he said, “*WHAT?!*”

“Did you hear that, Will? You and Mary... *care* for each other.” John doubled over.

Will sprang to his feet and grasped the bars. “Look, Kate, no, no, no. That is not at all what is real. At all. Mary... uh, is *attracted* to me. In the same way that a mosquito is attracted to that spot on your back you can’t reach no matter how hard you try. At least, that what she feels like to me. A mosquito, and a hyper-annoyance.”

“But... but she’s a goddess,” I stammered, my thoughts being thourgoly disorganized. “She’s beautiful.”

“You have to admit, she’s the most beautiful girl in all of England. Com’on, don’t you *care* for her?” John asked, his voice brimming with mirth.

Jailed Heart

William shook his head. "She's pretty, alright, but she's like a continual diet of honey. You get sick of her real fast. Besides," and as he said this he locked eyes with me, holding my gaze, though there was none of the intensity of the previous stares. One might even say it was a soft gaze. "Besides," he said again, "I've always preferred brown hair."

My stomach did flip-flops, and I flushed a deep shade of plum. Was his neck turning a shade pinker? He looked away quickly, leaving me to stumble back and try to process all this information at once.

Was that a flirt? I couldn't think of any way it wasn't... unless it was just his honest opinion, or a nice compliment to make me feel better about my imperfection compared to Mary's divinity. But there was something more about it, maybe in the way he said it, that made every hair on the back of my neck stand up.

And then suddenly the enormity of what he had just said burst into understanding. He was saying... he was saying... that he *wasn't* engaged to Mary, that he wasn't even attracted to her. I suddenly wanted to scream with... with joy. It only natural. We women scream when we're happy, when we're sad, when we're scared, when we're excited. Basically whenever and at whatever happens along. We either scream or giggle.

But... but that meant that he was open... that he was available. I steadied myself against cell bars and put a hand over my mouth.

"Kate? Kate?" William was watching me. "Are you alright?"

I stood, physically dizzy. "I... I need to take a walk."

Will reached out through the bars, as if he could catch me if I fell. "Kate, are you alright? Really?"

"*Alright?*" I was more than alright- I was wonderful, glorious, caught up to heaven on the wings of joy. But I smiled it what I hoped wasn't a deliriously happy way and nodded. "I just need to take a walk."

Will eyed me. "Are you sure? You seem..."

"A little loopy," John interjected.

Will sighed and rested his head against the bars. "Yes, that's what I was going to say, only with a bit more delicacy and politeness."

"Delicacy and politeness," John muttered. "Like those have gotten me anywhere in life."

"Maybe if you used them more, they would," William shot back at him. "But, Kate, something's wrong. I know it is. You seem out of yourself."

"Really, Will, I'm fine," I said, smiling and patting his still-outstretched hand.

He drew his hand back. "Alright... if you're sure."

I was sure. The Overseer's invitation was being taken up right now.

Chapter Twenty

The Overseer cracked the door open and grinned when she saw me. "I thought you'd be along sooner or later." She opened the door wider and threw a thin arm around my shoulders. "Come in, come in, tell me all the happenings."

"Well..." I hesitated for a moment, and briefly considered turning back. But I knew that this was too much for me to bear alone, too much for me to carry alone. My heart was about to explode from all the emotions and feelings, pushing and pulling and squeezing in opposite directions all at once.

"Yes, yes, yes," the Overseer said, unashamedly trying to hurry me along in my storytelling.

"Well... there's a new one in the jail."

"Yes, William. Nice lad, eh?" she stared at me. I looked her loaded question over from all angles before responding.

"Y-esss... he seems nice."

"*Really?*" She leaned in closer, her eye sparkling with interest. "Do you like him?"

"Uh..." I could feel my ears turning red.

"You don't have to try to lie and hide, dearie. The color of your cheeks says it all." She laughed, a girlish giggle. "Don't worry, I fully approve of your choice."

"There really wasn't much of a choice about it," I murmured, "It just kinda... happened."

The Overseer sighed wistfully. "I know exactly what you mean, dearie."

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. "What?"

"I know what you mean by 'It just kinda happened?'" She smiled dreamily.

"Richard?"

"Oh, I spill too much to these young'uns," she said, laughing. "Why do you care about a crazy old lady's love story?"

I flushed again.

"Don't even think about it, dearie. Richard doesn't care tuppence for me, not anymore."

"How do you know?"

The Overseer sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Because he's already married."

I started. "What?"

"Yes, yes. I thought we were going along just fine, and then, suddenly, I woke up one morning to their marriage announcement."

"Who?"

"Ah, some girl. I remembered her as being nice... but I never thought that Richard felt *that* way about her." She sighed again, but then laughed. "I was a goose back then. I let myself be tricked into thinking that he cared."

"He led you on?"

Jailed Heart

“No-ooo, but he didn’t discourage me either.” She sighed. “So they two married, and had a daughter, and I just kept on living my life.”

“That’s... terrible.”

“Eh, not so much as you’d think,” the Overseer said, trying to smile.

“So... what happened?”

“To...”

“Richard’s wife and daughter.”

“Died. Carried off by plague.”

“Oh.” There was an awkward silence.

“Sooooo...” the Overseer said, staring at the ceiling. “William.”

“Yes?”

“You like him?”

I bit my lip. “I suppose.”

The Overseer sighed. “I would have wished it different.”

“Why?”

“Because... he, uh... won’t make it.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.” I closed my eyes and exhaled. “Do you think he stole it?”

“Ah, stuff and nonsense!” the Overseer said, waving her hand in the air as if batting at a fly. “Anyone with unbiased eyes in their head can see that there was really nothing convicting him except...”

“Except three witnesses.”

The Overseer sighed. “Yes. Three witnesses. But I wouldn’t think their testimony would hold up in the court of law.”

“Why not?”

“Well... “ the Overseer shook her head. “I’m not saying anything about them without firm proof. But I’ll say that their testimony isn’t worth all that much. Definitely not. enough to convict Will. But,” and she sighed deeply, “He will still get convicted.”

“But you just said...”

“Will’s a special case. You see... everyone hates him. Hates his whole family. No chance of him getting a fair trial.”

“What?” I knew some people didn’t like him, but the whole town hated him enough to kill him for a crime they all knew he didn’t commit? “So... he’s just gonna... die?”

“Yes, dearie.”

I began to cry. “What’s wrong with people?”

“More than you could ever imagine, Katherine.” The Overseer stared off into the distance. “More than you could ever imagine.”

I bit my lip and stopped my tears. They wouldn’t get me anywhere. “What if... what if someone found and proved the person who *really* stole the sheep?”

Suddenly the Overseer looked at me with new interest. “Why, that’s an idea!”

Jailed Heart

“Would he still get convicted?” I asked, searching the Overseer’s face.

“I don’t think he would.” She stroked her chin. “I don’t think he would.”

“Don’t *think*?” I was frantic. “Can’t you be *certain*?”

She shook her head. “Hate’s a powerful thing, dearie. And though Will may be proved an innocent man, he may still end up hanging.”

I stared at her. “You aren’t serious.”

She shrugged. “If he had taken my advice, he wouldn’t ever have been here. I told him to clear the area posthaste.” She frowned. “But he stayed. For some reason. And now he’s in jail.”

“But... but... but he didn’t do it!” I put my head in my hands again.

“But, dearie, I think you should chase your chance. He’s definitely gonna die if you do nothing- he’s less likely to die if you do something.” She shrugged. “I know which I’d do.”

I nodded. “Can you think of any suspects?”

There was a short shout of laughter from the Overseer. “Think of them?” she whooped. “Child, I have suspects coming out of my blessed ears!” She noticed the look on my face and calmed. “What I am trying to say, dearie, is that there are any number of people who could have done it. Any number!” She giggled again. “Suspects? I got suspects!”

I sighed. “Do you know where to find the shepherd?”

“Of course I do. I know how to find anyone within three miles of here.” She squinted at me. “Can you read?”

I sighed. “Yes, I can. We went over this the first time I met you.”

“Goodness, that was so long ago.” She grinned. “When you get older, time begins to circle back around to where it began- it’s all part of getting closer to eternity. I’m already beginning to experience it.”

“Uh... what?”

“What? Oh, yes. Well, my memory’s beginning to circle in on itself. Things that happened when I was your age seem as vivid as yesterday- which is purely metaphorical. My yesterday is as foggy as a swamp.”

“Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Not in the slightest. Life gets more amusing when you can’t honestly remember what you’re talking about or why on the earth you’re talking about it. No, no, dearie, I’m not that far gone yet,” she assured me, noticing the look on my face. “But it does get a bit concerning when I can’t locate my spectacles to save my life.”

There was a silence while I tried to think of a way to transition this strange topic to another, more relevant one. But I needent have worried. The Overseer was self-addmittedly going senile, but she was still sharp. Mostly, anyway. And she was smart, too. I could feel her cleverness. Only a clever woman could hold an executive post like this one.

“Here you go, dearie,” she said, locating a sheet of paper among her many disorganized scrolls. “Oh, for spectacles.” She sufficed by holding the sheet excessively close to her face.

“I thought you said you knew where he lived,” I said accusingly.

Jailed Heart

She winked at me. “Ah, I didn’t say *how* I knew, dearie. Can’t keep everything inside the old noggin- I used to be able to, back when I was young and sly-” and she proceeded to do a little jig, one would assume, of the same type she used to do when she was young and sly, though she didn’t seem to have any trouble executing it now, nor did it seem likely that such a dance would ever have been popular among young people as a way of showing their youth and vigor- “But now, due to aforesaid time looping in on itself, there is a very high chance that some valuable information could slip through the cracks and end up halfway between stars. The stars are how we think, you know.” She said this with the calm assurance that I knew *exactly* what she was talking about.

“*What?*”

“Oh, have I never explained that philosophy to you? I made it up myself, though I’m sure some genius thought of it first. You see, when you have a thought, it’s the firing of light from one star in our glossy heavens to the next, giving the thought to the next one. And so it goes. Any guesses what happens when a thought gets stuck in between a star and the destination.”

“Uh...”

“The mortal forgets it,” the Overseer said mournfully, and a falling star plummeted to earth.”

Chapter Twenty-One

I stumbled out of the Overseer's office clutching a scrap of paper and feeling like the world was tumbling in on me. I wouldn't look at a falling star the same way again, ever.

She had gabbered to me about her strange philosophy of life for a good five minutes, and, by the end of her monologue, I felt like I had been roundly beaten around the head and sent out to fetch a pail of water from the village cow.

Then, as I stood in the corridor, thoroughly confused, I heard a cheery, *sane* voice.

"Kate? Kate, is that you?"

"Uh... I think so," I said, looking around in fuddlement.

There was a short shriek of pleasure from behind me, and I barely had time to turn around before I was tackled in a hug by Anne.

"Anne? Anne, how are you doing?"

She held me at arm's length, beaming. "Better than ever before. There are so many other girls here! Back when I was your handmaid, there was only..." She seemed to halt suddenly and stare at me guiltily. "There was... uh... just you. No offense, of course. It came out wrong."

I laughed and pushed her hands off my shoulders. "Don't be sorry. I was a drag on you, I know."

"No, no, no, it's not that, it just..." She came to another abrupt stop. "So, what have you been doing? I've been meaning to head on down to the jail, but I just..."

"Nothing awful," I said, leaving out the parts about beheadings and insanity and hate-filled family feuds and blood.

"Good."

The conversation seemed to come of a freeze. I realized that, all of a sudden, there was nothing in common between us. If I talked about scrubbing floors, she wouldn't be able to relate in the least, and the same went for me and... whatever she did as lady-in-waiting to Lady Joan. The camaraderie that had once existed had dried up. I bit my lip all of a sudden.

Anne noticed and smiled. "I know. I miss you too." She gave me one last hug and picked up the basket she had been carrying. I noticed it was full of laundry before she turned away and hurried up the spiral staircase.

I walked away slowly, wondering at that strange and all-too-brief reunion. There was something most definitely changed about her. It wasn't snobbishness- there wasn't a bit of snobbishness in Anne's good old heart- but there was something. I couldn't tell what it was at all and wished for Richard's uncanny insight.

"Kate? Kate, it's you!"

I turned at the voice, only to realize that Mary had rounded the corner in front of me. I sighed and turned to face her, preparing to be tackled by another hug.

Jailed Heart

But she didn't hug me. She just smiled in her sparkling way and fell in step beside me.

"What're you doing, Katey?" She stopped. "Can I call you Katey?"

Truth was, I had always despised the name "Katey". But anything from Mary's lips, even the most atrocious nicknames, tasted of wild honey and blackberries. So I smiled bashfully and said, yes, she could.

"Good," she said, smiling. "It feels so much more chummy to call you Katey, as opposed to 'Katherine'." I bit at the lumps on the inside of my lip and said nothing.

"So, why were you here?" she asked, fiddling with her fingernails.

"I... uh... had to talk to the Overseer."

"About?"

I shrugged. "Things." I hoped to drop the subject.

She eyed me. "Things... like... what?"

I stifled a sigh. "Nothing."

She giggled. "That's always been an interesting subject. People seem to talk about it all the time."

I allowed myself a grin. For some reason, I felt like I was breathing the smell off a snake's back, and I wanted to gag. It wasn't Mary. She was close enough to swirl her long hair around my face, and it smelled like strawberries. But I didn't want to give away my discomfort.

But I somehow gave it away anyway. She looked me square in the face. "Katey, I know what you were talking to the Overseer about."

"You do?" My voice came out stronger than I ever could have given it credit for. I expected it to squeak out of my throat. I did *not* want Mary finding out I was... ah... *extremely attracted to* the same person she was. I decided my best bet was an air of complete indifference.

"Yes." She stopped and took my hands. They were as soft as butter. My own hands had become roughened and toughened by the jail work, and I was keenly aware of this fact.

She looked down at me, being three inches taller- her perfection annoyed me, when I thought about her as competition- and smiled. "You like William."

It took tremendous self-control, self-control that had never surfaced in me before, to keep my face impassive. "Why on earth would you think that?" I asked. A muscle on my eyebrow twitched.

"I've seen the way you look at him."

"Do I look at him in any different of a way than I look at you- or a tree, or a cow, for that matter?" I had no idea how I was doing this- I was barely aware of my words. It was like I was watching from outside, narrating my life from third person. I felt oddly removed from the words coming out of my mouth.

She studied me closer, then laughed. "Well, I guess even I can be wrong. I'm usually good at pegging people's affections- but I guess I can't win 'em all." She laughed. "I'm glad you don't like him- if you did, I would have had to tell you to back off."

Jailed Heart

“Oh?” I was returning to myself now that the crisis was over, and I wondered what on earth had just happened to me. I knew that if I had been actually feeling the emotions, I would have blurted out everything, and the whole mess would have been spoiled.

“Yes. He’s mine, Kate.” She smiled at me, and I noticed she had sharp white teeth. Then she laughed again and took my arm. “Com’on, Katey.”

I was suddenly dragged along, or at least it felt like it. Mary’s wonderful sliding gait was a hassle to try to keep up with. She seemed to flow inside her skirt- which was pressed perfectly. I bit my lip and tried not to look at my own wrinkled and dirty garment.

“Wait, where are we going?” I asked, wondering what had happened. A moment, before I had been standing safely on the castle bailey’s floor- now I was sailing down the hill.

“To the jail, of course,” Mary said without stopping or looking back once. “Isn’t that where you were going?”

“Uh... not really,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?”

“Well, it’s where I’m going now,” I said, smiling awkwardly. Mary smiled back at me, the smile that made me feel almost as pretty and smart and wonderful as her. BUT I knew that I wasn’t, I didn’t have big, dusky blue eyes, I had eyes the color of a horse dropping.

Something nagged at me. William hadn’t said that my eyes were the color of manure. He said that they were the color of walnut wood. I could still remember every single tiny shift in that sentence, every small rise in volume and emotion. I could hear it playing back in my brain, filling me with hope.

And Will had also said that he liked brown hair better than blonde. There had to be something in that.

And then I was whisked away again, scrambling down the hill. *Why does it have to be so steep?* The pebbles slid away beneath the soles of my boots, and I wondered how bad it would hurt to fall and skin your hands on this stuff. My skin hurt just thinking about it.

But I didn’t have time to think about it. I had exactly one thing to think about- staying upright. Well, make that two. Staying upright and not making a complete and total fool of myself. And retain my decency and modesty. And show Mary that I wasn’t a complete klutz. And somehow hold onto my self-worth when faced with perfection.

Between all those, I was occupied completely. There was no time to think about anything else.

Mary kept hustling me along, and she did it with such perfect grace. I had no clue how she could possibly move at this speed, at this grace. Maybe she didn’t walk- maybe she floated. I stole a glance at her feet, which were most definitely touching the ground. I could see the tiny cloud of dust that rose every time she took a step, and the avalanches consisting of a few pebbles that skittered down the hill. She looked back up at me, seemed to notice I was having trouble keeping up the pace she had set, and obligingly slowed down for her clumsier companion. I caught my breath now that I was no longer in constant fear of falling.

Jailed Heart

“So,” I said breathlessly, “Where are we going again?”

“To the jail,” Mary said, and this time there was a note in her voice that made me feel like garbage. Was I thinking I was as good as her. I wasn’t- I knew it- and I was positively choking on my envy towards her. But... but... *I liked her*. She was a fun person to be around, even if she was infuriatingly perfect. And so I simply smiled and shrugged. “Why are you going there?”

She held up her arm, and, for the first time, I noticed that she had a rather large basket in her elbow. So she had been practically sprinting down a steep, pebbly hill, carrying a large, heavy basket and supporting me while she was at it. I bit my lip hard.

But then she smiled at me and took my arm like a friend. “Com’on.”

“So... you’re bringing the food to William?” I asked.

She nodded, but then smiled. “I can’t keep doing it for long. If I do, he’ll get fat and lazy.” She laughed, and I laughed with her. Then her face grew serious. “By the way, is he feeling alright?”

“What?” I tried to laugh. “Why would you think he’s not feeling good?”

“When I came to see him last time, he looked a little green.”

Last time? She said it like there had been more visits than the two I had seen. Had she visited while I was gone?

But that wasn’t the question at hand. The question was, was Will feeling alright? And I knew he wasn’t. But, for some reason, I didn’t want to reveal that bit of information to Mary.

“Perhaps,” I said, “Perhaps not.”

She smiled. “I take it that means yes.”

I smiled in a way I thought the Overseer would smile. “Perhaps,” I said, and my voice seemed to gather as much mystery as I could summon on such short notice, “Perhaps not.”

I suppose I succeeded in my mission, for I saw a moment of uncertainty pass over Mary’s face. But it didn’t last long, for she broke out in a laugh and patted my head. I squirmed. She was treating me like a little kid instead of what I was.

Or at least what I thought I was. Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heir of Grant Manor. But I wasn’t really. Grant Manor was no more. The Grant name was no more. I was really heir of nothing.

But Mary smiled at me and offered me a tart. I sighed inwardly, but, realizing it would be bad manners to refuse, took it and nibbled on it. It was good, but not as good as I would have expected from an angel. There was definitely a soggianness to the lower crust, and the filling had a slightly bitter aftertaste. But wasn’t inedible, by any means.

She strolled down the road, all the way to the jail, proving herself a master at small talk. She was interested in what I was doing, but she didn’t pry. *Oh, do I like you or not?* Her many redeeming qualities made up for few bad ones. And even I had bad traits. I was working on my fear of horses and my odd obsession with rodents, but people seemed to like me.

Right?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mary left after what seemed an eternity. The girl *would. Not. Leave.* Or at least that's what it felt like to me. She was there, flirting with William. It wasn't as painful to watch now that I knew the feelings were only one-sided, but it was still infuriating to listen to. I wanted to leap on Mary and tell her to get lost, you'll never get William, but that just reminded me that no one, not me, not Mary, not anyone, would ever get William. Ever. And that put me into enough depression to not really care what Mary would say to Will.

Then, finally, we were alone. By "alone", I mean that Mary wasn't there, yammering on and on. I closed my eyes and sunk to the floor of my cell.

"How's everybody doing?" I asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Terrible," Jem said.

"The worst," John said.

"Actually, not that bad," William said.

I opened one eye and stared at him. "Well, that's good news. I guess."

"What about me?" Jem whined.

I sighed and stood. "What's the matter, James?"

"My hand," he said, "It hurts."

He stuck his hand through the bars, the wrappings beginning to come loose. I frowned as I began to slide the fabric off it. "I thought you were supposed to keep it clean."

"He likes the attention," John said.

I whirled on him and took two fast steps towards his cell. This startled him enough for him to press himself against the back of the cell. "Master. Millington. What do you think you're doing?" I asked, frowning with not only my mouth but my whole face and body.

"Uh... nothing?"

"Nothing?" I snapped. "That's it. I'm done." I took a few steps away and covered my eyes with my hands.

"Kate? What's the matter?"

"Everything," I answered. "But at the same time, nothing."

"What?" William sounded incredibly confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I know something's wrong, but can't for the life of me figure out what it is."

"Women," John muttered, but then he raised his voice again. "Uh... wanna talk about it?"

"Talk about it?" I didn't know that John had that sort of caring in him. But his voice was definitely sincere. I sighed. "I can't." I had lied a bit. I knew what was wrong- I just had to figure out how to deal with it. *That* was what I was having trouble with.

"I need to go for a walk," I said.

"Again?" Will's voice was searching, and there was a hint of longing in it.

Jailed Heart

I looked at him slowly. “Do you want me to stay here?”

“Well...” He looked at Jem out of the corner of his eye. “It does get a little... lonely... when you’re gone.”

My heart beat faster, and my hands became cold. “Just this once, Will. Just this once, please?”

He smiled and shrugged. “What am I gonna do to stop you?”

I smiled back at him and patted the bars of his cell. I wanted to tell him that it would be alright, but I knew that wasn’t true. I turned away from his cell, then turned back again. “Oh, by the way, are you feeling any better?”

His smile faded, and he bit his lower lip. “To be honest, no. I’m not.”

My nurse stirred and rose up. “Still?”

“Yes, my stomach... feels... strange... still.”

“Strange like how?”

“There are more than one way a stomach can feel strange?”

“Like, pain, where’s it at, inside-outside, simply upset. like-I-ate-a-bad-thing-for-dinner, what?”

“Well, I definitely ate a bad thing for dinner,” William said, laughing and holding up the cloth Mary had wrapped her sweets in.

I had to give that one a giggle. “The crust was... heavy in your belly.”

Will bit his lip again, this time to hold in a laugh. There was a titter from John’s cell, and I heard a slight shuffling and laugh thinly veiled as a cough from Jem’s cell.

“Should I tell her not to bring any more?” I asked, “Considering they don’t agree well with your digestion.”

“No, no,” William said, his eyes growing thoughtful. “I need that food- I’d starve without it.”

I smiled. “I understand.” I reached into my apron pocket and pulled out the scribbled directions to the shepherd’s house.

And most excellent directions they proved to be. I mean that in a not-at-all kind of way, What I mean is, they were scribbled down in a very Overseer-type of way. They were written in a flowing yet incredibly choppy script, one that’s impossible to describe in any words that would make sense. The paper turned out to be an old recipe parchment, and the Overseer hadn’t paid all that much attention to putting the directions on the unwritten side. Meaning that her writing was interspersed with directions on how to cook veal, and that led me down a wrong street twice. I tried asking some other people, but they just gave me strange looks as I waved the indecipherable note in their face and begged them to please oh please help me find this shepherd. I didn’t want to mention William, and so all these meetings were unhelpful in finding said shepherd.

Jailed Heart

But, somehow, through the very grace of God, I finally stumbled upon my shepherd, the object of my quest. I still don't know how in the world I found him- all I know is that I did, and I'm leaving it at that.

He was reclining on a hillside overlooking the town, lying in the middle of all the long grasses. I would have missed him if it wasn't for his shepherd's staff, sticking straight up from the meadow like a beacon.

"Um... excuse me, Master..." It was at that instant I realized I had no idea who I was talking to.

The shepherd stirred, and then leaped up. He had obviously been asleep. "Wh-what?" He held his staff like he was about to fight. Fight or flee, one of the two.

"Are you..." I consulted my note and fished for a name, "Timothy Broth?"

"Uh... yes?" He rubbed his eyes. "I mean, uh... no. Well kind of."

"*It would be easy to steal a sheep from you,*" I thought. Out loud, I raised an eyebrow and looked at him. "What?"

"My name's Timothy, but my last name isn't broth."

I sighed as I glanced at the scrap of paper again and realized I was once again confusing the recipe and directions. "Let's just start with your real name, all of it, from the start," I said, crumpling the paper and tossing it aside.

He was still rubbing his eyes, and he hadn't looked up at me yet. "I... uh... I'm Timothy Garth." He yawned largely and looked up at me for the first time. He blinked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Katherine. *Enchante.*"

"Uh, what?"

"It's French. It means, 'nice to meet you'."

"Oh." He managed a lopsided grin- he wouldn't stop staring at my mouth, and I suddenly felt the need to breathe long and slow.

"Are you the shepherd who got sheep stolen from you?"

"Yes." He licked his lips, and I took a closer look at this boy.

For a boy he was. He was dressed in shabby clothes, but one that looked like they were nice and comfortable, for all that. His face wasn't displeasing, but there was a decidedly pinched feeling about the nose and chin, as if his face had been slightly contorted at birth. He was lazy- I could tell that already- and I had the feeling he was none too bright.

I also had the intuitive feeling that he was attracted to me. BUt I took a deep, quick breath and soldiered on.

"Tell me all you know about it."

"About what?"

"When the sheep got stolen from you."

"Oh. He scratched his head. "Well, I don't actually remember that much about it..."

"Let me guess, you were napping."

Jailed Heart

“Yes, I-” he stopped and looked at me closer (as if he wasn’t already looking at me closely already) “Why do you want to know? Who are you?”

I stood tall and looked at his suspicious face. “I am Katherine. And I am going to find the truth, no matter what or who stands in my way.”

“The truth about what?”

“About who *really* stole the sheep.”

“It was that William fellow, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t believe it was. There is no real evidence against him.”

“Sure there is, like, uh...”

“What? Did you catch him eating mutton in his house?” I threw my arms up. “What?”

“They said he did.”

“Who?”

“The Three Girls.”

I stared at him. “The who?”

“The Three Girls. There’s- ah, lemme think,” he closed his eyes and put a hand over his face. “I can’t even remember their names. I honestly can’t.”

“Why would you lie about it?”

“What?” He stared at me with furrowed brow. “I’m not lyin’. Haven’t lied in years.”

“Well, there’s your first one,” I muttered under my breath. I turned my attention back to Timothy. “Now, what girls said what?”

“The Three Girls. They-”

“Who are the Three Girls?”

He looked at me like I was the confused one. “The Three Girls.”

“That means absolutely nothing to me.”

“Oh.” He stopped and studied me again. “You’re not from here... are you?”

I took a tiny step back. Maybe this boy was smarter than I had given him credit for. “No, I’m not. Only been here for a little while.”

“Oh, how to explain? How to explain?” He leaned on his staff and crossed his fingers over the top of it. “The Three Girls... are these three girls-”

“I gathered that.”

“Let me finish.” He shot me a disapproving look and continued. “These three girls who...” he gestured, making circles in the air. “Are different. They’re all the same.”

“They’re different and all the same at the same time.”

“No- well, yes- well, kinda.” He flushed for no apparent reason. “They’re the same as each other, but different than everybody else.”

“Triplets?”

“No, they’re not related to each other in the slightest.”

“How odd that they should look so much alike.”

“Oh, they don’t look alike at all.”

Jailed Heart

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"The Three Girls. What are you talking about?"

"I," I said very slowly and carefully, "Am talking about the sheep that was stolen from you."

"Alright, alright." He smiled. "Now we're on the same page."

"Good," I said, smiling thinly. "I thought that we weren't even in the same book."

"No," he said, looking at me with complete impassiveness on his face. "We weren't even in the same library."

I stifled a giggle and veiled it under a sigh. "You are most right about that." My words sounded artificially stiff.

"I'm always right," he said, not an excess muscle twitching on his face, "When I put my mind to it."

"You have to put your mind to it? How does your brain work?"

"I thought we were talking about my sheep." He yawned. "I guess I was wrong. You're talking about something else."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Look. I want information. Can you please give me information?"

"Of course. What do you want information on?"

"What have we been talking about this whole time?"

"Many things." He shifted his weight and began to tally on his fingers. "Books, sheep, Three Girls, information, the way my mind works, what we've been talking about the whole time, and mutton, to name just a few."

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

He rested his chin on the rounded end of his staff and grinned at me. "I know what I'm talking about; what are you talking about?"

"The sheep!"

"Really?" He studied his fingernails. "That's not what it's seemed like. It seemed like much more than that, and yet much less than that."

"You're trying to confuse me."

He flashed me a smile. "No. I'm not trying to confuse you. I'm succeeding in confusing you. I can tell from the way you've scrunched up your eyebrows."

I stopped for a moment, and Timothy waited, staring absently into the distance and running his tongue over his teeth.

"Can we just talk in a straight way, my friend?" I asked at last, rubbing my forehead. Maybe I could erase those creases that he said I had there.

"I don't know," he answered smoothly, "What does it mean to talk straight?"

"Or should I just keep doing what I'm doing and try to puzzle out the meaning of your words? Which will take much longer?"

"Well then, it's a good thing you don't annoy me," he said, "Because that would be a cause for true alarm."

Jailed Heart

“What?”

“You say that a lot,” he observed.

“You say that a lot, too.”

“I say what a lot?”

“What?”

“No, that’s what you say.”

“You just said that you say what a lot.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What we are talking about.”

“And what might that be?”

“For once, you’re the one saying.”

“Saying what?”

“Yep.”

He stopped and looked me over, then burst out laughing. “Well-played, well-played,” he said, clapping his hands lightly. “I wouldn’t have expected such a table-turning from you, but, lo and behold, here you did it. Now I’m the confused one.”

I allowed myself a tight smile and bowed slightly and stiffly. “Now, can we get down to business?”

“What business is that?”

I fixed him with the coldest gaze I could bestow on such a foolish excuse for a man, and he sighed. “Fine.”

“Who are these ‘Three Girls’ you speak of?”

“Three Girls.” He stared at me, unblinking.

“Yep, those ones.”

“They are Three Girls. Nothing much else.”

I felt my eye twitch and my fist involuntarily curled into a fist. This surprised me. I was not a violent person, but there was something about this annoying boy that made me want to scream and throw myself on him.

“I’m done here,” I said, turning and taking three decided steps away.

“Wait!”

I turned around slowly, my eyes wide with exasperation. “What is it?”

“Don’t go. I’m enjoying this conversation.”

“Well, I am not! Good day, Master Broth.” I turned again.

“I’ll answer your questions, Miss Katherine. Turn around, come back.”

I didn’t move. “Promise you’ll answer straightforwardly and without confusion?”

“You’re asking about a very confusing topic, Miss Katherine, but I’ll try.”

“Good.” I turned around and crossed my hands behind my back.

“Success is not guaranteed, though,” he said, grinning.

I rolled my eyes. “Just try for once.”

Jailed Heart

“Alright. For you.” He winked, and I wanted to look anywhere but his smug face.

“Alright. Let’s start from the very beginning.”

“Hmmm... the very, very beginning? Of me? Of the world? Of time?”

I did nothing, just let my eyelids sag and stared at him.

He sighed. “Fine, fine.” I heard him mutter, “no sense of humor,” under his breath, but then he looked up and smiled. “Have a seat? This could take a while.”

I sat down in the most dignified position I could think of, somewhere in between kneeling and sitting. My dress performed wonderfully, fanning out around me. I lifted my chin, straightened my mouth, crossed my hands languidly in my lap and tried to look haughty.

Timothy flopped down onto the grass beside me and began to toy with a daisy he had plucked. “Loves me, loves me not, loves me...” he said, slowly pulling off the petals and looking out of the corner of his eye at me.

My hand flashed out and ripped the daisy’s head off. “Loves you not,” I said calmly to his shocked face. Underneath my placid demeanor, though, I was seething. No wonder William hated it when Mary flirted with him. Unwanted and unwarranted flirting should be a crime worthy of death.

“Dear, dear,” Timothy managed to murmur as I settled back down into my composed position. He twirled the decapitated daisy in between his fingers for a moment, then began to tie knots in the green stem. “So, I’ll just tell it to you like it happened to me.”

I nodded slightly, and he went on, in a significantly more subdued voice.

“I don’t know much- all I know is that, all of a sudden, the Three Girls come charging out of the woods screaming at the top of their lungs.”

“Who are these Three Girls?”

He held up a hand. “Wait, I’m organizing my thoughts,”

I nodded, and he continued.

“And, you see, I’m still just barely woken up, and so I don’t know what’s going on. I jump up, and they’re all pointing at the Gypsy boy, saying he stole my sheep. I count, and, yep, there’s a sheep missing.”

“The Gypsy boy?”

“The Osmond lamb.”

“You mean William?”

“I mean the Osmond boy.”

“He has a name, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. He never told me his name. He just looked so much like Old Man Osmond that I figured there had to be some connection. Also, the Osmonds are kinda... infamous around this place.”

“Why?”

“Are we talking about my sheep or others?”

“What?”

Jailed Heart

"I'll go with that, then. You said you wanted to know about my sheep; I'll tell you all want to know."

I eyed him. "I don't entirely believe you."

He held up his hand. "On my word of honor."

I didn't believe that he had one, but I sighed and started again. "So, they accused William of stealing the sheep. What happened?" I was still confused.

"Alright, so, I was sitting here, asleep as I told you," Timothy said, noting my confusion and starting over with his tale. "And the Three Girls... oh. Right. The Three Girls." He coughed slightly. "Three Girls. They, uh, are these three girls that... Well, I don't know whose they are or what their names are, but... they aren't triplets. If they are, they're the most different-looking triplets I've ever seen."

"What do they look like?"

Timothy frowned. "I don't remember," he said slowly, "I can't bring up a picture in my mind."

I sighed. "Not even a little bit?"

He shook his head. "No, really. Don't remember at all."

I eyed him.

"Really! But they all seem the same between them, despite their differences."

I frowned. "You have anything else?"

He shook his head again. "Sorry."

I pressed my lips together and nodded. "Go on."

"Alright. So. Three Girls. Then there's that Boy. Osmond Boy."

"William."

"Right. That one. Anyway, so there's Osmond-"

"William."

He waved his hand at me and scowled. "Stop that!"

"Stop calling him Osmond."

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "What you will."

"I will it."

"Now you're the one changing the meanings of words."

"Please go on with the story."

"Right. As I was saying, William, the Osmond boy, was just standing there, mouth open and looking as dumb as a lamb. The Three Girls said he stole a sheep. Some men were passing by and they heard it, and then they all began yelling and carted Osmond- er, William-" he corrected at my stern glance, "away. To jail, I suppose. All the excitement wore me out, so I took a nap." He grinned. "That's really all I know."

"What? You couldn't have just told me that?"

He grinned hugely. "It was more fun this way."

Jailed Heart

I sighed, fighting back anger. Fury was too good to waste here. “Well, thank you anyway, Master Garth.”

“Same to you, Mistress Katherine,” he said, touching his head as if to tip a cap.

I smiled- a forced smile, but a smile nonetheless- and turned away.

“Come back soon,” Timothy called out, “It gets lonely up here.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

It didn't take all that long to locate my next items of interest- the Three Girls. All I had to do was ask for "the Three Girls", explain why I didn't know who the Three Girls were, explain further why I needed the Three Girls, decipher the instructions given me, and then finally locate them.

Which, though it sounds long, only took about ten minutes.

They weren't hiding out, either. There they were, conspicuous despite their stunning normlacy. The fact that the people parted for them, leaving a sizeable gap between them and the rest of the world, helped a bit.

I studied them from afar. To tell the truth, Timothy had been right. There was nothing to set them apart, either in their face or body. Honestly, I can't even remember that they looked like. They blended together and disappeared from memory as soon as one looked away from them.

But there *was* something unseating about them, something than made you want to shift your weight from one foot to the other and look at them only in stolen, sideways glances. It was harder than it would have seemed to walk up to them.

But injustice and... er... *something else* spurred me on, and so I boldly walked up to the Three.

"Hello," I said, smiling and holing out my hand. "How do you do?"

The middle one smiled and took my hand. "Quite lovely, and you?"

I shrugged. "I'm not doing badly."

"I don't believe we've met before."

"We haven't."

"Lovely, a new friend!" She chuckled. "It gets boring here. You have to spice things up a bit. Name?"

"Kate."

"Short for... what?"

"What makes you think it's short for... anything?"

"Never heard a Kate that wasn't short-for." She shrugged. "There's always a first time, though."

"What's your name?" I asked. Giving my full name away to these girls seemed dangerous somehow. There's power in a name.

"Call my Gyp." She smiled thinly.

"Gyp?" I raised an eyebrow. "And you say my name is strange."

"Who said anything about names?" Her smile widened, "I just told you to *call* me Gyp. For all you know every blessed person in this town could call me something different."

I sighed. "Alright, Gyp."

Jailed Heart

“Good. Now, it’s been lovely making your acquaintance, but we really must go, apologies.” She looked from side to side at each girl and they nodded, smiling with her.

“I’m sorry, but I really need to askp you something,” I said, not moving. “I need to know everything you know about the sheep robbery.”

“What makes you think we know anything about it?” They never stopped smilig, and never stopped looking at me.

“You were there, weren’t you?”

“Yes, we were.”

“So, what do you know about it?”

“Quite a lot.”

“Tell me all of it.”

“Well, there we were, strolling through the woodsm and then we looked down and there he was, that scoundrel, reaching over and trying to make off with a sheep. So we yelled and ran at him, and he dropped the sheep-”

“Where did the sheep get off to?”

They shrugged- or, rather, Gyp shrugged. The others just stopped smiling for a moment, But the effect was the exact same. My nerves were set on edge from this eerie sameness.

“Is that all?” I hoped it was. I was ready to get away.

Guyp shrugged again. “Well, then some men came and hauled him off to jail. But only until his trial.”

“He’s got what’s coming to him.” said the girl on the right.

“Serves him well,” said the girl on left.

I resisted the urge to take a step back, to retreat. “Is that all?”

Gyp nodded. “Unless they saw something I didn’t.” She looked from one girl to the other. “Did you?”

They shook their heads. “As I thought.” She looked back to me. “Sorry we couldn’t then helpful.”

“You’ve been plenty helpful,” I said, smiling as really and truly as I could. “I thank you for your time.”

“And thank you for yours,” Gyp replied, “It’s lonely being us... if you haven’t noticed.” She motioned to the gap around us.

“Any particular reason why?”

She shrugged. “Anyway, must be going. Lovely talking to you!” They breezed off, and all stole backwards glances at me. They fell to whispering among themselves.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Everyone looked up as I entered the jail.

“Welcome back,” said John, “Where’ve you been?”

“Wouldn’t you love to know?”

“Actually, I don’t care,” John said, picking at his fingernails. “Just being polite, like a gentleman should.”

“Gentleman,” said Jem.

“Gentleman,” William echoed.

“Yes. A ture gentleman.” John motioned to the others. “One would have to be a real gentleman to put up with the likes of these poor ones night and day, day and night, never being able to get away, not ever.” His voice had an edge of desperation to it. He pointed at me. “At least you can leave. I’m still stuck here until I can get my debt paid off, which, at the rate I’m selling these things-” with a kick at a pile of fabric on the ground- “I’ll be in here, in this dank, cold, disgusting jail until I’m Simon’s age. Gyah!” He kicked the clothing again.

The jail had fallen silent during John’s outburst. We all stared at the temper tantrum unfolding before us.

John stared out at us, black eyes smoldering with defiance and expectation. There was another beat of silence.

Jem looked to me. “So, where’d ya go?”

“For a walk.” This was not a lie. I had definitely walked.

“Where to?” Will asked.

“And, more importantly, did you bring back anything good?” Jem interrupted, rubbing his hands together.

“Why would she bring back anything back for us, Jem?” John asked. “She doesn’t care.”

Jem paid him no attention, and I decided to do likewise.

“Well, nothing big,” I said, “Nothing you would like, anyway.”

“So you did bring something?” Will asked, slowly getting to his feet.

“Uh... partly...” I procured a bouquet of flowers that I had gathered while wandering the hills, looking for Timothy.

“Flowers? What good are those?” John grumbled.

Jem reached through the bars. “Flowers!” he said, grasping for them, “Flowers!”

“Is it true? Can it be true? The outside world still exists!” William said. “There are still flowers blooming!”

I smiled and split the bouquet three way. One I handed to Jem, the other to Will. He buried his face in them, breathing deeply.

I held the last clump out to John. “John? Want one?”

He slowly got up and grasped the bars. He stared at the clump of daisies in my hand.

Jailed Heart

“What I want,” he said, “Is to get out of here.”

“Sorry, can’t grant that request. But, besides, that’s not what I asked you.” I took a step forward and held out the flowers. All John had to do was grab them. “I asked if you wanted the flowers.” I smiled at him.

His hands twitched- once, twice- and he just kept staring at the bouquet. “I want to get out of here.”

“Do you want the flowers, yes or no?”

“Uh... yes. I guess.” He reached out and took them, hands trembling. “Thanks. I guess.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome.”

He kept staring at the flowers and didn’t say anything. I turned away.

“What’s the matter with you people?” he exploded, “I’m standing here, hello?”

“You are standing here. That’s true.”

“Com’on! Argue with me!”

I didn’t turn around. “Sorry, John. Not in the mood for argument.”

“Argue with me!”

“I’m sorry, John.”

“You aren’t sorry! You aren’t sorry one bit!”

I said nothing. John just wanted attention, nothing more.

“Like the flowers?” I asked Jem, smiling. He had his face completely hidden in them.

“Yes.” His voice was muffled.

“You too, Will?”

“I was really beginning to think that the world had turned completely to stone and metal,” he said.

I smiled sadly. “Well, it’s not, trust me.”

“I don’t need to trust you,” he said, “I have these flowers. That’s proof enough that life will go on... even when...”

“Yours doesn’t.” John scowled at us.

“Has it been weighing on you?” I asked, looking at Will and ignoring John’s comment. Then I stopped and looked closed. “Will...” there was an edge of alarm in my voice. “Really, are you alright?” Maybe it was just the light, but he looked bad, pasty and tired.

“To tell the truth, no. I’m not alright.” He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Jem. “We weren’t going to say anything, but...”

I turned on Jem. “You too?”

“Don’t forget me,” John whined.

“Uh... yes. Me too,” Jem said, rubbing his forehead and looking at the ground.

“John?” I asked, looking at him.

“Nice of you to ask. Finally.” He trailed off, waiting for a response. He wanted me to contradict him, to drag me into an argument, where he could show off his capacity at witty and biting comments. He wanted me to laugh at him.

Jailed Heart

“John, I’m not going to argue with you. So stop. Now.”

He blanched and quickly looked away. “I’ll be glad to talk with you,” I said quietly, “But I will not trade insults. Is it possible for you to carry on a normal conversation?”

He said nothing, just knawed on his lower lip.

“So, what’s the matter with you poor little things?” I asked, turning my attention away from John and to William and Jem.

“Uh... well...”

“ARE you coming down with something?”

“I don’t know,” Will said, “Just all-around...”

“Sickness,” Jem interrupted.

“Where? In your belly? Your head? Your chest?” I asked, praying for anywhere but the chest. A coughing sickness was not a good thing. Mother had a coughing sickness, and... I bit my lip and held back a garbled sob.

“Uh... mostly belly...” Will said, “Though kind of everywhere...”

“What?”

“Well,” William said, leaning against the wall, “We all feel nauseous, but... well, look at me.” He held out an arm in the air, and, for the first time, I noticed that a tremor ran up and down it.

“That’s not normal.” I was truly beginning to get worried. I looked at Jem. “You too?”

He held out his arm, and, though it shook just as badly as Will’s, I noted with some satisfaction that the wounds on his wrists were healing up. But that wasn’t what I was worried about right now. “Huh. When did it start?”

“Well... I’ve been nauseous for a few days- you know that- but today’s the first day I’ve felt like I was trampled by a herd of angry deer.”

I winced. “Then why don’t you lie down, you poor thing?” I felt the mother coming on and checked myself. There was a thinly-veiled laugh-as-cough from behind me when I called Will “poor yhing” and even Will bit back a smile. “Fine, fine, you... ah... not-poor-thing,” I said, smiling at my own quaintness. “Where’s Simon?”

There was no answer. I looked from Will to Jem. Neither answered.

“Haven’t seen him all day today,” John said from behind me. “He’s probably in his room, unless he’s crawled out the window and ran away to join the acting troupe. I heard they were coming through.”

Even I had to laugh at the idea of frail old Simon running away to travel the world. “He could be known as, ‘Simon- the oldest man in all of England’.”

John smiled. “Now you’re getting it.”

I walked to the back of the jail and opened the door to Simon’s room, still grinning slightly. My smile immediately faded as I opened the door.

“Kare? Kate?” John said, noticing my alarm.

Jailed Heart

“Something’s wrong.” The air was heavy. I had breathed this same air once before. When Mother was sick.

“Oh no...” I murmured, standing still for a moment. “Oh no.”

“Kate? Kate, what’s wrong?”

I didn’t answer him. I darted into the backroom.

Simon lay on his little bed, coughing.

“Oh no... oh no.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

I ran to Simon's side. He was sleeping- sleeping or unconcious. I wasn't sure.

"Simon! Simon! Wake up!"

He grunted and slowly half-opened his eyes. "Wha?"

"Oh, good, you're awake- Master Simon? Master Simon!"

For he had fallen into a fit of coughing. His thin- too thin- body shook violently.

"Master Simon, how long have you been like this?"

"Forever," he mumbled, "Forever and never."

"What?"

But his eyes fluttered shut. *I just checked him yesterday! He was fine!* He was too tough for his own good. *Why didn't you tell me, you old thing?* I sighed and felt his forehead.

Burning up. Just like Mum's had. Cough. Just like Mum had. Tired all the time. Just like Mum was.

I staggered back, back out of the room. The scent, the heavy scent that I'm sure was only a product of my imagination, was too much, too soon. I couldn't trake this. I was going to die, Simon was going to die, Will was going to die, and everyone else was probably going to die, too, taking into account the way things were going.

"Kate? Kate! Kate, what's wrong?" It was William. At least he wasn't dead yet. And I wasn't dead yet. Maybe there was still hope.

I took a deep breath and ordered my thoughts. I opened my eyes and looked at Will. His face was genuinely worried. Worried for *me*. This thought brought the tiniest bit of a smile to my face.

"I'm fine, Will," I said, "It's Simon. He's sick."

"Wait, what?" John stood straight. "When?"

"I just saw him yesterday- he had been spendind a lot of time in his room, but I thought he was just old and tired."

"Sick with what?" It was Jem.

"Cough. Cough and fever. The same thing my mum had before she... before she died." I buried my eyes in the crook of my elbow for a moment, and the jail fell into a respectful silence.

I took a quick, deep breath and pulled my arm away. My eyes were red-rimmed. There was no shame in weeping, I knew, but there wasn't time. Just a moment, that's all I needed.

"I'll go for Richard," I said, "It would have been better had we caught it earlier, but we must do what we must do. What we can do."

"How can I help?" Will asked, no doubt not really thinking about what he was asking. A quiet laugh bubbled to my lips.

"You can't. Well, I guess you can."

Jailed Heart

“How? How? Tell me, Kate.” He was completely in earnest. He gripped the horizontal crossbars of his cell.

I walked to the front of his cell door, laying my hands on his fists. I looked right at him.

“Be strong,” I said, “Be strong for me. I- I don’t know if I can do this...” My eyes suddenly burned and my lips trembled. My gaze faltered for a moment, but I blinked and looked back up at Will.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I said, “But I will try my utmost. I will try, even if I kill myself in the process.”

He managed a smile. *Probably thinking I’m a bit off my rocker.* But he nodded.

“Yes, Katherine. For your sake, I’ll try to be strong.” He smiled again, and I suddenly became hyper-aware of how awkward I had made this situation. I slowly began to withdraw my hands, but Will grabbed them and held them clasped within his. “You don’t believe me,” he said, searching my face, “But I promise you, I will be true to my word. I will be strong.”

“Good.” My voice sounded far away. I attempted a smile, and my hands slithered out of Will’s grasp. I took two staggering steps away, and then turned suddenly.

“Have to go get Richard, fast,” I said, and ran out the door, leaving it swinging behind me. I felt his eyes on me as I ran, until I disappeared into the marketplace crowd.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Goodness gracious, girl, what’s the matter?”

That’s what Richard said as I burst into his little shack without so much as a knock.

“Simon,” I panted, “Sick. Cough.”

Richard didn’t respond, just leapt up and slung a bag over his shoulder. “Just today?” he asked, rifling thorough a shelf of medicined. He stashed a few in his bag.

“Yes, today’s the first day I noticed it.”

“Noticed it?” He stopped and looked at me. “What do you mean, ‘noticed it?’”

“I, uh...”

“You don’t mean to tell me that he’s been sick before?”

“I... uh....”

He made a noise, something between the screech of a dragon and the roar of a lion. “Oh my...” I felt his anger like a hammer, pounding down on me. “You... you... you...” He seemed to come to a loss of words, but what he meant was clear. I bit my lip and looked down.

“WELL, no fixing it now, girl,” he said, claspng the bag and throwing on a traveling cloak. “Co’mon, and be quick about it.”

I was as quick about it as I could. I ran as fast and as far ahead as I could. I’ll admit, it did give me a good measure of satisfacton to look back and see Richard, far behind me. But his pace was strong and steady, and I fell back with him as my speed began to give out.

I pulled open the door to the jail and ushered him inside. I expected him to go charging back to help Simon, but instead, he stopped. He stared at William.

Will looked up, and the moment he saw Richard, and unreadable expression crossed his face.

John stood and nodded to Richard. The respect this implied was startling.

Richard, who had been staring alternately at William and John, shook off his trance and turned to me.

“Back room?”

I nodded, and he hurried off, without so much as a backwards glance at either John or William. I had a feeling that he didn’t want to be disturbed.

“Well, I got him here,” I said to no one in particular, “that’s something.”

Will’s face suddenly went pained. “You mean he didn’t want to come here?”

“I wonder why,” Jem said.

Will bit his lip.

“No, he wanted to come,” I said quickly. “I didn’t have to beg him.”

Will sighed.

“Do you... know Richard?” I asked. Will looked at John for a moment, then looked up at me.

“Yes. Quite well.”

Jailed Heart

“When? I thought you were a wanderer?”

He winced. “Yes... you know... well, when I said that?”

I stared at him. “It was a lie?” I couldn’t believe it.

“No, no, no, not a lie. It was true. I’ve been a wanderer ever since I was twelve or thirteen.” He frowned. “I can’t remember when.”

“You left when you were thirteen and a half,” said Richard very loudly from the back room. Had he been listening?

Wait... what is going on here? “So...” I said aloud, “where did you live before you... ah... left?”

Will was silent for a moment. “I lived in Hilltop. Right around the corner, as a matter of fact.”

“What?” I was about to ask another question, when I was interrupted by Richard.

“Listen, Kate, girl, could I get a hand back here?” There was a strain in his huge voice, a hint of a crack in his strong baritone. I frowned but nodded.

“Be right back there!” I looked back at Will. “We will continue this conversation at a later time,” I said in a low voice. I wasn’t sure I wanted Richard to hear everything that I was saying.

I hurried into the back room. Richard had shed his cloak, which lay in an untidy heap on the floor, as if he had cast it off without a second thought. He bent over Simon, one hand to the old man’s forehead, the other on his chest. His face was grave and straight.

“Is it...” I began, but he silenced me with a glance. He was talking to himself, whispering garbled words. Like he was counting. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

“Katherine,” he said at last, opening his eyes and digging in his bag. “Be glad that this man is old.”

“What?”

“If he was any younger, his body wouldn’t have given out as easily and *you* would still have no idea that there was even something wrong with him. As it stands, I should have been alerted two days ago.”

“I didn’t know,” I said quietly.

“She didn’t know. She didn’t know,” Richard muttered, holding a bottle up to the light and squinting at its contents. “Too distracted with William’s face to really take much notice of anything else at all.”

I sucked in my breath as this rebuke hit home. *You’re right. You’re right.* I had let a boy turn my head and steal my reasoning and logic. I had other things to do. I didn’t need William.

I still stood in the door, and I glanced over my shoulder at Will. And immediately, my heart cried out *I DO NEED HIM*. He looked at me, and I turned away quickly.

It was so much easier to tell myself I didn’t need him when I couldn’t see him. Couldn’t see the brown curl of hair slipping in front of his eyes. His ice-blue eyes.

I stopped up those thoughts and went to Richard.

“What can I do?” I asked. “This is a thing I’m good at.”

Jailed Heart

He stopped for a moment and looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Really?" A sarcastic smile twitched one corner of his mouth.

"Well, once I know the person is actually ill, *then* I'm good at it," I clarified, laughing softly.

"That's good to know," Richard said, falling back to tending Simon. He was silent for a minute.

"So... what can I do?"

"Oh!" Richard said, starting. "You're still here. Right."

"You forgot I was standing right next to you?"

He shot me an irate glance. "I have a lot on my mind, alright?"

I nodded quickly. "I only want to help."

He sighed. "Yes, yes. So I heard." He fell back into silence. Kneeling beside the bed, he placed his ear against Simon's chest. He listened for a moment, and his brow furrowed. "Not good," he said, "Not good at all."

"What's the matter?"

"The cough. Seen it a few times- all too many times. Never good, even when you catch it first day."

"Oh," I said softly, "I think my mum had the same thing."

Richard's eyes turned to me. "Really?"

I swallowed and nodded. "She died." It was so hard to say those words.

"I really am sorry," Richard said, looking out the tiny window. "But I guess you were right when you said you had experience."

Another silence.

"So... what can I do?" I asked for the third time.

"Nothing," Richard said, measuring out a spoonful of medicine.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," he said, "For now."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Richard was right. I could do nothing but watch as he dosed Simon up with medicines. In the plural. I had no idea what was in the bottles, and I didn't know what ointment Richard spread over Simon's chest- all I knew is that it smelled strongly of mint. I coughed, despite effort to breathe easy.

I fanned the air with my hand, squinting. "Aren't you trying to make people cough less, not more?"

Richard fixed me with a scathing glance. "To clear the lungs," he snapped, "Who's the doctor here?"

"You are." I lowered my gaze.

He forced a spoonful of a black liquid down Simon's throat and massaged his neck until he swallowed it. He followed with a glass of water, delivered in little doses. Each one he worked down Simon's throat with more tenderness in his rough fingers than I would have ever given him credit for.

"There," he said, as the last gulp of water disappeared, "That's all I can do for him now."

"Can you wake him up?"

He shook his head. "Even if I could, he'd probably be delirious."

I thought back to when I had woken Simon the first time. He had said something about "Forever and never". Probably delirious, as Richard had said.

"What do I do with him now?" I asked.

"Water. Mostly lots and lots of water," Richard said. He looked at me. "You saw how I got him to drink?"

I nodded.

"Good. I'll be back soon, maybe tonight. Definitely tomorrow morning." He buckled his bag again and picked up his cloak. Shaking out the wrinkles, he settled it on his shoulders, preparing to leave. I stepped in front of him, blocking the door.

"Please, Master Richard, could you stay and check up on the others?"

"The others?" his face was blank.

"You know they haven't been feeling very well..."

"All of them?"

"Yes, and since you're in the area..."

His face changed. "Alright. Alright." He pushed past me.

"Well, since I'm here," he said to the three prisoners, "I might as well patch up you children too." His voice didn't sound tired anymore. Now, it sounded strong and jolly. Like a grandpapa, or Father Christmas. At the thought of Richard the Pirates as Father Christmas, I couldn't help but laugh.

"What?" Richard turned a severe eye on me.

Jailed Heart

“Well, you *did* call us children,” John interjected. “And that’s not exactly what we are.”

“Well then, what are you?” Richard raised an eyebrow.

“Mature and grownup,” William said, “*Very* mature and grown-up.”

Richard snorted. “In your dreams, Will. In your dreams.”

“Are you going to keep trading insults and witty banter or are you going to help us?” Jem asked, crossing his arms and tapping his toe on the ground.

John sighed. “You always ruin all the fun. ‘We can’t help being interesting any more than you could help being dull’, as the Overseer would say. Oh... sorry.”

For at the exact moment that he had mentioned the Overseer, Richard’s face had gone dead, went blank. But his eyes said it all. They were the eyes of a creature who has been wounded in the exact same spot it was hurt last time. He forced a laugh.

“It’s fine,” he said, “She’s a wise woman, right?”

“Who’s a wise woman?” a voice said from behind us. I looked up and blushed for poor Richard’s sake.

There was the Overseer, in all her flaming glory, standing in the doorway.

The jail went dead-silent for yet another time that day. I stole a glance at Richard- he was frozen, absolutely frozen.

The Overseer just smiled and walked in. “Did I come at a bad time?” She watched Richard closely.

“No, not at all,” he said, recovering himself in an instant. “We were just talking about you.”

“Oh?” Her eyes darted to Will, then to John.

“What are you doing here?” Richard asked, crossing to the opposite side of the room. I realized that the two had been standing close together.

Only when Richard’s back was turned did I see a bit of the Overseer’s emotion. Her face flashed a haunted, confused look as Richard walked away from her. She took a deep breath. “You mean me?”

“Yes, You. I don’t know anyone else who just showed up.” His voice was devoid of all emotion.

“Oh. R-right.” Richard glanced over his shoulder just in time to see her randomly blush. He quickly looked away.

“I just decided that it was a good time to come visit,” she said, her voice strangely subdued. Richard seemed to notice.

“Is everything alright, Martha?” he asked, and there was something in the way he said “Martha” that made me bury an uncontrollable grin behind my hand. It was... different. Like the way William said “Katherine”. Here was a bit of... extra meaning.

She nodded. “Everything’s fine, Rich. Really.”

I bit my tongue. “*Well, so far this is going... well...:*” I thought.

Jailed Heart

"That..." he trailed off for a moment, and they filled their eyes with each other. Though they were both old, I could still see the emotion dancing clearly across their faces. I snuck a glance at John, and he was practically stuffing his fist in his mouth to keep from laughing outright. *At least he has enough decency not to disturb this moment.*

Richard looked away after what felt like an eternity. "That's good," he said, looking at me, but not seeing me at all. He blinked, and his eyes refocused. Turning, he addressed Jem. "Feelin' bad, eh?"

Jem nodded. "Sick and shaky."

Richard glanced at both John and Will. "You boys too?" He was completely ignoring the Overseer.

John nodded. "I think we have some sort of sickness."

Richard sighed. "That is likely, yes."

I felt a tug on my sleeve and the Overseer pulled me into the back room. She shut the door behind us and looked at me with wide eyes.

"What is he doing here?" she said in a hoarse whisper.

I said nothing, just motioned to Simon, who lay across the room.

Her hand rose and covered her mouth. "I knew something wasn't right. I felt it in my bones." she made to step towards the old jailer.

Richard poked his head in the door. "Ladies, just so you're aware, his sickness is catching." He addressed this to both of us, but only looked at the Overseer.

"Cough?" she didn't look at him.

"Yes."

"Oh, Maker help us," she said, running a hand over her face. "Come, dearie, we'll have to have this conversation elsewhere."

"Private conversation? Ugh, women," Richard muttered, turning away. The Overseer's eyes flashed with some emotion, either anger or pain, but she blinked twice and walked out of the back room. I followed, albeit somewhat slowly.

"I think that I'd best be going now," the Overseer said brightly, "Just popping in briefly. Got to run!" Her voice was *too* cheery, *too* carefree. She held her chin at *too* high an angle, and her eyes sparkled *too* brightly. I felt for her.

"Go ahead, no body's stopping ya," Richard said, not looking up.

The door closed behind her. The second the latch snapped shut, his head shot up, eyes straining for a glance of her out the windows.

I caught John's eye and shook my head emphatically. He was just bursting at the seams with sarcastic comments. But that was *NOT* the way to speed a romance up. At least, not *this* one.

"I *still* don't feel good," Jem complained.

"Right," Richard said, snapping out of it, "Right, right, right." He clenched his fists once, twice, and then he was back to normal. "Once more, children, what feel bad?"

"Everything," William said, running a hand over his face. "I feel like I could hurl."

Jailed Heart

Richard looked at me. "You've tried my ginger, right?"

I nodded. "Didn't work."

Richard rubbed his chin. "Huh." He closed his eyes for a moment. "Then I don't think I can do anything but recommend more water and more sleep. Huh. Strange."

John leaned on the bars. "Really? That's all?"

Richard shrugged. "If ginger didn't work, I don't know what would."

John sighed and slid to the floor. "Well then, go on." He looked away from us.

Richard glanced once at me, then quickly stepped to William's cell. He squatted and mumbled something into Will's ear, glancing quickly at me the whole time. Upon hearing it, Will's face went red, then white, then red again. But he faded to his own normal color again, and he nodded. Richard hesitated, as if he expected Will to respond, but Will remained silent, staring at the opposite wall.

Richard left the door half-open as he blew out of the jail. I was about to close it when I looked over at William and saw how he breathed the fresh air deeply, relishing every breath. I smiled with a corner of my mouth and propped the door fully open.

Will's eyes popped open and he stared outside into the marketplace. "Life," he said softly, and I could see the hunger in his eyes. It was unhealthy, I thought, for him to yearn for something he couldn't have. Something he could never have again.

"So, Will..." I said, sitting down in front of the open door, trying to block his view as much as possible/ "I said that we were going to continue our conversation, and I am true to my word."

Will looked down and stifled a sigh. "I suppose I'll have to have out with it."

I nodded. "You supposed rightly."

"Will..." John caught Will's eye. "Just... be careful what you say."

"I'll try. I'll try." Will looked back down at the ground. He stole a split-second glance at me, and then went back the ground, biting his lip.

I looked from John to Will. Neither met my eye. John fidgeted with a button on his coat and moved his lips, as if speaking to himself, but no words came out.

"You guys don't trust me, do you?" I asked.

"Well, you don't trust us either." John looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"There's something about yourself you're not telling us."

My heart beat faster. "What do you mean?"

John waved his hand at me. "Don't play dumb. You know exactly what you're hiding. We're the only ones who don't."

"Well, no one else knows either, so it's not just you," I shot back, and then bit my tongue.

"Leave her alone, John," Will said, settling into a more comfortable position. "We have our secrets, too."

"I personally think her secrets might be a bit bigger than our measly ones."

Jailed Heart

I looked at Will. "Look... William..." I started, before being paralyzed again by his eyes, staring right into my soul. I blinked and tried to meet his gaze. "I do trust you. I trust you enough to believe you don't deserve to be here. I do have secrets, yes. I do trust you, yes. But these secrets..." My eyes dropped to my hands. "Are something my whole future rests upon. I'm sorry, I..."

"Oh, what'dya do, kill someone?"

I looked up at John defiantly. "No, Master Middleton. I did not kill someone. I have done nothing wrong. Rest assured. It's the... others..." I couldn't hold back a shudder, "Who have done me wrong."

"Why don't you tell Will?" Jem suggested. "After all, he can't carry your secret beyond the grave." It was cruel, that's what, simply cruel.

I looked up at Will, and there was that unsettling eye contact again. I suddenly realized that if he asked me to tell him, I would have a very hard time refusing. As long as he looked at me like... that.

"No, Jem," William said, eyes never leaving mine. "If she has her secrets, they are hers to keep." He smiled at me, and I slowly smiled back, relieved beyond words.

"Tell ya what," I said, "I'll make a deal. I'll reveal a secret for every one that you tell."

He eyed me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... well..." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I want to trust you. And I want you to trust me. So... I'll try to answer whatever questions you throw at me. And you'll do the same."

Will frowned. "Do we *have* to answer the questions?"

"No, not at all."

He relaxed. "Good."

"Now, here's my first question. What's the relationship between you and Richard? Don't tell me there isn't one. I know there is."

"You're right, there is. A big one." He paused. "Richard is... I don't know, like a father to me."

"What? A father?"

"Not my real father... but he acted like one to me. My real Papa..." He cleared his throat, "Wasn't a very good one."

"To say the least," interjected Jem.

Will sighed. "I'll admit. He wasn't the most... upstanding... gentleman..."

"He wasn't a gentleman at all. What gentleman steals?"

"Wait. Your dad was a thief?"

William looked away. "Not so much a thief... more a blight on society."

"But he *was* a thief," Jem said.

"Perhaps. Nothing was ever proven."

Jailed Heart

“That’s because he ran away before anyone had the time to prove anything! Good thing we didn’t make the same mistake with you.”

“Just because my papa stole a sheep doesn’t mean that I stole one.”

“Why not? Runs in your blood, doesn’t it?”

“Jem, stop!” John said, eyes burning dangerously. “If blood was everything, why did I take such a different path.”

“That’s different!” Jem said.

“Is it?” John thrust his arm through the bars. “The same blood that runs through these veins runs through yours! If it’s all about who your father and mother were, then why was I disowned?”

I said nothing. A lot more was being revealed in my being silent than my asking questions. The links in my mind began to solidify.

“We’re not talking about that. We are talking about him!” Jem shouted, pointing at William. “*His* bad blood, not yours!”

“Well, so what? So what if he has bad blood?”

The argument ground to a halt as Jem struggled for an answer to that. “I... I... it has to matter!” he finally exploded.

“Has to? No, it doesn’t,” John said. “Will, do you admire your father?”

Will shook his head.

“Do you want to be like him?”

“No.” Will shuddered. “No, no, NO!”

“Well, then, who do you want to be like?”

Will pondered for a moment. “Richard,” he finally said, and looked up at Jem, who had totally deflated. “JEM, Richard acted more like a Papa to me than my real Papa. I do *not* want to be like my father, not ever.”

Jem glowered at him. “Too bad, you are.”

“What?” John asked, staring at Jem.

“Both thieves, both liars!” Jem began to laugh, and that’s when I suspected that his mind had started to really slide.

“Jem!” I leaped up.

But Jem just kept on laughing. I exchanged a despairing glance with John. “Jem!” he shouted, trying to make eye contact.

But Jem just kept on laughing. It wasn’t a good, hearty laugh, either- it was the laugh of a coyote, a laugh bordering on evil. But at least it wasn’t that awful screaming.

I turned away from Jem and stared at John and William for a long moment. “So,” I finally said, talking over the noise from the other cell, “I learned a lot more about... well, everything. Let me get this straight.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “You,” I said, pointing to John, “And you,” pointing at Jem- or what was left of him, anyway- “Are brothers.”

John’s face fell. “I was hoping that you wouldn’t figure that part out.”

Jailed Heart

I smiled brightly at him. "I'm not dull. I've been suspecting something this whole time, but thanks to you for clearing it all up. Brothers, who'da thought it!" I glanced at Jem's blond head and back at John's black shock.

"Would it surprised you even more to find we're twins?"

"Twins?" I stopped and thought for a moment. "Yes, that would surprise me more. As a matter of fact, it did."

John just smirked.

"So, there's one mystery uncovered. Now..." I turned my steely eye to William, and he quailed. He recognized the look. I was out on conquest, and there would be no stopping me on my quest for answers.

"Now, on to you, Master Osmond," I began.

He held up his hand before I could go any further. "Remember what you said about not having to reveal things."

I sighed. "Yes, I remember. But that was before *that* happened." I pointed at Jem, who was still giggling sickly. "And, because I want to help him, I need answers. I have a sneaking suspicion that the reason for his madness lies somewhere inbetween you two."

William looked to John, who shrugged. "I don't care anymore, friend," he said. "Neither of us have much to lose."

Will sighed. "You're right." He turned back to me. "Get ready, Kate, because this tale won't make much sense unless you've lived it."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“It started way back, when John and I were just youngsters. We became friends, through a... series of events... that-”

“What series of events?” I wasn’t going to let a single detail slide under my notice.

William sighed. “Do you really want to know?”

“I’m finally getting some answers, Will, and I’m not stopping until I get them all.”

“Alright, alright, Kate, let off the boy,” John interjected. “The ambiguous ‘series of events’ are something neither of us talks about, but, since you insist...”

I suddenly began to backtrack. “No, no, I didn’t mean...”

“Remember your story about your village, and the sickness, and your mum dying?” John asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s what happened here, only in real life. Our real mothers got sick. Come to think of it, almost everyone’s mother got sick. Half the people’s fathers, too. Children, dropping like flies.” John suddenly bit his lip and looked away, eyes shining.

“We met at Richard’s shop,” William said, picking up where John could go no further. “Both our mums were sick- sick bad-” He made a choking noise and swallowed. “And we both came to get help from Richard.”

“And he did help us. Helped both of us more than anyone ever did. Fathered both of us.”

“Wait. I thought your father was Allan,” I said, looking at John.

“Oh, yes. Allen. He’s my pop, alright.” He laughed shortly. “By blood, anyway, but he never really cared. Only cared about that blubbering heap.” -referring to Jem- “Richard raised me, Kate. Richard cared.”

“Same,” William said, “My Papa... wasn’t the best. I’m sure you’ve gathered that fact.”

I nodded slowly. “So you two... are like... brothers?”

They looked at each other. “Oh, why didn’t I ever think of that?” John asked Will. “I always just thought of us as best friends, but... yeah. I guess we are like brothers.”

“So... so then what happened?”

John sighed. “Well, then Will’s family had to up and leave. I was lonely, but also jealous.”

“What?”

“I wanted to leave, Kate. I’d always wanted to leave. I... I don’t want to say hate- I don’t hate my family- but...”

“I get the picture.”

“Good. SO, right then, I told myself I was going to leave as soon as possible. I did... and...” he shrugged. “It got me disowned and in debt. Leading me here.”

“So... Jem hates you because of it?”

Jailed Heart

“He always hated me. But yes. Hates me more, I guess.”

“Oh, is *that* what you think?”

I jumped at the sound of Jem’s voice. It was low in pitch and seemed sane, at least.

John, however, just stared right at Jem without flinching. “Yes, Jem. That’s what I think, tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong.”

A fleeting moment of uncertainty flashed across John’s face, but it immediately hardened again. “Oh?”

Jem stared at the floor. “Is that really what you thought? All this time?”

“That you hate me?”

“I don’t- I don’t hate you.”

John picked his chin up. “*Really?*” He sounded totally unconvinced.

“I don’t hate you- t never *hated* you.” He covered his eyes with his hands. “So it was Richard’s fault, my fault.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve never hated you, I’ve always hated Osmond.” He shot a glance at Will. “If you were his brother, you couldn’t be mine.”

John suddenly coughed. “Kate, you’re a great chum, but I have a feeling that great interpersonal strife and ugliness are about to come pouring out and be resolved, not to mention the volume could get a little loud. Would you mind taking one of your little walks? We’ll all be happy as clams by the time you get back.”

“Of course. I have my answers- and it really isn’t any of my business anyway.” I hauled myself off the floor. “Besides, there’s work to do.”

“You work on your walks?”

I smiled at William. “You’ll see.” I sincerely hoped he did.

I walked out the still-open door and softly shut it. So much more made sense now. I thought over the events from the time when Will arrived in light of all these new understandings, and the peices clicked together in my mind. So satisfying to

But I really did have work to do, so I hurried up the road to the castle. I had two visits to make, and one more mystery to puzzle out.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

But, it seemed, I would never get to make those two visits, and the mysteries would just keep multiplying.

It seemed I had scarcely gotten three feet from the jail door before I heard my name called. I turned to see Mary hurrying towards me. I groaned inwardly. *Just when I thought I was out of my jail...*

“Good afternoon, Kate!” she said, smiling fit to bust and basket over elbow. “How are you on this fine day?”

I shrugged. “As good as can be expected.” *What with annoying perfections interrupting my walks and emotions flying left and right.*

Her face fell. “Is something wrong, Kate?”

I brightened. “Nothing the matter with me, no.”

“Then what?”

“Oh, there’s just some emotional battles flaring in there. No one’s feeling especially well, and-”

“What? Not feeling well?”

I shook my head. “Got some sort of stomach bug, and Simon has the cough.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh. Poor Simon.”

“Yes. Poor Simon.”

“So...” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Not a good time?”

I smiled thinly. “Let’s just say that even I have been banished from their presence.”

“Dearie dear.” She stroked her chin. “So you have nothing to do?”

I shrugged. “Not especially. I need to be here by sunset tonight, to give them all their medicines and waters, but other than that...”

“Perfection!” Mary squealed. “I’ve been dying to introduce you to my family.” She held out her hand. “I am inviting you for dinner tonight.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. Better than anything you’ll get here.”

“Are... who’s the lucky chef?” I chose my words carefully. I wasn’t sure I could endure a whole meal of Mary’s cooking. *Angel she may be, but in the kitchen, fiend is closer to accurate.*

Mary laughed. “The castle chef, of course.”

“Right, right, you live at the castle. I’d forgotten.”

“So, are you coming?”

I pondered a moment. “How long will it take?”

“You can leave whenever you feel it.”

Jailed Heart

"Then... alright. Alright." She took my arm. I looked up at her and smiled. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions? Since you seem to be... *in the know*."

"Sure, ask away."

"What do you know about... about..." I was going to ask her about the sheep, but I suddenly realized that I could ask better questions. Mary seemed to be a social person. Maybe she could answer some of my most buring questions.

"What do I know about..." She raised an eyebrow at me.

"The Three Girls."

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"The Three Girls."

"Oh. Those." She cleared her throat. "Why do you ask?"

I shrugged. "I think it might be useful in saving Will's life."

She stopped and stared at me. "You... what?"

I sighed. I wanted to make a comment about how, for being so pretty, she really wasn't all that bright, but I held myself back. "I want to save William's life. I don't think he stole the sheep, and I want to find out who did."

"Ah." She resumed her walk. "Well, I don't really know all that much. I try to stay away from them. All I know is that they're strange."

"Strange?"

"Yes. I don't like them one little bit. Give me the shivers."

I frowned. "But how-"

I was cut off by another call from across the marketplace. "Mary! Mary, yoo-hoo!"

I smothered a grin when I looked up to see the Three Girls hurrying across the marketplace towards us.

Mary ground her teeth. "Wonderful, just wonderful." She looked so different when she was frustrated.

The Three Girls reached us, breathless. "Oh Mary, there you are," the middle one said- they hadn't noticed me yet- "Been looking all over for you. There's-" then she finally noticed my presence and smiled broadly. "Why, hello there, little one."

"Let us pass, ladies, if you please." There was a good deal of force and command in Mary's tone.

The Three Girls looked surprised, but nodded slowly and stepped aside. Mary breezed by them without looking back. I glance over my shoulder as well as I could, with Mary pulling me along, and saw that they were staring after us, worried and whispering among themselves.

"What was that all about?" I asked as soon as Mary slowed.

She shrugged. "I told you they were strange. It doesn't matter." her cheeks were flushed and her voice hard.

"Really?" I asked, throwing another glance backward. The Three had disappeared into the crowd already.

Jailed Heart

“So, tell me about yourself,” Mary said, smiling wide.

And so passed the trek to the castle, with me regaling Mary with slightly tweaked variations of my life’s history. Though perhaps they were more than slightly tweaked. Perhaps they were entirely fictitious. What’s a girl to do?

And so passed the trek. Mary listened, absorbed like a friend should be.

Before I knew it, there we were at the castle and hurrying through the courtyard. I, by this time, had run out of my stories to tell, and Mary had dutifully taken up the slack. She, by the sound of it, led a very interesting life, though there was a hint about it which made me think they were as fanciful as mine. But they were entertaining, that’s for certain.

“Good evening, Miss Becket!” someone called from across the way, and then I remembered that Mary said her father was Becket. Was I going to have to spend a whole dinner across the table from Becket?

“Good evening,” Mary called back, and swept me up the stairs. And then another. And then a long hallway and *another* set of spiral stairs.

“Surely this isn’t the way to the Great Hall,” I said as soon as we slowed sufficiently. The Great Hall was a huge room. There was no way they’d put it on the third floor.

Mary cast me a bemused glance back at me. “No, this isn’t the way to the Great Hall.”

“Then why...”

“I think you’ve forgotten, my little one,” she said, turning a corner, “That I am the steward’s daughter. We don’t eat with the rest of everyone.”

“But why...”

I didn’t have a chance to finish the sentence before Mary flung a door open. How she knew which one was the right one was beyond me- all the doors looked the same- but there we were, inside the Becket Great Hall.

Honestly, I failed to see the difference. There were people everywhere. They took absolutely no notice of us as we walked in.

Becket sat at the head of the table, a tired-looking woman beside him. Mary and I took our seats quietly, and still no one paid any attention to us.

Then Becket pounded on the table with a fist, and all the people, still talking and laughing, moved towards the table and sat down.

“Who are all these people?” I whispered into Mary’s ear.

“My brothers, my sisters, my half-brothers, my half-sisters, my stepbrothers and stepsisters, and their husbands and wives. And some friends of theirs.”

I stared at her in sheer amazement.

She shrugged. “Becket’s been married a few times, alright?”

“I should think so!” I managed to squeak out. “All of these are his children?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Jailed Heart

“Oh my goodness gracious,” was all that I was able to say. There were enough people in the room for a small village. There were young ones, ones that looked about our age, and fully-grown men and women.

“How is that even possible?” I wondered aloud. I turned to Mary. “Only one wife at a time?”

She shot a disgusted look at me. “Of course.”

“Just wondering.” Still, no one had spoken to us. The food arrived then, and a feast it was. Best thing I had eaten since before I left Grant Manor.

Mary was surprised at my table manners. She studied me closely as I ate, and then exclaimed that “Oh, Kate, where did you learn to eat?”

“At a table, why?”

“Your table manners are the best I’ve ever seen from a peasant. You’re better than half the folks here! Where did you learn to eat?”

I stared at my food. “My mum was an enforcer when it came to good table manners.” It wasn’t a lie. Mum had always been the strictest when it came to eating cleanly.

“Ah.” Mary seemed to sense that this was a sensitive topic and pressed no further.

No one, not even the people right next to us, took any notice of us during the meal. I was too shy to try to engage anyone, but Mary tried to introduce me to a few people sitting next to her. They didn’t even look at her. The loneliness and frustration coming from Mary were very pronounced.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see the tired-looking woman standing there, smiling at me.

“Why, Mary,” she said, “Who’s your friend?”

The relief of getting noticed was immensely gratifying. Mary seemed to feel it too, for she smiled wide.

“This is Katherine, Mother. Kate, this is my mother.”

I smiled. “Nice to meet you. Your daughter is a lovely person.”

Mary’s mother rubbed her forehead. “Yes, she-”

“Alys! Alys!”

Mary’s mother looked up at Becket and nodded. “Coming, my lord.” She walked away, her footsteps falling so quietly that it seemed almost ghostly.

I shivered. “Is this what it’s like every meal?”

She nodded. “Becket says that I shouldn’t associate with the villagers, but the castle servants all treat me like a master, and everyone here treats me like nothing. Do you know how nice it is to have friends like you and William?”

I thought about what her reaction would be if I told her that William loathed her presence. But I only nodded in a friendly way. Mary noted my answer and nodded back. We both fell to eating once more, and a silence occupied the air between us. (well, at least a silence between the two of us- the rest of the room kept on chattering and giggling)

Jailed Heart

I then remembered just how much food I had been accustomed to eating, at a far-ago time. It had only been about a month, but it seemed farther than Bible times. I finished the first course and felt full-up, which, I will admit, felt very good after the adequate but unsatisfying meals I had been eating.

But then, just as I was about to push my chair back from the table, the door opened and yet *another* train of servants entered, bringing with them more food. I stopped for a moment and remembered that food was served in three courses. I groaned internally as I realized that there was going to be food aplenty- an excess of food. My stomach must have shrunk to accomodate my small diet- I remembered a time when I could down this whole meal without batting an eye.

I sat down and braved my way through the second course. I took very small helpings, and took very small bites. Now I went from full and satisfied to gluttoned and bloated.

Mary noticed my dilemma. *She* had no problem with the huge meal. SHe caught my eye and raised an eyebrow at the way I pecked at my food. A meager smile was the only thing I could offer in response.

And then, at the end of the eternal second course, in came the sweets. I took one look and knew that if I stayed, there would not be a happy ending to this tale. I turned to Mary.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I must get home,” I told Mary softly, “The boys will be expecting me, and I have to tend to Simon.”

“Must you? I’d...” and here she cast a glance around. “I’d really like it if you stayed. Even if you just sat there. Just so... I have a friend with me.”

I wavered for a moment, but then I looked up as a servant passed me with a tray full of tarts. “No, Mary,” I said, “I’m sorry. Really am.”

She sighed. “Alright. I’m sorry you had to miss the best part of the meal.”

“So am I,” I lied. I skedadled as fast as my little feet would carry me. Besides, I had some thinking to do.

Chapter Thirty

I walked out into the light and then marvelled at the lack of it. *How long was I in there?* The sun had almost entirely set, and I could see the faintest gleams of stars.

I regretted my decision to accompany Mary. My gut hurt and now it was too dark to make my two visits. I snarled at no one in particular, and a passing girl gave me a very strange look and hurried away.

But Mary wanted me. Perhaps needed me. It was a very strange feeling to actually be needed by someone. But Mary's begging me to stay wasn't just politeness. It was sincere. She did not want me to leave. I felt a tiny pang of sadness over leaving so suddenly, but it would be almost the next morning before I could have gotten out of there.

So I strolled, through the balmy weather. Something in me wanted to run and jump like a deer for no good reason at all. Maybe this is what Richard meant when he said that he felt fairyish. But I kept my feet going slowly and calmly, one in front of the other, staying on the ground and in order. I felt like I was constantly reining myself in, like I was a horse.

In this formal and composed manner, I made my way back down the road, through the town, and back to the jail.

I opened the door and poked my head in. "Hello? Is it safe to come in?"

There was no answer for a moment, and then a groan from John's cell. "If you are immune to the plague, then it's perfectly safe." His voice sounded sleepy.

"The plague? Oh, say it isn't so!" I stepped into the jail and smiled brightly. "I'm assuming that means that you all yelled at each other and exhausted yourselves? Everything worked out?"

"Yes. Now be quiet and let me sleep," Jem croaked.

I took the hint and accordingly fell silent. I tried to make as little noise as possible as I softly padded back towards Simon's room.

Simon wasn't trying to be quiet at all. He coughed loudly, but I didn't fault him. After all, the poor man was just trying to breathe.

"Simon?" I said softly. "Simon?"

He didn't stir.

I sighed and picked up a pitcher of water that was sitting on a table nearby. I closed my eyes and remembered how Richard had done it. Surely if a big, rough man like Richard could do it, so could I.

I was quickly humbled. More water ran down Simon's neck and soaked the front of his shirt than actually managed to trickle down his throat, but I threw myself into the fight wholeheartedly and, out of that whole pitcher of water, got about a glassful into Simon.

Jailed Heart

I dried him off the best I could and took off his soaked shirt. Sleeping in cold water couldn't be good for anyone's cough. I wrung out the garment and was astounded afresh at the amount of liquid in it, but I comforted myself in the knowledge that Richard had probably done this very thing a thousand times. I did pretty good for a first try.

I looked around the room and didn't see anything else that I could do for Simon other than fold up the covers to his chin and wish him sweet dreams. I closed the door behind me as quietly as I could and looked around.

Everyone was sleeping, sleeping hard. It was officially nighttime now. A cricket chirped in the corner, but when I tried to follow his song and flush him out of his hiding place, he fell silent. I shook my fist in his general direction and turned to my cell.

I laid down on the pile of blankets that I called my bed and stared at the dark ceiling. My thoughts didn't whirl around my head, but they did come and go constantly. I stared at the ceiling until the black blurred into darkness and I fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

I opened my eyes again to, not blackness, but to a bird singing outside the window. I rose and smiled out at the sun.

“Good morning, everyone!” I chirped, combing out my hair with my fingers and tying it up with a bit of string. Everything felt happy today.

No one answered. I just shook my head at them. They could sleep today. They were sick, after all, and needed their rest. Besides, I felt the need for another walk out in nature.

That walk was one of the last truly pleasant things for about a week. But I didn’t know that, and so I truly did enjoy it to the uttermost. It was a perfect summer morning, the dew still on the ground and the sun not quite hot yet. A perfect balance between hot and cold, windy and stagnant.

It was a rather long walk, and I returned only when it was so warm as to become uncomfortable. I was refreshed and ready for the day.

I tripped back into the jail with a cheery “Hello again!”

No one responded.

I frowned. “Lazybones, not up yet?”

Again, no answer.

I strolled over to William’s cell and peered inside. “William?” He lay still. “William, wake up!”

William did nothing.

I suddenly was seized by an icy hand of fear. “William, answer me!” I saw that he was breathing- there, his chest rose and fell. I turned to John, Jem, pleading in vain for an answer.

I glanced back at William’s cell, and saw, to my horror, that he was in the depths of a seizure. His whole body shook wildly.

That’s what did it for me. I ran to the wall and pulled the keyring off. I could not find the right key fast enough.

“William! William, wake up!” I said, jiggling a key in the lock without success. I pulled on the bars in frustration.

Finally, the door surrendered its hold on the frame and creaked open. I shook William by the shoulders. “William, wake *up!*”

William slowly stopped shaking, though I didn’t think it was anything I had done. It was probably just the fit passing.

I rolled him over and slapped his cheek- first lightly, then not-so-lightly. He refused to open his eyes. I opened his eyes for him, just in case he was playing some cruel game with me, and saw that his pupils were dilated.

Jailed Heart

And then I fully realized the extent of this little stomach bug. I didn't even stop to latch the cell behind me- William wasn't going anywhere. I flew out, the formerly beautiful day turning dark and dangerous. I flew to Richard's, my feet flying faster than I thought possible.

"Richard!" I called, practically busting the door off its hinges.

Richard raised his eyes. "This is, what, the third time in two days? What is it?"

"Jem... John... Will... sick bad."

"Bad? Like, how bad?"

I caught my breath as rapidly as I could. "Bad. Really bad."

"Symptoms, and don't slack!" *He* certainly wasn't slacking. He flew off the chair and around the room, grabbing every salve and potion that caught his fancy as I listed off everything I had seen. There wasn't much I could say- I had been so worried and flustered- but there was enough for Richard.

Now, he didn't walk quickly back to the jail. He ran. Ran faster than I ever would have dreamed. I, still winded from my frantic run to his hut, walked along a bit more slowly. Still fast, but I needed to catch my breath and gather my thoughts.

I watched the flying form of Richard and wondered why he ran so fast. I supposed that he was running to save his son's life. Two son's lives.

I eventually arrived at the jail, five minutes after Richard got there. He was bending over William.

"Where are the keys?" he asked, and his voice was raw with panic. "I need to get to the other cells!"

I scooped up the keys from where they had fallen and tossed them to Richard. He jammed a key inside John's lock and got lucky. The door swung open.

He spun and tried to open Jem's door. The key got stuck and snapped off in the lock from Richard's wild twist. "Oh, curse these bars!" Richard shouted, shaking the door.

I glanced at William and John. If that didn't wake them, nothing would.

It didn't wake them, and I forced my attention away from them. Richard was still fuming, cursing and kicking at the door. I laid my hands on his shoulders.

"Go take care of John and Will," I said, in as calm a voice I could muster. "I'll handle this."

Richard sighed and turned. Pushing me lightly out of the way, he dug in his bag and set to work.

I peered at the key and found, to my relief, that about two inches of the shaft still protruded from the lock. I turned the metal between my fingers and pulled it out, as if I were extracting a thorn.

I peered at the end of the key and wondered if he had even used the right one. Just because a key worked for John's cell didn't necessarily mean that it would work for Jem's.

I took a deep breath to keep myself calm. Panicking wouldn't help matters at all. The only thing it could do was hurt them.

Jailed Heart

I picked up the key again and carefully inserted it into the lock. I twisted slowly, and the lock groaned open. I sighed, and then realized I had been holding my breath. The suspense had escalated greatly in the last few minutes.

I turned. "Richard?"

He said nothing, just clamped a hand over John's forehead. "No fever," he said after a moment, "That's something."

"I... suppose."

"Yes. It is." He closed his eyes as he took John's pulse.

"What's... er... wrong with them?"

He was silent for a moment longer. "Will it destroy your trust in me if I tell you that... I have no idea?"

"No idea what's wrong? Not even a little one?"

"Well, it's not coughing. Nor a skin rash, neither." He scratched his head. "So those two are out."

"That... narrows it down."

"Vastly." He closed his eyes tight and rubbed his temples. "Give me the symptoms over again."

"Fit, unconsciousness, nausea, I suppose, and... dialated pupils."

"Is that all you know?"

"Yes. I think you might know more than me."

"Well, I don't." He sighed loudly. "And accordingly, I can't give you any better advice than you could give yourself."

"Oh." I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. "So, basically, more water? Tender care?"

"Yes. I really am sorry for this one." He stared at the ceiling. "I wish I knew what to do. If... if only I knew what to do."

I could feel the dam he had constructed in his mind begin to crack under the tsunami of emotions. I knew exactly what he was feeling like. I had the exact same feeling many a time.

He blinked rapidly and turned to me. "What about Simon? I probably won't be able to do anything for him, either, but on the off-chance..."

I led him into the back room. Simon looked worse than I had left him. Richard scowled, examined him, and turned to me.

"How much water have you given him?"

"Um..." I blanked for a moment. "About a glassful."

"Girl, he needs more than that. He needs a glassfull about every..." he pursed his lips, "Three hours. Three to four hours, night and day." He glanced at me. "Same goes for those poor wretches out there."

"Night and day?" I felt my eyes glaze over at the sleepless nights ahead.

"Girl, look..." Richard stopped and took me by the shoulders. "Kate, look at me."

Jailed Heart

At the sound of my name, I blinked and focused my eyes. “Yes?”

“You... You’re going to have to be strong, girl. Stronger than you’ve ever been. I can’t stay here all the time, and...” He looked right into my eyes. “Girl- I mean, Kate, you’re the only thing standing between these men and death.” Emotion choked his throat, and he could only grab my shoulders tighter. “Kate, don’t let them die. Don’t let them die.”

And then he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Richard's instructions went deep into me, and I served them to the best of my ability. But by the third day, I was beginning to wear. The monotony, broken only by visits from Richard, weighed on my mind. The same everlasting three hours looped over and over, only difference being the amount of light and noise coming from outside.

There was no time for walks now. It was all I could do to eat and sleep. That was the routine, wake up, go to the well (which, fortunately, was right outside in the marketplace), fill up a pitcher, trudge back inside the jail, water all of the men, tend to any bedclothes that needed changing, and fall back into bed, telling myself to wake up soon to do it all over again.

It was the afternoon of day four. I dragged myself from my bed and tottered outside to the well, rubbing at my eyes the whole time. How long had I slept last night? Three hours? Four hours? Well, it wasn't nearly enough.

I filled up the jug and stared inside it for a moment. Then I slowly climbed the stairs to my duties once more.

I didn't immediately sense something wrong when I walked into the back room. My senses had been dulled by sleep deprivation.

It was only when I finally reached the old man and stared down him that I knew. His face was paler than pale, and drained of all life, for, truly, all life had left it. I just stared, blank and void of any and all emotion and thought.

I slowly set the pitcher down and tucked in his sheets one last time. I did this mechanically, without thinking about it. I couldn't think about anything, My mind had been knocked completely unconscious, and, though my body still went through the motions of habit, I gave no heed to what my hands were doing.

I picked up the pitcher once more, and turned towards the door. One step, two steps sounded on the stone floor. My steps, my mind realized.

And then my mind awoke for just a moment, and the wooden pitcher slipped from my hands. Water sloshed over my feet and soaked my skirt. The now-empty pitcher bounced once and rolled around in a lazy circle before coming to a stop.

I had known death, but I had never tasted of it so distinctly as I did now. My sense sprang back to life, and I could smell death in the air, taste the bitter taste. The room swam, and I felt like fainting.

Richard had given me instructions to keep these men alive, and now one of them was dead. Dead under my care. My care. My fault.

And then my mind mercifully shut down again and I bent to retrieve the fallen pitcher. I couldn't think about this now. Not while I was in the room.

Jailed Heart

I slowly walked out of the back room and tottered into the jail. No one asked me what was wrong. No one could ask me what was wrong.

I laid the pitcher down next to a cell and stood up tall. I looked at John, then William, then Jem, and then down at my hands. My knees buckled and I sat down hard.

“Kate, Kate, whatever is the matter?”

I looked up through a blurry haze to see Anne standing over me. I blinked hard and stood. “Why, nothing at all,” I said.

“I don’t think you’re telling me the truth.” She reached down and pulled me to my feet.

“Well, perhaps not,” I said, running my sleeve over my eyes, “But it’s not something you would understand.” I marvelled at myself. I had slipped into third person again, and I could only watch the confrontation.

“Are you sure?” Anne asked, searching Kate’s face.

“Yes. But,” and then Kate grasped Anne’s shoulders, “Why are you here?”

“Lord Russell has returned,” Anne said gravely.

And then I was back to myself. “What?”

“And you know what that means.”

I knew all too well what it meant. It meant that William’s time was over, that time was up. There were no second chances.

She steadied me, somehow sensing that I was going to the floor. I took a deep breath and looked right at her.

“So he’s back. Is there a date set for the trial?”

“Trial?”

“Yes, William’s trial.”

She stared at me. “I... don’t know anything about a trial. What trial?”

I studied her. “Oh, then, forget I said anything. Why *are* you here?”

“Because... I don’t know. Maybe, now that the lord is here, you could tell him, or something...” She trailed off as she saw the look on my face.

“No, Anne,” I said softly, “I can’t go back. You know I can’t.”

“But, Kate!” Anne said, “We could live life again!”

“This *is* life, Anne. The real life, anyway.”

“Servitude and breaking your back is real life?” She held out her red, blistered hands.

“What? Anne, what happened?”

“They have me washing clothes,” she said with a choking sob.

I inspected her hands, once so soft. Then I held out my own. They were equally as red.

“Come back, Kate,” she said. “Please. For me, if for no one else.”

“Anne, come here,” I said. I led her to Jem’s cell and pulled the unlocked door open.

“What? Don’t you lock the doors here?”

“Look at the poor wretches, Anne. They’re sicker than a dog and haven’t moved, except to have a fit, in the last three days. They aren’t going anywhere.”

Jailed Heart

“Oh.” She eyed them, then timidly followed me.

We stood over Jem, and I picked up his pale, cold arm. “Do you see these scars, Anne?” I said, pointing to his wrists, where the chains had cut into him.

She squinted at them and then gasped. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

She glanced out of the corner of her eye at me.

“My point is simply the fact that these people need me,” I said, and then stopped. “They need me,” I said again, this time softer. When was the last time someone had needed me?

“No, they don’t. Someone else will come along, surely. And talk about needing someone? I need you, Kate.”

When I said nothing, just stared out the tiny, barred window, she sighed. “I see.”

And without another word she walked away.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I stood watching as Anne darted out the door. I wanted to call out after, ask her what had happened to our friendship, but I was rooted to the floor, only able to stare as my old companion ran away from me.

And then I looked at myself and realized that I looked an absolute mess. I couldn't see my face, but my hands and skirt were covered in dirt and grime. I eyed the wrinkles in my dress despairingly. They had been there since at least fleeing the castle, and nothing I did had made them any better.

I looked up once more, then looked at Jem, then John, then finally William. I shook my head, as if waking from a dream. I stared at my hands, then back at the room where I had left Simon. But it wasn't really Simon anymore. Simon was gone. Gone.

And then I crumpled to the ground. I felt like I was about to lose myself again, and this time there was no William to pull me up out of it.

I looked up from where I sat at William. A tremor ran up the side of his neck, and his cheek twitched.

I slowly stood, steadying myself a bit on the wall, and walked to William's cell. I looked down on the sick boy.

"Well," I said aloud to myself, "Simon's dead. And you're probably going to die from this awful sickness, too, William. And if that doesn't kill you, Lord Russell will finish the job for you." There was something satisfying about hearing the words aloud. I continued, seeing no reason to stop.

"So, there you have it, Will. I tried. Don't say I didn't try. Because I did." My voice became garbled. I coughed and turned away.

"So, there you have it, William Osmond," I said again, in a low voice. "There you have it, Katherine Elizabeth Grant. And that's the end of it."

I looked at Jem, then at John, then to the back room. "Jem, that's the end of it. You're insane and always will be. John, that's the end of it. You'll spend the rest of your days in a debtor's prison, parted from all that is dear to you. Simon..." my voice trailed off. "Simon, it's already ended for you."

My eyes suddenly filled with tears, and I turned back to William. "That's the end of it," I said again. "I know I wished that it wasn't, and perhaps... perhaps you wished this story could end differently too. But... but it's not. You're going to die."

I choked. "And I can't do a thing about it."

I laid my head on the bars and had my darkest moment. I couldn't even speak it, but my whole body trembled with the sheer intensity of emotion I battled. For once, I didn't try to hold them back or control them in any way. I just tried to survive their onslaught.

Jailed Heart

I don't know how long I stayed there, trying desperately not to suffocate, not to drown. But I know that when I looked up, it was almost dark.

I looked at William, then at Jem, John, the room where Simon lay, and then finally back to William. "You," I said slowly, "Are going to die." I worked my jaw, thinking hard. "And I can do nothing to stop it. But..." And then I stood up straight, "That will not kill me. I will survive. My identity is not wrapped up in you, William Osmond. I love you, but I am letting you go."

Tears stung my eyes through the entirety of my resignation, but I turned away. "I'm going for Richard now," I told them all, as though they could hear me. Which of course they couldn't. "I'll be back soon."

I turned and walked slowly out of the jail. And somehow, I managed to breathe.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Simon's funeral was simple and small. He died as he had lived- friend to everyone, enemie of no one. Everyone mourned him to a degree, but life went on.

Richard stood next to me, and, seeing the tears streaming down my face, he awkwardly put his arm around my shoulders. "There, there, girl," he said, smiling out of the corner of his mouth. "It'll be alright."

Somehow, as I looked down at the coffin, as shovelful after shovelful of dirt fell on top, I knew that it would be alright. I couldn't think of how it could possibly be alright, but I knew that it would all come out fine. Eventually.

"I know, I just..." I trailed off as I spotted the Overseer appear our of the dispersing crowd. I ran to her and buried my face on her shoulder.

"Why, Kate!" she siad, very obviously surprised by my outburst.

"He's gone, he's gone," I said, my voice muffled into her shoulder. And then I stiffened and cast a glance over my shoulder. Richard stood staring after me, though not *at* me. No, he was occupied with someone else.

And then my brain lit up with an idea, and I smiled wide despite my tears.

"Uh... Kate, dear, I think that I have to..." the Overseer began.

"Oh, no, no, no, my good Overseer," I said, grasping her hand and pulling her a step or two forward.

"Kate, what are you doing?" she asked, stopping.

"I at least want someone's story to have a happy ending," I said, pulling hre another step.

"Dear, what are you..." And then she looked up. Her eyes met Richard's and she stopped resisting for a few moments. In those few moments, I was able to move her half the distance to Richard, who stood frozen. Then she bestirred herself. "No, no, dear, I can't..."

"You rave about him all the live-long day, and yet you won't go up and talk to him." I tugged on her sleeve again. "Is that any way for a romance to develop?" I glanced back at Richard. He hesitated a moment, and then made a stride towards us. "*That's it, Richard, just keep coming.*" He did, taking another step, and then another, and the Overseer tried to pull away.

"Kate, you're... that's.... He- he doesn't care about me anymore! He never cared in the first place! He... married someone else."

Richard was close enough to hear this, and, looking over at him, his step increased. He was upon us in a moment. Rather, upon her. I didn't even factor in his vision. He had eyes only for one, the one.

They just stared at each other for a moment. Richard was the first to speak.

"Is that what you've thought of me all this time?" His voice wasn't soft, which suprised me. It was rough and a little bit angry. "Is that what you thought?"

Jailed Heart

The Overseer's eyes flashed and she raised her chin. "Yes."

"You thought... you thought I don't care?" Now his voice was slowly sinking into surprise. Apparently this is not what he had expected.

"Why, I thought you cared. Apparently, though, a few moonlit nights and a few compliments and a few promises don't mean much to you. Of course, I was wrong. You didn't care- about me, anyway. No doubt you cared very much about Phillipia." Her voice had only anger in it, none of the love that I had heard before. I wondered if I had made a mistake in bringing them both together.

Richard stared at her. "Didn't you get my letter?"

"Letter?" she stared at him. "What letter?"

"Oh, I never should have trusted him to give it to you," Richard said, smacking his forehead.

"A letter?" the Overseer asked, confused. "Why would you send me a letter when we live less than a mile apart?"

"Because I didn't trust myself to say it- not in front of those eyes." I bit back a grin. The Overseer blushed. Richard didn't smile, though, he closed his eyes and clenched his fist. "That explains so much," he said, as if to himself, "You don't know! You never knew any of it! No wonder! You think I just up and left you, and just married some other girl! You... you don't know all that happened!" He opened his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. "I am so sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

Richard glanced around. There were more than a few people curiously watching the confrontation. "Not here," he said, "There's too much... personal pain... in the story I have to tell you."

"What?" The Overseer looked like she could be knocked over with a feather.

"Just... just... oh, not at my house. Not at the castle... ah..."

"I know," I interjected. It was obvious, at least to me, that I had not gone wrong. "The jail. Everyone there is... Non-factoring, and the whole back room is open for private discussion."

Richard stared at me, as if seeing me for the first time, and then nodded. "I suppose that works." He turned back to the Overseer. "So, Martha..."

"I'll come." She had shaken off her surprise. "When do you want me there?"

"Not tonight... night after tonight?"

"Why not tonight?"

"I need to get a few things ready," he said, smiling lightly. "A lot makes sense now, and I need time to peice it all together."

"A-alright." Her eyes fluttered to the ground. "May I go now?"

"If you want."

She obviously wanted, for, after one slow step backwards, she turned and strode away.

Jailed Heart

Richard turned to me, looked me over once, and then caught me up in an embrace. I made a grunt of surprise, and he let me go. I stumbled back, looking at him incredulously. "Where did that come from?"

"I'm sorry, Kate, it's just that..." He stared off after the Overseer with a gleam in his eye. "The last forty years make sense now. And all thanks to you and your meddling ways."

"Sir, I have no idea what you are talking about."

He chuckled. "It follows." Suddenly he frowned and looked at me. "But I need to know the truth. Martha's a good actor. Also, when you add in the fact that she didn't get my letter..." He shook his head and looked at me. "Tell me. You know Martha these days better than I do. Did she ever..." he hesitated, "Talk about me?"

I laughed. "Sir, I had to distract her attention to anything other than you. It got wearisome."

He laughed with me, but then sobered again. "Now, tell me. I must know."

"Yes?"

He closed his eyes and let his breath out in a long stream. "Do you think that... that she..."

"Still loves you?"

"No, no. That would be too much to ask. I want to know... would it be remotely possible... to make her love me again."

I giggled, picturing the way the Overseer had said his name. "Very possible, sir."

"Wonderful." He laughed. "Tomorrow night, we shall set the record straight!"

Chapter Thirty-Five

I returned to the jail, sad over Simon, yes, but now I was convinced that life would go on. Life, I had a feeling, would always go on. It had went on after Mother and Father died. It went on after Simon died. It would go on after Will died, however impossible that may look.

Besides, there was the matter of Richard and the Overseer to look forward to. It had been a risk, but one that turned out better than I could have guessed. And maybe, just maybe.... I giggled in spite of myself as I opened the door.

“What’s so funny?” the voice was weak, but unmistakable. I spun to face William.

“Oh, you’re awake!” I said, opening the door to his cell and hurrying to look him over.

“Have I been asleep?” He rubbed his forehead.

“Yes, for about the last few days.” I laid a hand on his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Alright, I guess.” He tried to sit up, but only succeeded in levering up on his elbows. He fell back. “Never mind, I’m not.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just can’t move... really. At all.”

“Paralyzed?”

“No, just... weak.”

“Well, you need to just get some rest,” I said, patting his shoulder.

“Isn’t...” he stopped to take a breath, “Isn’t that what I’ve been doing for the last few days?”

I thought back to the way he had thrashed when the fits took a hold of him. “You’ve been unconscious, yes, but I don’t think ‘resting’ is the word for it.”

He studied my face. “Is everything alright, Kate?”

“No, it’s not,” I said, turning away.

He groaned. “What is it?”

“Well...” I debated telling him of Lord Russell’s return. I didn’t want to put undue stress upon the boy, what with him already being sick. “Simon... well, Simon passed on,” I said slowly.

“Oh... that’s... that’s awful.”

“Just this morning, I believe. Apparently the undertaker had expected it for some time and already had the coffin prepared. We buried him this afternoon. I just came from the funeral.”

There was silence for a moment. “Is that all?”

“All?” I was trying to stall.

“Yes. Is that all?”

He knew something was up. Something about me gave it away. I sighed and turned slowly to him.

“Lord Russell is back.”

Jailed Heart

He didn't understand for a moment, and then he did. He threw an arm over his eyes and was silent for a moment. I turned away and slowly walked to the door.

"Kate?" he said.

I turned. "Yes?"

"Don't talk about this to me. I want to live these last few days of my life without thinking about it."

His words cut to my heart. "Alright, Will." I walked out and shut the door behind me. "I suppose, because you're awake now, I have to lock you in again."

"Yes. You wouldn't want me escaping, would you?"

"For your sake, yes. For my sake, no." I took the keys off the wall and locked the cell up tight. "Now, let's see if the rest of you people are up."

"Yes, we're up," John said, not moving. "Lock the door. You don't want a dangerous debtor like me running about."

"No, we don't." I fumbled with the keys. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit in the head with a sack of potatoes."

I frowned. "I feel like you just mixed a metaphor in an awful way."

"Oh, for pity's sake!" John groaned.

"Oh, don't mind my jabberings," I said, locking the door. "The only thing they are is trouble. But you're feeling better, yes?"

"YES... I suppose. How long have I been out for, again? Two days... three days..."

"I think the last recorded count is three days, maybe three days and a half." I shook the door to make sure it was locked. "Time ceased to have any meaning there for a while."

"What?" William asked, raising his head.

"Never mind," I said, "I'm just glad you're awake." I looked over my shoulder. "Jem, please tell me you're awake."

"I am," he said, "Though I'd rather that I was still asleep."

"Not feeling very good, eh?"

"Not at all." He turned over with great effort. "So. did I hear right about... er, Simon?"

I nodded.

"Well, it was better for him," Jem said, "It was nothing but misery here. Heaven will be good to him, I'm sure."

"Yes." I looked over the three, all awake and groaning, and smiled sadly. "You poor things. Whatever germ you have looks pretty awful."

"D'ya think you caught it?" Will asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. But..." I shrugged. "We may never know until I'm actually sick."

"Well, if you do get sick, Miss Kate," John said, "We will take of you just like you took care of us."

Jailed Heart

I looked at him and smiled. He was almost like a little boy in the way his simple promise was delivered with the upmost sincerity and gravity.

I walked to the front of his cell and laid a hand on the crossbar. “Thank you, John. I appreciate that.” I took a deep, quick breath, squared my skirts around me, and strode to the door in the back of the jail. I had to get Simon’s old room cleaned out. Wouldn’t do to have all that sickly air hovering in there. Besides, it was going to be used for a rendezvous tomorrow night. I briefly entertained the idea of decking out the place with flowers, to further my romantic designs, but I discarded the notion. It was going to be hard enough just to get the place livable.

I pulled my handkerchief out of my apron pocket and tied it over my nose and mouth.

Chapter Thirty-Six

But the handkerchief didn't end up being used for blocking the dust out of my mouth. Instead, it was used to wipe tears away from my face until it was saturated with salty wetness.

But Simon's room did get cleaned out, tears or no tears, and when I collapsed into bed, I was Achy without the Good and my eyes hurt from crying so much. But I looked forward to the morrow when I thought about the Overseer and Richard. But, with tomorrow coming... it could easily be the last day William had to live. These thoughts spun round and round my head until I finally fell asleep.

The next day passed slowly and uneventfully. William brooded in his cell, but he did seem somewhat better than the day before. They all were strong enough to sit up today, and they all seemed healthier, if not very happy.

Dusk slowly marched over the sky, and now there was a knock at the door. I slowly opened the door and smiled at Richard. "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, Kate," Richard said, uncommonly cordial. "Is... ah..." he looked from side to side, as if afraid someone would hear. "Is Martha here?" he said in a low whisper.

I opened the door wider. "No, she's not. Come on in."

He stepped in and smiled wide at the three prisoners. "Well, well! I see you're feeling better. Boys!"

Will nodded silently, and John smiled. But none said anything.

Richard paused and looked them over. "Well, that's good." He turned to me. "Kate, could I talk to you?"

"Um... sure, I... suppose. You mean, in private?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Back room. I cleaned it out just yesterday."

He smiled sadly. "We'll all miss Simon, but I'm glad you're working through it."

"I didn't know him as well as anyone else, and I'm still grieving him."

Richard ushered me into the back room, and I sat down on a chair in the corner. Richard stared at the little table I had set up, complete with a vase of roses in the center. He raised his eyes to me. "You..."

"I know. I couldn't get a minstrel to serenade you on such short notice, but... " I shrugged, "I supposed this would have to do."

Richard's eyes clouded over. "If only I still had my lute. I could serenade her myself."

I frowned. "What?"

He motioned across the table. "Sit down, Kate. I want to tell you the story first- for practice. Also, I think you deserve to know."

I obligingly took a seat. Richard took a deep breath.

Jailed Heart

“Now, all this happened back when Martha and I were both young. Your age.”

I tried to picture Richard and the Overseer young. I stifled a giggle.

Richard watched me and shook his head. “Yes, we were young once, impossible as it may seem.”

“I believe you, sir.”

“Good. There’s going to be a lot of things that push the limits of the believable in this story, but it is true. All of it.”

I nodded.

“When I was young, I met a enchanting girl named Martha.” He closed his eyes and smiled. “She was poor, yes, not a penny to her name. No one knew where she came from and what she might have done.

“I, myself, was a bit different then. I was not the wise man you see before you now. I was wild. Wilder than anyone I’ve ever seen since.”

“Wild?”

“As in, I wanted out of this stupid village, wanted to go and roam the world, see what I could see. I wanted to be an adventurer. But only on the inside. On the outside, I was as good as anyone else.”

I nodded slowly. Equating these two very different ideas of Richard, the old wise man that sat in front of me, to the rebellious boy he must have been.

“So, I met Martha,” he said, laying out an invisible timeline on the table, “And she taught me to read. And I fell hopelessly in love with her.”

“Aw!” I said, without thinking about it. At last, true confirmation. Richard *did* love the Overseer!

“Yes. Aw.” He cleared his throat. “But then... my father got involved.

“When I told him that I was in love with Martha and intended to marry her, he just smiled at me and told me, easy as you please, that he had just worked out a marriage for me, and that I couldn’t possibly marry Martha.”

He leaned forward in his intensity. “Kate, he told me he would disown me and worse if I didn’t go along. Kate, I could have been killed. Do you know how it feels to have your father, the person who was supposed to be your protector and guide, literally force you into a marriage with some girl you’ve never met, and threaten you with a noose and axe? And loving someone else the whole time?”

He shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “Anyway, I was married to Alyson in a week. Didn’t help either of us- she didn’t want to marry me any more than I wanted to marry her. But Father got a pretty penny out of the deal.”

“That’s...” I couldn’t go on.

He waved his hand. “Father’s dead now. He was a good man in some respects, and definitely a smart one. Don’t think too ill of him.

Jailed Heart

“The night before the wedding, I managed to write a letter to Martha, explaining the whole thing. I knew she would understand. Apparently, the letter never reached her, and so, when I marched down the aisle with my new bride...” he shook his head, “no wonder she’s hated me all these years.”

“But she hasn’t hated you,” I burst out, “I’ve seen her! She doesn’t hate you!”

Richard raised weary eyes to my face. “Maybe. Maybe so.” I could tell he didn’t believe me. He shifted in his chair. “I suppose I’ll tell you the rest of the story. Alyson and I had one child, a daughter. I loved her, and I tried to love Alyson, too. She knew where my love was placed, and she didn’t grudge me it. She knew I took good care of her, and I would do my duty to the utmost. It... it was like a business partnership, almost. I really was sad when she was carried off by the cough. Little girl died too.” He lowered his head, and I patted his shoulder.

He took a deep breath. “And so that brings me to today.”

“Do you still love her?”

“Martha?” He chuckled drily. “Girl, if I stopped loving her, I was never really in love in the first place.”

“Funny, she said something just about the same. About you.”

“What?” his eyes flashed.

I nodded and rose. “I believe she’ll be here soon,” I said, glancing out the window. It was fully dusk now. “Let me just make some final preparations, and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Final preparations?”

I walked to the corner, fumbled around in a trunk for a minute, and emerged triumphant with a burning candle. I set it on the table and checked to see how the moonlight fell through the window.

Richard watched all these preparations with a raised eyebrow. I smiled at him. “Just setting the mood, dear sir.”

He waved his hand at me. “Out, you!”

I danced out of the room, giggling in spite of myself.

The Overseer had just stepped through the jail’s front door. She exchanged her usual friendly greetings with the prisoners, and then saw me.

“Is... is he here?” she asked.

I smiled and nodded. “In the back room.”

She sighed and ran a hand over her face. “Oh, this was a bad idea.”

“Not at all,” I said, taking her arm and walking her to the back. “It’s the best idea I’ve had in a long time.” I practically pushed her into the room and shut the door behind her.

“Well,” John said slowly, “May I assume you’ve had a hand in all this, Miss Kate?”

“Oh, bigger than you know,” I said, sinking down to the floor.

“Please don’t tell me you’re turning matchmaker on us all.”

“Far too late, Johnny. I’ve turned long ago.”

I expected an sarcastic reply from John, but he remained silent.

Jailed Heart

William raised his voice. "I, for one, am glad. If you're going to be a matchmaker, Kate, let's hope all your couple turn out as good as that one."

I blushed but smiled. "I'm just glad you're cheering for it."

"I am," Will said, "Richard deserves the best life has to offer. Alyson was... so, so wrong."

"Elle was nice, though," John said blandly, staring off into the past.

I at once saw between his words and groaned for poor John.

"Yes," was all William said. The jail lapsed into silence. The only noise was the muffled voices of the Overseer and William from behind the door.

I sensed something different in the conversation and tone. "Did... something happen while I was in the back?"

John sighed. "As a matter of fact, something did." From the tone of his voice I gathered that it wasn't a good thing.

"Can you tell me?"

Will shifted in his cell. John stared at the ceiling. Jem, who had been silent all this time, finally raised his voice. "The messenger came," he said, "Will's trial is tomorrow evening."

"Oh," I said, and stood up. I would not take this news passively. "I'm... I'm sorry."

"I know you are," William said. "I..." he trailed off and said nothing.

It was silent for a good five minutes. And then Jem stirred.

"William?" he said, and there was a tone in his voice that was different. "I guess... that now would be a good time... to say what I must."

"What?" William looked up. I saw that his eyes were red, and I pitied him. The poor boy must be in the deepest darkest dungeon of despair. I would be.

"Well..." Jem fidgeted for a moment, then looked right at William. "I'm sorry. Sorry for how awful I've been to you. Ever since... Ever since the talk we had that one night, I've been sorry. I've just..." he hung his head. "Just been too proud to say it. Will you... will you forgive me? Please forgive me. After all, I don't.. I don't want this hanging over my head for the rest of my life."

William was silent. "Alright. I forgive you," he said at last, quietly and calmly.

"Thank you." Jem was silent for a moment. "John, I... I suppose I have something to say to you too."

"Apology taken and a similar one extended."

"You are forgiven. Not... not *entirely*, of course. Father... Father will never forgive you..."

"You said you would never forgive me, either, and look at you now."

Jem laughed. "True, true."

John's voice sobered. "But I really am ready to come back. I'm tired of this life."

Jem said nothing, and said nothing more for the rest of the night, not even when the Overseer and Richard, emerging from the backroom, parted at the jail door with a handshake and an 'I love you.'. They both thanked me fervently for bringing them back together. Everyone, even John the Cynic, couldn't deny that something had been rekindled.

Jailed Heart

And I'll admit, I felt rather happy, despite the looming, black morrow.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The black morrow turned out to be a very bright day, unseasonably cool for the season, and as breezy and beautiful as you please. For everyone who wasn't slated to die that day.

Will did make a valiant effort to push through it, despite the obvious anticipation of the town. I couldn't even go to the well, a hundred paces from the door, without hearing someone talking about Lord Russell and the trial. It was incredible to me to find out just how hated the name "Osmond" really was. I was glad I had never met Osmond Senior. He had ruined his son's reputation, and brought him to the scaffold.

I tried not to think about it. But it was nigh impossible. The jail was deathly silent most of the time, except when we all made a conscious effort to speak. And I when I thought of how hard this endless waiting was on me, I then thought of how much more it must oppress Will. He mostly just sat in the corner of his cell, head on his knees.

I tried not to think about it. I tried to be busy, almost acting like nothing was happening. But it was a lie. We all knew that it was a lie. We knew because here we were, trapped in the very middle of it.

The day went on. It seemed stuck between endless, long, drawn-out waiting, and sickening speed. It felt like both. It was the worst of both worlds.

I had already decided I couldn't go to his trial. I felt like I would attack the judge or something. I would just stay in the jail and weep silently in the back room.

Time ticked by, and then the door to the jail opened, ever-so-slowly. I slowly lookde up from the floor I was scrubbing. A man with a rope in his hand stood there- behinde him I could see a group of people, all grinning madly and chatting. The man looked at me.

"I need the keys," he said.

I glanced up at the hook where the keys hung and briefly fantizied about grabbing them and running as fast as I could. Then they couldn't get the cell open to kill him.

But that was a crazy thought. For William to stay here constantly was worse than death- it was a living death. Besides, they'd probably just shoot him through the bars or something.

I slowly stood and even more slowly handed the keys to the man. He selected what he thought was the right one, but after three failed attempts, he handed them to me with an oath. I stalled for as long as I could, messing up on purpose twice before finally getting the right one.

The door swung open, and I stared at Will for a moment. He was staring up at the man.

I walked to him and helped him to his feet. His legs trembled. He was still weak.

The man uncoiled the end of the rope and stepped towards us.

And then the reality of it all really, finally hit me. This was going to be the last time I saw William in the flesh. I could do nothing to stop it, either.

Jailed Heart

The rope snaked around William's wrists and I felt like they were being tied around my own neck. I looked away, and my eyes caught Will's.

He stared down at me, with a sad look in his eyes. I was still helping support him, unsure of his capability to walk. We said nothing- how could we say anything?

The man knotted the rope tightly. "That's it," he said, and prodded Will in the back with a thick finger. "Let's go."

And William was being pushed forward, away from me. He looked back at me one last time.

"I love you," I said in a low voice, before I even knew what I was saying. It was so low that the man didn't hear it. But William saw the words on my lips, and his eyes went wide. His mouth opened once, twice, with no sound coming out. When he regained his voice, precious seconds had passed, and he was already outside the door. "Kate, I-" he managed to squeak out, and then the door shut very firmly in my face. I heard the crowd grow noisy at the sight of their enemy, and I could hear no more. I slowly walked to the window and watched as the crowd- it looked like the whole of Hilltop had shown up for the occasion- swallowed up William. His face flashed above the crowd's head once, and then it disappeared.

The world began to swim with tears as they disappeared into the town. I felt my knees begin to buckle.

And then I blinked and squinted out at the marketplace. It was mostly empty now, except for one figure on the far side. It was Gyp. But that wasn't what grabbed my attention. It was the fact that she was alone. The other two members of the Three Girls were nowhere to be seen.

She glanced at the jail, and I instinctively ducked out of sight. I slowly moved to peer out the keyhole.

"Kate, what are you-" John began, but I silenced him with a raised finger and a glare.

I set my eye to the keyhole and watched. Gyp was obviously waiting for someone. Who? Who could it possibly be? And then I realized that I *still* didn't know anybody in this town.

But I didn't have to wait very long to find out. And when I saw, my eyes popped out of my head in surprise.

Mary, dressed in a drab outfit totally unlike her usual prints, came hurrying out of the alley. Gyp accosted her angrily, it appeared, but Mary just laughed and laid a hand on her shoulder. She spoke a few words, and Gyp calmed and nodded. Mary cast another glance around, then laughed. They both hurried from the marketplace.

I leapt up and ran to my cell. Something was going on here, and I wanted to find out.

John stood up. "Really, Kate, what on earth are you..."

"Going for a walk," I said, pulling a light shawl out of my bag and draping it over my shoulders. "Won't be gone long."

"Kate, a storm's blowing up out there," John said, glancing out the window.

"I said I won't be gone long," I told him, opening the door to a burst of almost cold air. I peered out and saw that, indeed, there were menacing clouds to the east. But this was more important than staying dry.

Jailed Heart

“Kate, wait!” John called after me.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

But I didn't wait at all. I trailed Mary and Gyp the whole way out of the village, through the hills, and all the way to the woods. I didn't follow the road, but instead skirted it, hiding behind trees, houses, wagons, anything. They weren't looking for me, of course, which made it easier to go unnoticed. But they did seem very uneasy, always looking behind them. As soon as they could, they left the road and cut through the grass. Whatever they could possibly be doing was beyond me, but I felt that they were up to no good.

Following them through the wood proved to be tougher than trailing them through the grasses. I stepped carefully, trying to break as few twigs as possible and remain hidden. It had gotten even colder, and I pulled my shawl around me.

I slowly looked around the tree I was hiding behind and saw the light of a fire coming from between the trees. Mary saw it at the same time I did, and she let out an exasperated sigh.

"Oh, surely you jest," she growled under her breath, and picked up her skirts to run. Gyp followed her, and I followed both of them, more slowly than either. They led me to a little clearing in the woods. The other two of the Three Girls sat on logs near the fire. I wormed my way behind a bush and peered out through the leaves.

Mary walked into the clearing and stared at the fire, then at the two girls. "You fools," she said, "Do you want to bring the whole of Hilltop here?"

"It's cold, Mary," one of the Girls whined.

"So it is. You should have bundled up more," Mary replied, stomping on the pitiful remains of the fire. "Now, Gyp," she said, sitting down on a log and angling her metal gaze at Gyp, "Why did you bring us here?"

"We should have talked earlier," Gyp said, "But you were busy with that other girl."

I drew in my breath slowly. They were talking about me.

"I was gathering valuable information, friend."

"Well, that's why we're here. We were all for getting back at William by locking him up a bit- serves him right- but all of a sudden I hear that he's about to be hung?" Gyp shook her head. "Haughty and stuck-up he may be, but he's no criminal."

"Why, Mary?" one of the other Girls asked. They all rested their chins in their hands and looked expectantly at Mary.

Mary looked them all over. "Why, justice, of course. William's whole family deserves it."

My brain spun. Mary... she had planned all this. She wasn't Will's friend. She wanted Will to hang!

"But William *didn't do it*," Gyp said, "We did."

"Oh, William is by no means innocent," Mary insisted.

"What did he do?"

Jailed Heart

“Why, besides being a calloused brute?” Mary asked.

Gyp leaped up. “Don’t tell me, Mary Warren, that we’ve helped you send a man to the gallows for just some petty revenge,” she half-shouted.

“What?” Mary said, “You got your pay. You don’t like him anymore than I do.”

“You mean that he’s going to die for something he didn’t do? What will the judges say?”

“Well, believe me, I never intended for him to get this far along,” Mary said, “If he hadn’t been so ridiculously generous. He didn’t actually eat enough of it to make a difference, only get him ill.”

“*She poisoned him!*” I thought, and my hands suddenly felt dry. What type of monster was this, this monster impersonating the fairy?

Apparently the Three Girls thought the same thing. They all stood, clenching their fists.

“Girls, girls, calm down!” Mary said, waving them down.

“No. We are going to Lord Russell right now and telling him everything.”

Mary laughed. “As if anyone would believe you. After all the times you’ve cried wolf.”

I had heard enough. But I couldn’t just slip away without any proof. And there was no chance I could find this place again. But there was only one of me and three of them. But...

As I was debating this, the clouds broke loose. Any struggling embers in the fire were immediately doused. It was better here, under the bushes, but out in the clearing, they were all drenched. They all ran for the shelter of the woods. They ran towards the bush where I was hiding.

There was no time for me to run. Before I knew it, they were all staring at me. I scrambled to my feet, and could only stand there.

Mary smiled. “Why, Kate! Fancy meeting you here.”

I ran.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Three Girls didn’t follow me. They ran for their lives in the other direction.

Mary, however, did follow me. I glanced back during the snatches of lightning, and there she was, making her smooth way towards me. *How does she move so fast?*

It didn’t take long for her to catch me. She knew the ground. She pinned me against a tree and searched my face.

“How much did you hear?” she asked.

“All of it,” I said, trying to keep my voice even and my chin raised. I would not cower.

“How much did you understand?”

“Most of it.”

Jailed Heart

“Oh, oh, oh, dear,” she said, reaching for her belt. I made a wild struggle to get free, but she held me fast with only one arm. She was stronger than she looked.

She smiled at me again just as the lightning flashed, and her teeth shone. “No, Kate. You aren’t going anywhere.”

I heard the unmistakable sound of a knife being drawn, and I cringed in fear. She noticed and laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” she said, “This is a castle knife. Out of all the people at the castle, I’m the last person they’d suspect.”

“It wasn’t you I was worried about,” I mumbled.

“Oh, don’t worry. I know how to kill painlessly.”

Another flash, and I saw that she had a sharp blade angled at my throat. I wiggled furiously, trying to get away. “Help!” I called, “HELP!”

“Oh, stop, someone will hear you!” She was liking this, and I shuddered.

“That was the general idea,” I said, “Help!”

Then Mary squealed as a hand darted out and grabbed her wrist, knocking the knife from her grasp.

“You.” I recognized Richard’s rich voice, and I about laughed from relief. Richard was here! I didn’t know why or how, but I sunk to the ground and thanked God.

“You,” Richard said again, “I always knew something was up with you. Now I know for sure.” He grabbed her free wrist.

Mary struggled for a moment, and then stopped. “Alright,” she said, “Lesson learned. Kill people at once. Don’t gloat.”

Richard scowled and knocked her head against a tree. She slumped, knocked cold.

“Don’t worry, Kate. She’ll be alright.” He laid her on the ground and produced a bit of rope. While he was tying her hands, he looked up. “Are you alright?”

“I... I... what are you doing here?” I was hopelessly confused. “Why are you here?”

“Well, looking for you, among other things.” He secured the rope’s knot and stood. He pulled me to my feet. “Com’on, we’ve got to hurry. Explanations can wait until after Will is safe.”

“Mary did it,” I blurted.

“I know,” Richard said, scooping Mary up into his arms. “I heard it all. Now, hurry!”

And we did hurry. We ran, and the distance back was longer than I had remembered. Richard led me by the hand, pulling me up out of the mud when I fell. We were soaked as we ran across the hills, but I didn’t even feel the water or the wind.

But, I tell you, we must have looked an absolute sight when we burst into the room where Will’s trial was being held. It was small, but crammed to the brim with people. Richard bowled over a person standing in front of the door as he burst in, and I paused to help the poor, startled man up. Meanwhile, Richard pushed through the crowd, calling to make way.

Jailed Heart

A man dressed in fine robes stood up. "What is this? What is this?" he bellowed. *This* must be Lord Russell, fresh from the Crusade. Next to him sat Lady Russell, with ladies in waiting behind her.

"This, lord," Richard said, dumping the now fully-awake Mary on the floor, "Is justice!"

"What are you talking about, Richard?" said Becket angrily. He was standing next to Lord Russell. "This *is* justice!" He didn't even mention Mary.

Richard looked glorious, standing there with the rainwater streaming down his face and his shirt clinging to him. "I have evidence," he said, "that William Osmond didn't steal Timothy Garth's sheep. I have witnesses that say Mary Warren," and he pushed her forward a step, "Actually stole it and framed him."

"Who are these witnesses?" Lord Russell asked, sitting back down. He motioned for Becket to sit, as well, though Becket was shaking with anger.

"One, myself. Two..." he cast a glance back at me. I nodded and strode to the front of the room. It was now or never. A servant girl would never have the influence that an heiress would.

"Two," I said, fishing in my satchel. "Katherine Elizabeth Grant, Heiress of Grant Manor." I held up my signet ring."

And the room fell silent as the sapphire glinted in the light. I looked around the room. Mary's face had fallen into complete shock. Lord Russell studied me from head to toe. I also looked for William. There he was, staring at me as if he had never seen me before.

Becket jumped up. "You lie!" he shouted. "We have heard of the demise of Lord and Lady Grant."

"Did you ever hear of the demise of their daughter?" I shot back. "I fled the castle disguised and came here to seek rest."

"That is true," someone said from behind the Lord and Lady, and Anne stepped out. "I was there. I fled with her. I second all that she says."

Lord Russell glanced at his wife. The Lady looked at Anne, and then at me, and then stood. "If what you say is true, then you and I are cousins."

"Yes, my Lady," I said.

Lady Russell sat back down. "I have not found any guile in Anne, my lord," she said to Lord Russell. "I believe her."

Lord Russell silenced Becket with a glare, and looked closer at me. "Well then, my Lady, tell us what you have learned."

Slowly I recounted what I had heard in the woods, and how Mary had tried to kill me. Richard told his story, which closely lined up with mine. Lord Russell listened to all these, and had to keep glaring at Becket to keep him from bursting out with rage. I don't even think he was all that concerned for his daughter. I think he just wanted William to die and hated the fact that we were trying to save him.

Jailed Heart

I kept glancing at William out of the corner of my eye despite myself. He had no such scruples. He just kept staring at me, studying me in a whole new light. I would always glance away quickly, but in a minute my eye would wander over to him once more.

When Richard finished his witness, Lord Russell slowly nodded. "Alright, alright." He then looked hard at Mary. "You."

"Yes, my Lord?" She sounded so respectful.

"You are accused of come very serious things. Are they true?"

Mary's brain, no doubt, had been going at top speed, and she answered readily. "Yes."

Will stopped staring at me and stared at her.

Lord Russell pursed his lips. "All of it?"

"Yes."

"William Osmond did not steal the sheep in question?"

"No sir. I did."

The room's noise volume had swelled hugely by now, and Lord Russell waved the noise down. "In that case," he said firmly, "William will *not* be hanged, as he has done nothing wrong. Thank you, Richard, for sparing us this innocent blood. Let the boy go."

Richard was the closest to tears I'd ever seen him as he bowed and thanked Lord Russell. Tears, no doubt, born of relief. I felt them going down my cheeks, too, and I wiped them away with my sleeve. The guard holding William cut his bonds, albeit grudgingly.

"But," Richard said, recovering himself, "We have yet to deal with this fiend," and he pushed Mary forwards.

"Yes... yes..." Lord Russell said, and he squinted at Mary. "Listen."

"Yes, my lord?"

"We were about to kill a man for stealing a sheep. You, by your own admission, stole that very sheep, framed William just to try to kill him, and then tried to poison him. Young lady, I'm afraid that you will meet the same fate."

"I can't," she said, smiling wide.

"Why not?"

"Why, I'm pregnant," she said, placing a hand on her stomach.

This was a lie. I knew it, she knew it, and everyone else knew it. She had thought all this out, and now had played every last trick she had.

Lord Russell looked to Becket, who shrugged. "She should still be killed," Becket said. Mary started. She had obviously had expected a defense from her stepfather. "but," Becket continued, "As the matter stands, we will have to wait until the baby is delivered. And then we will kill her." He directed a furious glare at Mary, who stood rigid.

"And that's final," Lord Russell said, standing. "I have tired off all this drama. Out! Out!"

The room, shocked, slowly obeyed. I was happy, but the shock and stress of it all got to me. I felt lightheaded, but a hand around my shoulders steadied me. I looked up into the Overseer's face.

Jailed Heart

“Well done, Kate,” she said, pulling a strand of hair off my forehead. “Well done.”

I leaned into her. “I’m tired.”

“This way. You’ve just had a knife at your throat and changed a verdict, not to mention brought out to the world your true identity. No wonder you’re tired! A half-an-hour of rest will do you nicely.”

She led me into her chamber and laid me on a couch. I curled up and dozed.

When I came back out, the rain had stopped, and the crowd had dispersed. A few people still stood around, talking over the strange trial.

I walked along the wall, looking around for a familiar face. But I was stopped by two familiar voices.

“Really?” It was William.

“Yes, I... I need her, Will.” Richard’s voice, unmistakably. They were right around the corner of the wall. I stood still and listened.

“Well then, go and have her!” Will laughed. “Why would I have any objection to a marriage?”

Richard chuckled. “I... I don’t know. I just thought you might.”

There was a pause, and then Richard continued. “Well then, what next?”

Will wasn’t swift in response, and, when he did speak, his words were slow. “Richard, this has shown me how deep the hate of the name ‘Osmond’ is a part of these people. I can’t stay here.”

At this, I froze. So, this is how it was going to end. With him just leaving Hilltop. And me.

Richard was silent for a moment. “Where do you have in mind?”

“Probably to some northern village. Someplace where Father hasn’t ruined everything.”

“We’ll miss you.”

“I know. I’ll... I’ll miss everything here, too. Miss everyone here.”

I could hear no more. I ran, barely seeing where I was going through the unbidden tears.

“Kate!” Will called out after me. “Kate, stop!”

But I didn’t stop. I didn’t stop until I found myself alone in the hills, and then I collapsed to my knees in the still-wet grass.

Chapter Forty

I had just began to quell my sobs when I heard heavy breathing behind me. I spun, and looked up into William's face.

"There you are," he breathed, and fell- literally fell- onto the grass.

I was suprised, yes, but also worried for him. Had he chased me all the way here? He was still recovering from Mary's posioning- he was still weak.

I rolled him over onto his back, and his eyes fluttered open. "There you are," he said again, taking deep breaths. "I was afraid you had disappeared."

"Will, you shouldn't have done this. You're too weak for this."

"I knew."

"Then why'd you..."

"No, Kate. I *knew*."

"What are you..." and then I realized that he wsa talking about something else. "What do you mean, you knew?"

"I knew you were somebody different. Somebody special. I knew it from the moment I saw you."

"William, what are you..."

"Let me finish," he said, and took another deep breath. "I knew that this little woman with the little laugh and the sparkling eyes wasn't ordinary. I knew she was something special."

I couldn't say anything.

"I knew she was hiding something- she had to be. She wasn't a peasant. No peasant had that wonderful refinement to the voice, the instincively ladylike poise. No peasant would smile like that. But... but I didn't know how special you were until you saved my life."

He hoisted himself up on his elbows. "Now, Kate, before they took me to the jail, you said something. I couldn't hear it very well, but I saw your lips move. Now, listen very closely to me." He closed his eyes. "What did you say?"

I looked away. "I... I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"You said that?"

"No, no, I'm... I'm apologizing for what I said."

"If you said what I thought you said, there's no need for any apology at all. But, then again, it all depends on what you said. Just tell me."

I steeled myself and looked up at him. "I said, 'I love you'."

He didn't flinch. "I love you too, Kate."

It took a moment for me to process, and then I stood up, hand to mouth. Will scrambled up. "Kate, don't... I didn't mean..."

He was interrupted by a shriek from me. It was involuntary and borne of extreme elation.

Jailed Heart

His face was troubled. "Kate, please don't..." His knees trembled, and I snapped back to reality.

"So sorry, Will. here." I helped him back to a sitting position.

He grabbed my hand. "Kate, what was that about? Did I... displease you?"

I grinned. "Oh, no, no, no. Quite the opposite. Now..." I sat down and spread my skirts around me. "Please repeat that. I'm not sure I heard you right."

"Tell you again that I love you?"

"And again. And again. And again," I said, smiling wider than I thought possible.

"Alright." he laid down again. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

I laughed out loud, covering my face with my hand. "I love you too, Will."

"Oh, the sweetest sound in all of earth, that is!" he cried.

"Thou art waxing poetic, Master Osmond," I said, hugging my knees to my chest and giggling uncontrollably.

He laughed, but then grew sober. "Kate, you overheard my conversation with Richard. About leaving."

"Yes."

"And... well... you know why."

"Yes."

"And... oh, this won't come out right." He sat up. "Kate, come with me. I'm not sure where we'd go yet, but come with me. Be with me... forever. Til... til death do us part."

I smiled and looked at the sky. *What would Mother and Father say?* I knew that they probably wouldn't approve. William was so far below me. After all, wasn't I Katherine Elizabeth Grant, heiress of Grant Manor, and last burning torch in the Grant family line? I reached into my satchel and pulled out my ring. I studied the crest etched onto the sapphire, then tried to fit it on my finger. It didn't even close to fit. It wasn't meant for me.

"Kate?" William said softly.

I looked up at the sky once more. The clouds suddenly parted, and a beam of sunlight shone down on the two of us, as if God was giving his blessing.

I handed the ring to William. "I'll come with you. Wherever you go, I'll be with you. Til death do us part."

"I love you, Katherine."

"I love you, William." I jumped up and pulled him to his feet. "Com'on. If Katherine Elizabeth Grant had big adventures, wait til they hear about Katherine Elizabeth Osmond's!"

THE END

Jailed Heart

Kel, known to her friends and the government as [NAME REDACTED]. To just her friends and family, however, she has been known to go by the title of "Sue".

Kel is the author of no published work (yet) but has written one novella, "The Battle for Mir", and two and three-quarter installments in the book series "Gleeboo." She has also written the novel you just read, [INSERT TITLE HERE], and has another novel, The Darkling Guild, in the pipeline. She writes whenever she feels up to it, and it is her dream to have a stack of books taller than she is. This is the one time she is happy about being 5'3.

Kel speaks regularly at her home, abroad, and pretty much anywhere else she can get the chance. in fact, she has won the "Loquacious" award from SFR University three years running, and was voted by her mother "Most Likely to Have a Messy Room". She cherishes this award... when she can find it underneath the clutter.