

Sunset Of Freedom

By Shiloh Burger

Chapter One

I sat at the edge of my window; it was my prison this room of mine. Though it had all the finery required for a daughter of the duke of Kentmorr, there was no warmth in it. Not even the fire could warm the icy feeling of the room which was richly dressed in fine furnishings and covered with the softest and most expensive fabrics. The day had started out with such pleasure, but turned into a nightmare when my father, the duke, sent for me.

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The sun shone through the window in the library as the lady Clair and I worked on my sewing. No matter how much I tried to get the stitches even, I never could.

There was a hard knock on the door; it then opened, not waiting for the sound of my voice. There stood the duke's (I was denied the privilege of calling him father for being a clumsy daughter instead of a son) most trusted servant, a sly man by the name of Coraton. He was the vilest of men with eyes to match, a shade of brown that made bile rise in my throat every time I looked into his gaze. He was of medium height and as skinny as one of the chickens that run about in the villages.

“Lady Malinda,” he took a mock bow, “The duke does wish for you to join him in the hall.” What he really meant was the duke demanded that I be there at once. I stood, my baby blue dress swaying with me, the curious side in me coming out, but with it came the dread of seeing the man that I once called father.

To get to the hall I went down stairs that were covered in rich velvet. Kentmorr is the only castle in England to have stairs that are covered in material, (a present given to my mother from the duke.)

The hall was a magnificent place with a long dark oak table covered by a rich velvet cloth edged with gold braiding. It was surrounded by 50 matching chairs where the duke’s family and noble friends sat, and there are always noble friends at the table. I am no longer allowed the privilege to dine here except on the day that Christ was born.

Tapestries hung from all sides; there was an ivory chair at the head of the table. In it sat a tall, over fed, knight of a man, the duke of Kentmorr and the favorite of the king. The duke had every inch of himself dressed like a fat bear cub ready for play in its finest clothes, but all that had seen his temper knew he was more like a man-eating bear that would kill all that opposed him.

I stood waiting for him to acknowledge me, it felt like an hour not just a few minutes. His hairy face contorted at the sight of me. Then a pleased look came as a servant brought him a platter of fruits and meats.

“It’s about time you got here! I’ve been waiting,” he said, in a deep voice that could send shivers down even the bravest of knights.

“I am sorry to keep you waiting my lord,” I said.

“Not you,” He then turned his fury on the poor servant girl who had brought it. Unfortunately, his attention turned back to me. “Now I am sure you know of Sir Andrew, Malinda.”

The shock at being called by my given name, by the man that has called me “useless girl” for the last five and a half years, stopped me from answering right away. “Yes I know of him,” I finally replied, thinking of the huge man who had become my father’s favorite knight. Sir Andrew had black hair with a mind of its own, dark piercing eyes that could kill a wolf if it looked in them, and a scar running down the side of his cheek.

“You,” the duke stuffed meat into his already loaded mouth, “are to marry him.” He finished chewing with a belch.

All color drained from my face. He could not ask me to do this; I was not going to do this, the anger lept up in me.

“I will not do this!” I yelled.

I ignored the duke’s red face, for if I hadn’t I would have backed down. “You can never make me do it! I refuse.” I turned to walk away when the edge of my dress got caught on the rod of a tapestry; I bent down to unhook it when something went whizzing over my head. It hit the door

in front of me and landed with a thump. It was the platter, and if my dress had not gotten caught it would have hit me.

I turned and saw the duke get up from his chair, his face a bright strawberry red. “You will do it!” The duke growled between gritted teeth, his hands clenched and unclenched.

“No I will not marry that man. And you...” I stopped when I felt the back of his hand meet my cheek. I gave a small yelp and fell to the floor from the force of the blow. Tears slid down my face as I knew I had gone too far.

“You will marry Sir Andrew even if it is the last thing you do! And if you talk that way to me ever again, I will make sure that you suffer more than you can ever handle, that death would be better than life!”

“But I already wish I were dead,” I whispered, the tears still streaming down my face. My head jerked backwards as the duke’s hand once again hit me in the same place, making my already stinging cheek even more so. His light, gray eyes showed a hatred that speared through my heart more painful than any dagger.

“Get this mop off the floor and lock her in her rooms till I have need of her,” he ordered the guards at either side of the high curved door. “Have a servant clean up this mess,” he commanded, even as one hastened to do it, “oh and have them bring another platter out.” With that he strode back to the big ivory throne, his over fed stomach jiggling all the way.

As I was dragged away by the guards, I saw Phillip (my brother and the next duke of Kentmorr) standing with Coraton, both grinning like mad fools over the display I had foolishly made of myself.

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That is why I stand here now in front of my window, Lady Clair sitting by the fire. There was another knock on the door and I dreaded who it might be. Lady Clair went to open the door and found Valichina, the duchess's personal maid. Her black hair was pulled back in a bun that was taller than her 4'9" gentle frame. "The duchess wishes to see you, My Lady," she said to me with her Spanish accent coming through.

My mother was the only family that still loved me, well... besides three of my brothers, two of which no longer lived here, being banished by the duke.

I followed Valichina down a twisting stair case then up some more stairs, all covered with the same velvet. When we came to the end of a hall with a wide tall door that was ornately carved with wild flowers and trees, we stopped. Around the door hung dark green velvet with a rich, chocolate brown, silk. Valichina pulled on the heavy pine doors, they groaned as if in protest at the sight of me.

"I've brought her, My Lady," she said through the curtains of matching brown and green.

“Thank you Valichina, you may go now,” the soft and gentle voice of the duchess Loreanda came back like the breeze outside. Valichina went out and closed the doors behind her. I went through the curtain and on a long bench covered with pillows, sat my mother. Long, red, ringlets hung down her back.

They say that I look like her; evidently I don't see what they see. For every time my reflection is seen in a pool of water or a mirror, I see a straight girl with a mop of red hair that just hangs there, and dull green eyes while mother's were a brilliant and shining green. The only thing on my body that is perfect is my nose; which was small and delicate.

My mother held out her hands, called me to her, and held me close. When she pulled away she gasped. I felt the cool of her hand where the duke had hit me.

“He did this to you?” mother asked.

I nodded and saw tears stand in her eyes.

“My poor daughter, my poor, poor daughter,” she whispered it over and over in my ear as she pulled me closer and continued to hold me. Her hand went lovingly through my hair.

After a while, she spoke. “I do not know what he sees in Sir Andrew to give my precious Malinda away to him.” Her hands went over the bruise that must surely be there.

“Do you know why he wishes for me to marry him, mother,” I asked.

“Yes, I know why.” the duchess sighed, “He is afraid that Sir Andrew will become more powerful than him. So he has come up with the plan to make him his son-in-law. If Sir Andrew happened to die in battle, the duke would be far more powerful, even more powerful than the king himself. It’s all for more power and wealth.” She looked at me, studying my face intently.

“Go to Dove’s Ridge,” she said, “go to your brother Randle. He’ll protect you from this evil man and your father, for I cannot bear to see him hurt you again!”

Chapter Two

“Mother I could never leave you even if it meant marrying that black bear.”

“My daughter, you have to do this. I cannot sit around as yet another one of my children suffers at the hand of my husband.” She said this with gentleness, but with a steel that said I would do this no matter what I wanted. “You must go now. I will call you when I have come up with a plan for your escape. Go now.” My mother gave me one last kiss on my brow, and then nodded to the door.

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Once back to my rooms, I went to the window. “Please leave me, Lady Clair, I need time to think.” I heard her steps as she went to the door. She hesitated before opening it; then left me alone with my thoughts. I couldn’t marry Sir Andrew, but could I run away? Questions and thoughts ran through my mind for the next hour.

I sat up in my chair, “Why did I not think of this before?” I asked the empty room. Maybe there is a way for me to stay after all and not have to marry that big goat. I went to the door; I opened it as quietly as possible. I saw but one guard, I closed the door and thought. How could

I get out without causing the guard suspicion? Then and there I devised a plan.

I opened the door once again with as much regal bearing and courage I could muster; I walked out and stood before him. His eyes looked at me in an unkind manner and I began to lose my faith.

“I need my maid at once,” said I. He grunted and turned to go.

I went back to my room, tripping on the rug that was in my chamber and fell to my face. ‘There goes the regal bearing,’ I thought to myself. The guard laughed as he turned to leave, its harsh sound echoed through the hall as I pushed myself up off the ground. A few minutes later he returned with the maid, he left us with little care of what we did as long as it did not get him in the Kentmorr dungeons or his neck in the noose.

“Norlean,” I said pulling her across the room to where no one could hear what we spoke. “I must get to Verlon and Richard as quickly as I can without any thought of who I might really be.” She nodded, her blond bun bobbing up and down. We looked much alike, with the exception of hair color, and her eyes were blue, while mine were green.

Norlean went hurriedly to my massive oak wardrobe. She threw open the beautifully carved doors, Norlean pushed away heavy gowns of all colors to get to the very back. She pulled out the clothes of a servant girl.

“Will this do, my Lady.” she asked, and held it up for inspection.

“Yes it will, Norlean.”

She nodded, swiftly she got to work pulling off my soft, decorated, dress of baby blue with pearls around the neck and helping me to slip into the rough, plain brown servant's dress. She then put a cap over my red hair. Within a few minutes I was disguised as a plain servant. It was easier to make me look like a servant than the daughter of a duke.

I then had Norlean dress in one of my gowns, and decorate her hair with a covered hat that would not show a spot of blond hair, for a ploy of course.

I left the room and went to the study of Verlon, where he taught Richard, my younger brother. Verlon had been with our family since before I was born, he had been paid to teach my brothers. The duke soon found that Verlon could find solutions to his problems quite easily, thus putting him in great favor with the duke and making Coraton extremely jealous.

I made it without any problems and came to the door of the study; I walked in as quietly as possible. As I turned to shut the door, my foot caught on a tassel at the end of a great hanging tapestry. Leaning forward to get my foot untangled, I lost my balance and tumbled backwards bringing the tapestry down on top of me. Suddenly a gush of pain went flying up my back.

“Ouch!” I screamed.

With a rush of wind the tapestry came off and Richard stood above me.

“You, servant girl, will be lucky if you just get a thrashing. You broke Verlon’s greatest work and prized tapestry,” he said, pointing to what was left of a sculpture of King David. “Why I would give you one myself if...” His words trailed off as I stood up, “Millie! I should have known. You couldn’t stop tripping if your life depended on it.”

I smiled weakly. “It already did. Remember?”

“That wasn’t your fault, Millie. None of that was.” Richard led me to a chair. “So what brings you here to see your favorite little brother?” he said.

“Actually I came to see Verlon.”

“Well you won’t see him. He left for his village three days ago.”

I suddenly felt very light headed. Verlon, not here, Verlon was always here, no matter what.

“What’s wrong Malinda?” Richard asked worriedly. “You look like a ghost.”

Then I told him it all, from father’s announcement to mother telling me to go to dove’s ridge. After I was done he sat quietly.

“He slapped you?” he finally said, not really asking, since he knew the duke capable of doing it.

I nodded

“You know I can’t go to father like Verlon could have, but I might be able to help you and mother find a way to get you to Randle.”

“But that’s just it,” I wailed, “I don’t want to run away. I want to stay here with my family!”

“What family Millie?” he asked, “Father makes no signs that you will one day return as his daughter, Charles was forever banished when he helped Randle escape with his wife to Dove’s ridge, and Phillip, well, Phillip would gladly see you wed to that son of a ... well you know. Mother and I are the only family you have here.” Richard stated “Besides we all know that you would be far safer at Dove’s Ridge than here at Kentmorr.”

I stood and worked my way to the door, my hand stopped just above the handle. “You know that if I choose to run away, I will forever be banned from this house and this family,” I said, just loud enough for him to hear. I then grabbed the door and left for my chambers. But even before I got there, tears were already streaming down my face as I realized that I was already banished from this house and family.

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Beneath my covers that night in the large canopy bed I cried. Large drops of tears slid down my face and onto my already soaked pillow. My eyes grew heavy and tired from all of my crying. Would life ever be the same, is the question that I fell asleep on.

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I came slowly awake when there was a creak from the door and saw a light being carried by a silent form. Fear gripped at my heart; why wasn't the guard coming in after this cloaked figure. Maybe this person had killed my guard! Or maybe it was the guard!

I sat up straight as an arrow and startled the cloaked figure in the process. I opened my mouth; a hand came up and covered it. The force threw me flat on my back, bringing the dark image down on me. "Do you wish to wake the whole of Kentmorr, My Lady?" Relief flooded in as I recognized the soft voice of Lady Clair.

"Why are you sneaking around in this dark cloak? So that I could scream and alert my guard?" I heard her giggle from the edge of my bed.

"Come," she said, "your mother wishes for you to see her." I got out of bed and put on my white lace and silk cover up.

"What time is it?" I asked of her as we made our way out of my room. I saw my guard slumped against the wall. "We are in the twelfth hour." She looked around a corner to make sure no one was ahead. A question ran through my head "why would mother want me at this time of night?"

When I went in, to my surprise, mother was not alone. By her side was Richard. He smiled when he saw me. Mother had me sit across from her and Richard; Lady Clair stood next to me. "Now Malinda, I know you probably want to know why I have sent for you so late," The duchess

questioned, her long curls hanging to her waist around her lavender robe, “so I am just going to come out with it.” She leaned closer to me, “your brother and I have finally found a way to get you out of here.”

My stomach churned.

Over the next hour, the three explained the plan and other arrangements, without even asking me whether I even wanted to leave. Sometimes I just wanted to scream “*STOP!* I’m not going away from Kentmorr and you can’t make me!” Of course, I held my tongue as I was supposed to.

“Sir Andrew will be here two days from now. And you will escape on the night before that,” Richard was saying, “I am also going to get Ledden to help you on your journey.”

“NO!” I shouted.

This is something I would speak up on. Everyone looked shocked. I always trusted Richard, but Ledden was someone that I did not trust. His appearance was not even trustworthy, with his green eyes so big and close together, balding gray hair, and a nose too small for his face but that gave enough room for his over large mouth. To make matters worse, he was French. He would also do anything to gain the favor of the duke. I do not know how they could even think of him.

“I will not allow that son of...”

“No foul language is to come throw those lips, Malinda!” mother said, in a strict tone. “Now, since we have planned out this trip for you perhaps we can allow someone more to your liking than to Richard’s.”

“But moth...” Richard began.

“No buts, Richard. And frankly I do not care for Ledden either.” She then turned back to me “How about David?” The smile on her face soon came to mine. “Will he do?”

“Yes. He’ll do.”

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David was the castle stable boy. Now you might want to know how my mother could put me in the hands of a stable boy. His parents, who are now dead, used to be friends of my family, with the exception of the duke and Phillip. His father, a stable man, had saved Richard’s life when he was little thus earning a dear trust with my mother. David’s mother became my mother’s most trusted friend. But then they died in a most bazaar fire; no one yet knows how it started. So, it was for this reason, that she could allow me the privilege of this dear friend.

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I sat on the sill of my window waiting to see if David would agree. Turning when the door opened, I saw Lady Clair come in with a smile on her face. “You leave tonight as planned,” she said.

“David,” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“He’ll be waiting in the stables.”

## Chapter Three

Watching from my window, I saw as Sir Andrew arrived a day early, to the duke's great pleasure, and to my great displeasure. He sat on a huge horse of brilliant white; his pure silver armor glinted in the fading sun light.

"He makes a very impressive sight, doesn't he?" said Lady Clair from behind. "He may be the devil's helper, but he does know how to make an entrance."

"Yes it is impressive. Now I understand why the duke wants this marriage."

"And why is that?"

"Look at his armor; it must be made of solid silver!"

"He is very wealthy," she stated.

I turned away from the sight below and looked skyward to see the lively sunset of pink and gold. I wondered, would this be the last time I would ever see the sun rise and set from this window again, or even more so, my mother? My hand went to the locket around my neck. It was heart shaped and made of solid gold with a diamond in the middle; mother had given it to me as we said our goodbyes earlier. She had said that as long as I wear it, she would always be with me. I leaned my head against the stone sill and sighed.

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I sat on the sill of the window and waited for Lady Clair to come for me. It's weird that the same person, who had once been thrilled to have a daughter, would now be the same person that drove me away from my home? If everyone else could forgive, then why could he not?

The door creaked open as Lady Clair came in and studied me, she nodded her approval of the rough stable boy clothing that I wore. Although it would be hard for most ladies of my age, or even younger, to pull off this feat of dressing as a man, with my unbecoming features, well... I wish I had been born a son instead a daughter. The only way of knowing that I was a lady, lay neatly hidden.

“David is waiting for us in the stable,” Lady Clair said, in a hurried voice.

“I'm hurrying,” said I.

We opened the door gently, and peered out before moving quickly through, Lady Clair led the way. Suddenly I felt warm breath hit the back of my neck and a hand came down onto my shoulder. I froze, my face contorted, we had been caught and already Lady Clair was out of sight! Then the body itself started to lean closer. I stepped away and gave a loud yelp and my breathing quickened as I turned around to see who had captured me. I saw instead my passed-out guard whose breath smelled of one too many drinks.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head and his body hit the cold stone floor with a thud. Without thought or care of who would hear me I dashed down the hall and around the corner, I ran straight into two other guards that had come to check out the noise. They started to grab at me, so I kicked them. Although I know that it didn't hurt them, it must have startled them, for they backed off for a second.

I ran down after Lady Clair, I knew that once they saw the empty bed chamber and drunken guard, they would be after us and alert the duke, Sir Andrew, and Phillip.

Hitting the stairs with too much speed, I tripped and tumbled all the way down. My speed slowed when I hit someone and we both landed with an unsettling thud. My head spun, I looked to see Lady Clair sitting in front of me.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “One minute you were behind me the next you were gone.”

“We've been found out,” I said as I got to my feet. I pulled her with me just as voices were heard declaring my escape. We ran to a window bigger than all the rest.

“You have to climb down. Richard tied a rope to this earlier; it lands right by the stable. David is waiting at the end,” she said, even as her hands worked to tie the end of the rope around my waist.

“I can't do that! You know that!” I screamed.

“Yes you can,” she said. Now we could hear guards on the stairs mixed with the duke’s loud shouts. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I felt myself fall from the window. I grabbed for the rope. I screamed and waited for the feel of a hard stone death; but instead, felt the warmth of hands around my middle. I turned my neck to see the smiling face of David.

“Quite the exit,” he said, blue eyes shining. “Plan to let everyone know of your escape, eh?”

“Shut up,” I panted, but a smile came to my face, despite the circumstances. “Now get me out of this thing!”

“Alright, and lower your voice or they’ll hear you for sure.”

I waited for him to untie the knots. While I hung in the air, I wondered how I had managed to not hit my head on the castle wall.

David led me to the stable where he had two horses tethered to the stalls. He hefted me onto my saddle, then climbed on his own, the moon from the window shining on his light brown hair.

“Now let’s ride!” And with that we kicked our horses into gear and galloped through the stable doors. The guards heard us coming; thankfully, they were not ready, for they were slow in closing the gate and bringing up the draw bridge.

Minutes later, we hit the woods. The duke’s men were swift to follow on their own steeds.

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The sun started to show through the trees as David and I galloped along the path. We slowed down; David came to the edge of a river and instead of going on the bridge he went in the river itself!

“What are you doing?” I asked, “Why not just cross the bridge?”

“Millie,” he said, “we can’t stay on the path. We have to go up the river so that bunch back there,” he motioned with his head, “doesn’t get us?” David continued up the river, I followed behind him.

I put my hand on the heart around my neck and swallowed, I thought of my mother, with her soft red hair and kind green eyes. It was her face that gave me what I needed to urge onwards. I nudged Della, my horse, down the river and hoped a river snake wouldn’t spook her.

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After riding for some time, we stopped at a small opening in the trees so that we could stretch our legs. David hadn’t wanted to stop, but did so for my sake. I was so tired from having to ride all night long. My leg muscles and back were stiff and I could hardly move around, so I opted to sit on an old tree stump.

I saw David stiffen.

“Sh,” he said, as he got his bow and climbed on his horse. He urged the animal into the river.

“David what is going on?” I asked him.

An arrow whizzed by our heads and into a tree at the water’s edge. I screamed at the top of my lungs. Someone was trying to kill us. David muttered something under his breath; another arrow came out of the woods, it made me scream even louder.

“Millie will you please stop screaming and get on your horse,” David said.

A third arrow came from the other side and landed only a few feet away.

“Man, whoever is after us, they sure are persistent,” I thought.

“Ride!” David said, none to calmly.

We galloped up the river until we came to a water fall that was too steep to climb up on either side. All around us, the trees and shrubs were too thick to escape into the forest.

Just then two big men came up the river while others came from the different sides of the waterfall. All were dressed in the same rough tunics of pine green and bark brown.

“Well, well, well, look what we have here,” said a tall, burly, man with hazel hair and eyes. “A couple of farm boys and it looks like they stole these fine horses too. The chief will like them, you can count on that.” His harsh hazel eyes scanned us over. He had the harshest voice I’d ever heard.

“Get down.” he said, even as he had us pulled off our horses.

My feet hit the freezing water, numbing them instantly from the knees down. My left foot slipped on a loose stone which made me fall and land on my already flat tosh, making it even flatter. All around me people laughed as I fought to stand.

“Let’s take them back to camp, men!” Old hazel eyes yelled.

Four men came forward; they tied our hands and blindfolded us. They pushed me out of the water and I was glad that my hair and necklace hadn’t come out, yet. As they pulled us along, I wondered who they were. Were they some of the duke’s men dressed as common people? Or were they a band of mad villagers? Fear edged into my heart as I thought of what they would do to us, if they indeed turned out to be mad villagers.

They pulled us in direction after direction, or at least, it seemed that way. It also seemed like days and not the hours that it truly was, as I stumbled along like a blind dog. My feet slogged in wet shoes, now caked in mud.

The man that had led... no dragged me, stopped right in front of me, without my knowing of course. I continued to walk and ran right into his back. He slapped me across the face. I cringed. “Do that again boy and I’ll cut your ears off.” Great, I had only been captured for a few hours and already I had an enemy. And I couldn’t even see him!

“Gruffy what are you doing to that boy? Never mind, just get out of here!” said Hazel Eyes, “Why Rolf ever keeps him round I’ll never know.”

They made David stand beside me as they untied my blindfold. The sunlight blinded my eyes as they adjusted to the noon sun.

Mr. Hazel eyes came and stood behind us, he put his hand on my shoulder. I smelled the stench of one who had not bathed in months. “May I welcome you to the camp of Rolf, the king of outlaws!”

Chapter Four

I stood looking at a small opening in the forest. Trees lined the glade and all through it were rolling hills. The scent of freshly chopped wood could be smelt in the air. The aroma of roasted meat over the flames smelled almost wonderful and reminded me of my empty stomach.

“Where’s the boss.” Hazel Eyes asked.

He was talking to a man who was about the same age as David. He was of medium height and of stocky build, with icy blue eyes and sandy blond hair.

“Over on the hill,” he said, and motioned with a slight nod of his head to where men stood in a crowd packed together, yelling and throwing their fists in the air. “Old Gruffy thinks he should start leading and challenged Rolf to a fight for leadership.”

“Bet Rolf wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to put Old Gruffy in his place, now was he?” Hazel Eyes more stated than asked.

“Your right there Robby,” said another one of the men.

Robby smiled. “Come on boys; let’s get these two up to the boss so that he can see what we should do with them or ... to them.” The men laughed and made us trudge up the hill. David stood beside me, he leaned over and whispered, “whatever you do don’t let them find out that you’re a girl or the duke of Kentmorr’s daughter. And don’t talk either,” he added.

I nodded just as we reached the top of the hill.

Some of the men made room at the sight of Robby, though most kept their attention on what was at the center of their circle. Robby and his men pushed their way through the crowd with David and I pulled along.

When I suddenly fell forward through the crowd, I expected to have landed with a face full of dirt and a mouth stuffed with grass, but at the last minute a huge hand grabbed my arm and pulled me upward. I looked up expecting to see Robby’s hazel eyes, but instead saw the icy blue eyes of the boy who had told Robby where to look, he smiled. It wasn’t one of the greedy smiles that the duke would give nor was it the smile of thief. No, it was a smile of kindness. Even though this act was offered to me, I rejected it out of fear. I steadied myself after he put my feet back on the ground, nodded my thanks and stood closer to David.

I looked to what everyone else was intent on watching. There in the middle of all the attention were two men fighting like pigs. They were in what looked to be an awkward position; a short stout man pinning a large heavy man to the ground. Both were shirtless. The man on the

bottom screamed in agony as the Blondie on top grabbed his arm and twisted it around.

“Do you give up Gruffy or do I break your arm in front of all MY outlaws?”

Gruffy turned his head and spit on Rolf, or tried to anyway. Rolf twisted Gruffy’s arm and I heard a snap even as Gruffy screamed and cried out like a baby. My stomach twisted as everyone else cheered. After Rolf got up, he motioned two outlaws to dispose of Gruffy to the healer, so that his arm could be taken care of.

He turned his attention to David and me. He was a little over 5’4” in height, a small man to the height of the 6’1” frame of the screaming Gruffy whose arm was being set into place by a ragged old looking woman with a toothless grin.

“Well what have you got here brother?”

Rolf was Robby’s brother? Their hair and eyes were somewhat alike but everything else was different.

“A couple of farm boys; looks like they can steal royal horses, they got two beauties back there that look fit for the king to ride.”

“Really?” asked Rolf, “Show them to me.”

Robby lead the way, holding onto a rope that led me around. I felt more like a dog than a duke’s daughter. “My, these horses are beauties. Where did you get them, boys?” Rolf asked, he of course looked at me. When I

didn't answer, Robby lifted his hand; I prepared for the strike and cringed inwardly.

"He can't speak!" David said.

Robby stopped his hand. "What should we do to them? We could always torture them."

"Or," a man said that stood to the left of Robby, "We could teach them how to be outlaws. Maybe even sell them to passing villagers if we wanted to. Then again we could always have servants."

Rolf smiled. "Or we could give them to Outlaw."

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I hung from a massive oak that looked hundreds of years old. It was the most magnificent tree that I'd ever seen. The outlaws had taken us deeper into the forest to where they would give us over to the Outlaw; they had tied us to one of the oaks gigantic branches, and then left us to just dangle there. A stream ran a few feet away, the sound of the water trickling against rocks made my mouth go dry; I wanted to get a drink.

I couldn't see David on the other side of the oak but I heard his occasional movements as he tried to free himself. I knew he blamed himself for our getting caught, but it wasn't his fault, it was mine. I was the one who wanted to stop and stretch my legs, when all he wanted to do was keep going.

The sun was starting to set in the west; I turned my head as far as I could to see the colorful end of an agonizing day. As I watched, my mother's face came to my mind. How I wished that I could just see her one last time, to be held by her and hear her say how much she loved me, if even just for a moment. I have been stripped of everything and everyone that I have ever loved, and now the sun was even leaving me; only unlike my father, I would again feel the sun's warmth.

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A light in the woods from the east caught my attention. I saw the light separate into two different directions. One of the lights came closer while the other went off deeper into the forest. The light came closer and I saw that a huge hulking figure was carrying a torch. Something glittered in the torch light, I felt the loosening of the rope and my hands fell free. The first thing I did was pull off the gag that threatened to choke me.

“Millie, are you ok?” David whispered in my ear when he came from the other side of the tree.

“Yes. Glad to have that gag out of my mouth and my hands untied,” I whispered back.

I heard shuffling next to us. Then a deep brass voice spoke. “Follow me, I'll show you two where you can sleep. And if you decide to run I'll put an arrow in your leg.”

~~~~~

I felt the sun on my face as I woke up; my limbs, back, and neck were sore as I sat up and looked around. We were in a small opening of thirty feet in the shape of a circle. Trees surrounded us in every direction I looked; they were so close together that you couldn't even see four feet into the woods. David sat on a log facing a skillet hanging over the fire with pork in it. He looked up from staring into the fire.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Somewhere to the west of the river we were trying to cross yesterday.”

“Where is the man that said he'd shoot our legs if we tried to run?”

“Somewhere over in the woods there,” he answered. “But he's watching us, believe me. He's coming; remember you can't talk.”

I nodded as I looked up to see a black eyed, and bearded man, walk towards us.

“Good to see you're up,” he said.

He leaned down to rip a piece of meat off the pork. He took up three flat stones and put slices of ham on them, then handed the stone platters to David and me. I took the platter from him and I stared at it, wondering how to stomach it and how to go about getting the meat into bite size pieces. Normally a servant would have already cut my food. I looked up to find that both David and Black Beard were staring at me, David

picked a piece of meat and ate it, as if saying “you’re not in Kentmorr anymore.”

I picked up a piece of pork and looked at it... poor pig... I put it into my mouth and grimaced.

“Does your friend always groan while eating?” the dark bearded man asked.

“Only with meat,” David said, smiling slyly.

We finished our breakfast without anymore talk between the two men.

“Now, I’m going to turn you two into real outlaws and to do that I need to know your names.”

“I’m David and this is Milford, but everyone calls him Mill.”

“Can’t he tell his own name?”

“He can’t talk,” David stated.

“Oh?” he said.

My breath caught as my heart pounded faster. Had he heard David and me talking while he was on his way back to us? “Well you can call me Outlaw,” he said, as if he hadn’t even thought different of me not being able to “talk”. Lost in my thoughts, I was startled to have David poke my arm. I looked up from where I had fixed my gaze on the ground.

“We have to follow him,” he said, nodding to where the hulking figure of Outlaw stood watching us from the trees, about 30 feet away. I

glanced back to David who stared at me. “It’s alright. Come on.” He gently took my arm and helped me stand up.

Outlaw turned around and started to lead us deeper into the woods. He was as silent as a frost in the early morning. We could easily escape from him without being heard if we were quiet enough.

As if he sensed what I was thinking, Outlaw turned around and from a nearby tree he pulled out a bow with several arrows. He looked me directly in the eye as if to tell me that if I even tried it, he would put an arrow in one of my limbs. I looked at David’s face to see his eyes narrow and knew he had been thinking along the same line of thought.

“You two had better catch up with me or else I’ll come back there and make you.”

I shuddered as I tried not to imagine what he could and would do if we didn’t catch up with him. We got to where Outlaw sat under a tree that had nuts all over the ground. There were two huge barrels on the ground next to him.

He got up. “I want you two to fill these barrels full of nuts.” He turned and climbed up a nearby tree. “You have until noon, which gives you five hours. And remember, I’m always watching.”

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My back was stiff from bending over for more than three hours. My legs felt like they would fall off at any minute if I kept this up. I would

forever be thankful for servants. Sweat dripped down my forehead as the sun beat down on my back and neck.

“Well that does it for barrel one,” David said. “How about you go and start on the other side while I finish over there.”

I nodded and pulled the empty barrel to the other side. I started up again. As I picked up the nuts I wondered for the millionth time, what this had to do with learning how to be an outlaw.

~~~~~

Tears came down my face as I watched the sun say good morning to the world. I remembered the walks mother and I had taken every morning while the sun came up. That was all before the duke banished my brothers and in a way banished me too.

“You ok, Millie?” I jumped; David came and sat down next to me.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, “didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I know.”

“What’s going on through that head of yours my lady?” David asked.

“The good old days,” I said, dreamily.

“Before the banishment?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He put his hand on my shoulder “You miss your mother too, don’t you?”  
I nodded.

“Don’t worry, you’ll see her again.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said.

“Have a little faith Millie.”

“I think all my faith has run thin over the past three days.”

“I know.”

I looked down to find my hand once again on the locket over my heart.

“I love you mother,” I whispered into the sunrise.

~~~~~

“Today,” Outlaw began, “you are going to learn how to catch a skunk without getting sprayed.” My mouth dropped open. He expected us to catch a skunk without getting sprayed? Outlaw smiled. “Good way to learn teamwork, don’t you think?”

We had been stuck here for a week and the things he had made us do went from weird to horrifying. Two days ago he had made us catch freshwater crabs from the small stream near the huge oak. With David blind folded and my hands tied behind my back, it took us two days to get it down. He said it was good team work then too, all I got out of it were tiny crabs biting my feet.

“A skunk!” said David.

“Let’s see how many days this takes,” Outlaw said with a smug smile.

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“Mill, it went in the log! You go that way and I’ll go this way.”

I knew this was going to end badly. I’ll probably end up with the spray in my eyes and go blind, I thought hysterically.

I climbed in one end of the log and David crawled in the other. It was dark and smelled of rotten wood and poop. My hand touched something slimy but I didn’t have enough time to pity myself, for I felt something soft touch my hand. I pulled it out of the log and into the light, I saw that it was a skunk! And it hadn’t sprayed me! I saw David come out; he started to say something when the skunk released its full power. I wanted to scream as the stinky liquid hit my face.

I felt two big muscular hands pick me up and walk. That was when I heard the water. He was going to throw me into the river! Wait a minute, a river? I don’t remember there being any river? Could it be the very same river in which Robby had captured us two weeks ago? Had we really been that close all along; when we thought we had been hours away.

I started to squirm in the arms that held me as we got closer, then I felt myself being thrown in the air and then I hit icy water. My eyes popped open, the water instantly stung them. I shot up out of the water and I glared at the man on the bank.

“How dare you even do that?” I screamed, and stood up in the shallow end of the river. “I have put up with crabs, meat, and skunks for the last two weeks. I am sick and tired of being treated like a servant! I am tired of having to be the good little girl that has to be dressed as a poor peasant boy, and to top it off, I’m not supposed to talk! I’ve had enough! I demand the respect deserved to me!” I stopped, and put my hands over my mouth as I realized what I had just done. A strand of red hair hit my face as it fell from my hood. I had started to wear it since the hat had become difficult to keep on through all the trials Outlaw had put us through. I looked to see David come out of the woods and stared at me as if I had two heads. I then turned to face the man who had thrown me into the river.

## Chapter Five

My eyes met with Outlaws. What would he do to me now? Thousands of different thoughts went through my mind. What he did was one of the things that hadn't gone through my head. He threw back his head and laughed! Laughed!

"I knew that would get you talking, girl," Outlaw said, as he continued to laugh even harder. "Just didn't think I'd get a lecture!"

He'd known all along! I turned to face David; he looked as shocked as me.

"You knew?" I asked.

"Of course I knew!" he laughed.

"How did you..?" I questioned, not able to finish, being too shocked.

"No man goes to another part of the woods to pee," he stated. "A man also doesn't pick at his meat with dainty fingers. Not to mention..."

He cut short, his gaze travelling to the other side of the river. I looked over my shoulder to see the same man from our first day, with the sandy blond hair and the icy blue eyes. 'What is he doing here?' I thought to myself. He stood motionless with his jaw hanging open.

"Daniel, shut that mouth of yours," Outlaw said, sounding irritated.

"And will you stop staring at the girl."

He mumbled something under his breath about kids never doing what they're told. "Get over here boy."

I watched as Daniel crossed the river, he looked at me as he passed. His face gave away none of the shock that had been there earlier. As he

stepped out of the river, Outlaw wacked him across the head. The boy rubbed it while he attempted to give Outlaw a menacing glare. It didn't really work.

"I thought I told you to stay up in the trees and watch them."

"You did."

"Then why are you down on the ground instead of in the trees?"

He muttered something to Outlaw that I couldn't hear, David had evidently heard it since he chuckled. He stopped when Daniel scowled at him. Outlaw must have found it funny as well, but unlike David he didn't get glared at.

"We better get back to the camp and cut up some of that cold venison that we had this morning," Outlaw said.

They all turned to look at me when a groan escaped my lips. "What do you have against meat?" Outlaw asked, "I mean don't all royal families eat meat?"

How on earth he knew I was royal I'll never know? Then again I might have given it away in my tirade just a few seconds ago. "Only the ones that are hated don't get meat." I mumbled as I got out of the water and passed him. My teeth chattered and I crossed my arms to try and keep warm; it didn't work.

"What was that?" Outlaw asked. When I kept walking, he turned to David.

"She doesn't like to eat living creatures. She says it's like eating another human being," he answered. Outlaw and Daniel laughed at this, but I didn't care; I was used to being laughed at, especially by men.

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Now there are many things that I would prefer to eating meat. I would rather go catch another skunk than eat a one-time living creature. But here I was, forced to eat it. After they ate and I choked it all down, David went out of the camp for awhile. Daniel went right behind him, trying to make up to Outlaw for coming down from the tree.

“So tell me,” Outlaw began, “what’s a royal girl like you out here in the woods with David. You two don’t look like brother and sister to me.”

Could I trust Outlaw with my story, or would he get greedy and turn me over to the duke and Sir Andrew?

“It’s kind of a long story,” I said, hoping that I could trust him.

“I have all the time in the world at my call,” he answered and rolled over lazily onto his back, as if to make his point.

“But... can I trust you?” I asked, “What if I told you my story and you might have a taste for greediness and turn me over to the ones that I am running from? After all you are an Outlaw.”

“That good eh?” said he.

I nodded.

“Well now’s as good as any time to tell me it,” he said, making himself even more comfortable.

So I told him part of it; from when the duke hit me to where mother told me to escape. He grew quiet and I hoped against hope that I could trust him. If he went and found Sir Andrew, David would kill me. “So you’re running away from an arranged marriage?” he said.

“Yes.”

“I expected something more exciting.”

“I defied the duke and ran away with most of his men looking for me and you don’t think it’s exciting?” I said.

“I should have left you looking like a boy, at least then you didn’t talk,” he said with a groan.

“You’re the one that threw me into the river.”

He smiled.

“So what’s your real name, since it’s obvious that you’re not a Milford?”

“Malinda,” I stated with dislike, “but I prefer Millie.”

“You hate your name?” he asked.

“As much as the red hair that is on the top of my head,” I said.

He just smiled. It was strange for an outlaw; all of his teeth were perfectly white and even. Come to think about of it, he wasn’t a normal outlaw. He didn’t smell of a foul reek like the other outlaws and now that I looked at him more thoroughly, his beard was nicely kept and he smelled of river water.

Outlaw opened his mouth to say something but then closed it when David came back, Daniel watched him with the eyes of a hawk.

“Here, Millie,” David said, as he handed me two apples and some nuts.

“Thank you,” I said, giving him a grateful smile. Now I didn’t have to eat pork for dinner. At least someone respected me out here.

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“Millie. Millie!” Jerking awake, I felt a hand going to my mouth to stop a scream from coming. “Be quiet. You don’t want to wake Outlaw or his little pet, do you?” whispered a voice.

“What are you waking me for?” I asked, still wishing that I could snuggle back up in my thick blanket and sleep. It wasn’t anything special like the ones at Kentmorr that were made from satin, silk, and velvet, completely covered in jewels or beads, but it was warm and soft.

“Were leaving,” David said.

I sat up quickly, my forehead hit David’s.

“Why?” I asked, massaging my forehead gently with my fingers.

“We’re still on your father’s lands. We won’t be safe until you are behind the walls of Dove’s Ridge. I’ve got something for us to eat for our trip. Get your blanket and coat.”

“I’ve got them,” I said, still wishing I could curl up and go back to sleep.

“Now let’s go.”

My hand went to my chest where I hid the locket under my tunic.

“Mother, help me get through this alive.” I concentrated on her face and knew that I could do anything as long as mother gave me the strength.

## Chapter Six

The sun shone through the branches of the trees making designs on the forest floor. We walked hurriedly through the forest back in the direction of the river, trying not to leave a trail for Outlaw and Daniel, or anyone else that has it in their mind to follow us. I found out this morning, that David had left a trail to remember how to get back to the river. He had left marks with a sharp stone on the sides of trees. He walked up ahead to make sure Sir Andrew wasn't up searching the road for us.

I looked around and noticed how beautiful my surroundings really were. Is it always this beautiful? My mind traveled back to the days when my brothers and I would ride across wide open fields, but we would always stop before we got to the woods and its beauty. For at the time, I had found them terrifying, especially when Philip had tried to lose me and leave me stranded; thankfully, Charles had come along soon after Phillip left. I sighed, why did he hate me so much?

I jerked back to the present when my foot got twisted into a root. I fell face first into a bed of dirt and moss; my nose hit a rock. Soon after, I felt a warm liquid dribble from my nose; blood. I spat out some dirt and started to push myself up with my hands. I touched my nose along the way to see how bad it really was.

I stopped when two beady eyes stared straight at me. I held my breath as a scaly head appeared from under the moss, its skinny pink tongue came out along with a hissing sound. David didn't seem to realize the trouble I was in, for he walked on ahead as if nothing were amiss. If only he knew; I was unable to call out for fear that it would attack me and I would die of snake poison.

“It won’t hurt you, Millie.” The voice came from behind me. “It’s just a harmless little snake.”

Daniel! I closed my eyes for a slight second. Why did he of all people, have to be the one to find me.

“Would you just come and get rid of it?” I ordered, “Now!”

He chuckled as he came over and picked up the snake. The creature dangled by its tail above my head, making it known that it was none too happy about being disturbed.

“Get that thing away from me!” I madly proclaimed, “You idiot.”

“Yes, your royal highness.” He bowed sarcastically.

“How dare you. I demand you take that back right now!”

“No I won’t, and you can’t make me,” he said, a smug smile on his face. “Guess why? You’re not in your fancy palace anymore.”

I stopped myself from saying something else. He’s right, I wasn’t at Kentmorr anymore. This wasn’t me, yelling at everyone, it was my father. The thought horrified me. “Oh don’t let me turn into that man.” I silently prayed. I had to make things right, but not in the normal way and not with him realizing it.

“How’d you find us?” I asked, while working to put myself back on my feet.

“It wasn’t hard. All I had to do was listen for the steps of a day-dreaming lady and her stable boy,” he said, an impish grin on his face.

He probably thought he had won our “little” dispute, but quite frankly, anyone that goes low enough to call another person a donkey’s butt, does not win.

David came back to me then. “How’d you find us?”

Daniel shrugged, “Just followed your foot prints... and markings.”

Figures, I thought. “Nothing gets by you does it?” I said.

“Nope,” Daniel said, impish grin still on his pathetic face.

Just then, the sound of a snapping twig came. “That would be Outlaw,” Daniel said.

“He came too?” I said.

“Yep, I did,” he said, as he came from behind a tree.

He came forward and crossed his arms over his chest. “So you tried to run did you? You do know what I do to those that run.”

I felt my chest tighten. Ever since we had first been captured, Outlaw had threatened to shoot us in the leg and drag us back to the outlaw camp, and I just knew he would. Outlaw opened his mouth, he closed it when a noise came from the road; voices came floating to my ears. Outlaw started to walk to an outline of trees that said safety all over them. David followed; I went after him as Daniel climbed easily into a nearby tree that was in bloom. The flowers showed signs of withering; making it clear that summer was almost gone.

I looked through the leaves and branches of a tree as I sat down at the base of another. There in the middle of the road stood a brilliant white mare. On that brilliant creature, issuing orders to three soldiers, sat Sir Andrew. I gasped, David had thought Sir Andrew to be days ahead of us. How could he then be only a few feet away?

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“How can he be here? You said he was probably days ahead.” I asked David

“He probably got turned off our scent at the river as we had hoped.”

I nodded. I knew that it was more than likely true. Either way we had to escape, not just from Sir Andrew but also from Outlaw, again.

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“How are we going to get out of here?” I asked, “They’re going to be watching us closer than ever now.” It was later that night and Outlaw and Daniel were supposedly asleep. We had made camp farther in the woods, but had not lit a fire for fear that Sir Andrew would see it and investigate.

“We have to try again,” David said.

Just then Daniel sat up, he looked straight at David. “Don’t even think of it,” he said, “Or else I’ll have to shoot Millie in the leg.”

I swallowed.

“You wouldn’t,” David said.

‘Oh yes he would,’ I thought

“Yes I would,” he said, repeating my very thoughts.

“I doubt that.”

Daniel looked at him hard. I suddenly felt that these two were keeping something from me.

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“We’ll head east to a small village next to the gorge, the villagers call it Villa of Lost Animus,” Outlaw said.

“What does that mean?” asked David.

“The Village of Lost Souls,” he answered.

“Why do they call it that?” I asked, that was a pretty creepy name for a village.

“Sometimes things are left better untold,” he said, as we walked over dead twigs and leaves.

Fall had come, with its vibrant colors. We had been running for nearly a week now and away from Kentmorr for two months. Sir Andrew had caught our trail and was stopping at nothing to catch us. David came closer.

“Millie, the gorge of lost souls is only three days away from Dove’s Ridge,” he whispered, there was excitement in his eyes. “In a village we could easily get away if it were busy enough.”

“That you could, but this small village has a total of ten families, not nearly enough to escape,” Outlaw said from over our heads. He smiled down at us.

How in the world did he sneak up on us?

“And who says I’m keeping you from your destination?”

As always this black bearded man knew how to confuse me.

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“Why must we wear capes?” I asked. As normal, Outlaw ignored my questions as he continued to tie his own cloak.

“What if Sir Andrew were to come to the village after we left, or even while we were there? With a cape hiding us, we can easily get past him,” David said.

I looked at David “You don’t give Sir Andrew enough credit.”

I grabbed the hooded cloak from him and walked to the other side of the tree line. Rain hit my cheek. Suddenly glad that I had brought the cloak with me, I put it on. The other side of the tree line had been so thick that you wouldn't have even known that it was raining.

They didn't give Sir Andrew enough credit for what he could do; they hadn't seen him at work. I had watched him slowly but surely rip my family apart, while he pretended to be one of us. A tear came down my cheek as I thought of life before that man had come, when there was no banishment, no tears or pain; before the hatred. I thought of just the joy and love given to a little girl, a girl who no longer lived.

I felt two hands placed on my shoulders. I glanced up to see Outlaw as he looked straight forward. We didn't speak, just stood there.

“Your right, we should give the man more credit,” he finally said, “A man like that is supposed to be feared. Then again, a man can only scare a person as much as that person will allow.”

He looked down at me. “One day you may have to face Sir Andrew, whatever you do, don't be afraid. He's only human.” Outlaw's gaze went back to the setting sun. “My father once told me, ‘they may break your body and bones. But they can never break your spirit.’ Never let anyone break your spirit Millie.”

We stood there for a longtime. During that time a bond grew, and for the first time ever, I felt understood. This time I didn't reject it.

~~~~~

The clouds and rain continued as we made our way into the village's small street, if you could even call it a street. My boots felt heavy as the mud clung to them. My feet hurt from walking so far just to get here.

Outlaw went up to a small hut with mud walls and hay roof that looked as if it had stood for centuries and would collapse under its own weight. He knocked on it several times before it opened slightly to reveal a long witch-like nose. Outlaw whispered with the person through the crack, as the door opened it allowed me to see the owner of the nose. A tall skinny man with long, stringy, gray hair that clung to an oval shaped face that was too small for the huge round eyes and wide mouth.

“Welcome,” he said in a high-pitched, squeaky voice that I would have imagined for a field mouse. “My home is your home.”

He went into the house and sat on a small stool at the fire with Outlaw next to him. Coming in, I saw that it was dark with only the fire to light the small space. In one corner there was a bed of straw crawling with black bugs and in the other was a table which overflowed with books, maps, inks and papers. It smelled of pig poop and cow dung and I could hardly stand it.

A rat ran across the floor, it stopped and stared at me, his head tilted. My heart pumped faster as a scream tried to escape, though I kept it down.

Daniel put his hand down on the floor and the rat jumped into it, he picked the thing up and held the...um...animal in front of my face.

“This is Tippin. He’s Laurence’s pet rat.”

“He has a pet rat? Why in the world would he want a rat?” I said, my voice both shaky and squeaky

“It’s easier than a dog. Plus it’s a great thief.”

~~~~~

“Open up in there.”

The voices, as well as the hand on my shoulder, brought me out of a fitful sleep. Daniel looked down at me and put a finger to his mouth. I stood up and could hear people shouting outside.

“We know he is in there,” they said.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

“There are angry villagers outside, and Outlaw wants us to get out of here,” David said.

“How will we get out? The door is the only way,” said I.

Just then Laurence went over to one of the smaller book cases and pulled it away to show a small hole, big enough for a person to climb through.

“Go through this and hurry! The back of my house is in the woods. If you follow the path along the gorge you’ll eventually come to a path that leads across it, or if that happens to not work, a few miles away is a bridge that goes to the other side.”

David went through the hole; Daniel motioned for me to go next. The space was small and tight. How on earth had David fit through this? A branch from the other side hit my face as I pushed my body from the hole. David helped me up. Daniel followed with a determined look on his face. He went to some bushes and sat down, I followed him. He was looking over the bush to where I could easily see the front of the house.

“Where is Outlaw?” I asked.

“He’s not coming,” Daniel said.

Why wasn’t he coming? I thought of asking Daniel, but one look at his face suggested I better not. The villagers finally got annoyed with the situation and broke the door down. Outlaw and Laurence were dragged out. One of the villagers threw a torch into the hut. Laurence shouted at

the man, he laughed causing Laurence to become even more irritated. He threw himself on the man. One of the other villagers pulled out a knife; he stabbed him in the back. Outlaw charged at them but was held back by others. Tears came to my eyes and rolled down over my cheeks.

I was a jinx, everyone that I am with gets hurt in some way of another. My brothers were banished, mother's heart was broken, David's parent's were killed in a fire, and Outlaw was attacked and more than likely would be killed. All of it was my fault. I turned away, not able to watch anymore. The men must have felt the same way; Daniel got to his feet and started to walk, and if I saw right, with tears in his eyes.

## Chapter Seven

The night air was chilly under the dark, gloomy sky, the moon barely noticeable through the gray clouds. The apple in my hand had gone uneaten as the sight from the night before played in my mind. Why had Outlaw not come? Why had the villagers even attacked Outlaw and killed Laurence? Whenever I asked or even tried to talk to Daniel about it, he would either rudely tell me to mind my own business or all together ignore me.

How I wish it had been me in that hut, not Outlaw. Then all of our problems would be over with. Daniel would be able to go back to Rolf, the king of outlaws, Outlaw would still be alive, David could go back to his home and I...I'd be free.



Crack...crack...crack... there were dead branches everywhere and no matter how or where I tried to walk without making a sound, I'd fail miserably. How on earth did Daniel walk around these things? He made it look so easy; he'd already made it to the edge of the woods where we would go across the gorge.

It took me five minutes to get to where Daniel and David stood looking at a gigantic pile of rocks

“Guess, we should keep going,” said Daniel, “there is no way we could climb it.”

“I think we should climb it,” I said. I was sick and tired of Daniel being in charge, why was he even here still, Outlaw wasn't. Besides I had started to get annoyed at being told what we were going to do, I should be in charge. After all, I was the daughter of a duke.

Daniel looked at me like I had five heads and a set of wings to go with them. “We’ll climb it,” I said, my confidence climbing. I checked out the pass that had been closed off by a rockslide.

“Are you crazy?” Daniel shouted, “We can’t climb that; it could kill us if there was another rockslide. Do you know how painful it would be if you were hit in the head with a rock?”

“No. Do you?” I asked.

“Being an outlaw does have its downfalls.”

David coughed behind us. “You know, I hate to put a stop to this argument, but we have to go. For all we know, Sir Andrew could be just behind us,” said a calm David. “And her being a lady, she should choose the way. If one of us should die or be hurt, it will be on her head.”

Daniel grumbled. I knew what Daniel’s feelings were, but what were David’s? “We will climb,” said I. Daniel shook his head as I started to slowly climb, David coming up in the rear. Time passed slowly as we made our way to the top, none of us said a word. Sweat dripped into my eyes, making them sting. Every inch we went my limbs hurt more and more, as the soreness came into my body. We had only made it a fourth of the way up, yet already the sun was saying goodbye in the west. It was a mixture of pink, gold, and a deep, vibrant red around the yellow, setting sun.

“We should make camp. It will be dark soon and we won’t be able to see the way,” David said. “There’s a ledge just a few feet to the right of me, we could...”

“No,” I said, “We’ll keep climbing, every minute counts.”

“Do you wish to kill us? It’s bad enough in the day light. Now you want us to go on in the night when a slide could kill us even sooner?” yelled a furious Daniel.

The light was fading fast, making it harder to see. As I moved forward, my foot slipped. A few rocks came down the side of me as I fought for a footing. I found one and slipped my foot in.

“I’m alright,” I whispered, trying hard to believe it myself.

Just then I heard the sound of rocks moving. The noise became louder and louder, it was a slide! The others must have known too, they started to retrace their steps. “We are...” I heard Daniel say just before I felt a rock hit my head causing a searing pain to course through it. I saw more rocks sliding down all around as blackness overtook me.

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Pain throbbed through my head as I tried to turn it, I moaned. I heard voices that sounded far away, then the voices grew louder and louder as a picture formed before my eyes. A woman dressed regally in silks holding a little girl, both crying as smoke came through the door behind them. Yelling reached their ears, the little girl looked up, and tears streamed down her soot covered face. She held out her hands to a huge man.

“Father!” she cried.

The big man looked at her face with a hatred that scared the little girl; she cuddled close to her mother. “Don’t ever call me that again!” he snarled, making the little girl go even farther into her mother’s arms “You are no longer my daughter.”

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The pain worsened in my head as the picture faded, another moan came. “Millie... Millie... “

I felt something hot go down my throat, I slowly opened my eyes. Everything was blurry, I opened them farther when David’s concerned face became clearer the throbbing increased, and I closed my eyes.

“You gave us quiet a scare there Millie,” he said.

I gave him a small smile. “It wasn’t as bad as last time.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t as bad as last time?” Daniel asked in a grumpy voice. “You almost got killed! It’s a miracle that David or I weren’t hurt!” He was yelling now and I couldn’t stand how it made my head ache even worse, if it was possible. I closed my eyes as Daniel’s tirade went on. To block it out further, I thought of mother; mother, her soft gentle face and loving gaze surrounded by her rich dark red curls gracefully framing them.

My hand went over the locket. Oh mother, will I ever see you again? Will I ever feel your arms around me or hear your voice comfort me again after one of the duke’s hateful looks that always stabbed through my heart, reminding me of all that had happened since I was so little? I felt tears come to my eyes and slide down my cheeks. But mother wasn’t here to comfort me; I was alone and without her.

I started to cry uncontrollably, for the first time I didn’t try to stop the tears. I let the sobs grab me and take complete control as they racked my body. Strong arms came around and held me close, but I barely noticed them. I put my face up against the ruff tunic materiel and tried to stop, but new tears came to my eyes.

When the tears stopped coming I looked up into David’s eyes. Daniel had stopped talking finally. He sat and looked at me, with something akin to pity in his eyes. I looked back to David.

“Why couldn’t he love me?” I whispered, more to myself than to anyone else.

“He’s crazy,” David said.

I heard Daniel come over next to us. I looked at him, his eyes held questions and confusion. Why was he still here? He had no reason to be with us still. Outlaw was gone, gone; like so many other people in my life.

Before I could stop myself I said, “Why are you still with us? Outlaw isn’t here anymore.” I would have covered my mouth as I realized what I had just said, but was too weak. Daniel’s face registered surprise as he stared down at me.

“I promised Outlaw.”

“Well you wouldn’t need to keep your promise,” I said, “After all he was probably nothing more than an annoying man making you do all of his work.” What on earth had come over me? I knew that Outlaw had loved Daniel like a son.

He looked at me. “He was my father.”

## **Chapter Eight**

The days passed slowly as my head healed. Daniel had become distant and didn’t talk except when asked a question, even then he sometimes didn’t answer. It reminded me of myself after the banishment. You don’t want to talk to anyone, plus you feel like the whole world has just crumbled before your very eyes.

The moonlight came through the trees as I tried to sleep. We would be leaving tomorrow sometime, but we wouldn’t be walking far, since I still couldn’t stand without my head starting to throb.

I heard footsteps walk away from the camp; I sat up to see Daniel going down the path that we had come up nearly a week and a half ago. The leaves rustled under his feet. I got up, and felt my body start to pound. I took one step, then another and another. Daniel had stopped and now sat on the damp ground, his face turned away from me. I knew he'd heard me stumble to where he was.

“Why did you follow me?” he asked.

“Because we all need friends?” said I. I knew I was avoiding the real question

“Why did you follow me?” Daniel asked again, knowing as well.

I took a deep breath “Why, was the village called Villa of Lost Ani-Anim-ani...”

“Villa of Lost Animus?” he said and looked surprised, no shocked, that I would ask about the name instead of why Outlaw was killed.

“Yes.”

“Because they're a bunch of lost souls, retired thieves, outlaws, and murderers, you name it and they're there,” he said.

Daniel seemed to sense what I was going to ask next. “Why did they kill Outlaw?”

I nodded.

“It's complicated,” he said. He ran his hands through his blond hair.

“Please tell me,” I begged.

“Why doesn't your father want you?”

The question put me so off guard; I didn't know what to say. "How do you know he doesn't want me?" I asked hesitantly, trying with all the desperation I felt to make it sound like he had it all wrong.

"You talk in your sleep." His blue eyes sparkled.

I felt my mouth drop. How much had I said in my sleep?

"You talked even more while you were unconscious," he said, with a grin.

"What did I say?" I demanded

"Nothing much, but I got a clear picture that your father hates you," he said.

Why hadn't David told me this? I felt confusion wash over me.

"If you tell me your story then I'll tell you mine," he said after a while.

Could I go that far into my memory and tell it to someone? I hadn't talked about it in years. I made little references to it now and then, but that wasn't the same as talking about, or was it? I just didn't know anymore. I hadn't told anyone in over nine years about what happened on that day, which had so drastically changed my life. Could I talk about it after all these years? Did I even want to talk about it? No, I didn't.

"It isn't a very nice story," I said, maybe he would change his mind.

"Mine isn't either," he said, his voice as calm as if we were discussing the weather.

I gave a sad smile. "I don't know if I can even tell it," I said, after a quiet pause, "I've tried so hard to forget it, to lock it up in the past and throw away the key."

“I know what you mean; you just want to forget about it. Yet you remember it, as if the earth just fell to pieces right in front of your eyes,” he said.

I smiled. “Exactly,” I said. My smile went away.

“Sometimes,” Daniel said, “If we talk, it helps.”

I took a deep breath, and then let it all come back to me. I remembered it as if it were yesterday. “I was six when it started, and up until that time I was the duke’s little daughter, the one that was the apple of her parent’s eyes. I had five brothers; Randal, Charles, and Phillip, were my elder brothers, there was ten years difference between Phillip and me. He was the youngest of the three and absolutely despised me. Then there were my younger brothers,” I said, smiling at the memory, “Robert and Jonathan, who was just a baby.” My smile left as the thought of Jonathan came back. “I loved my brothers.”

Tears came to my eyes. “Everything was perfect...and then he came. A knight had saved the duke’s life in a battle and for that the duke invited him to stay with us. His name was Sir Andrew.”

“Why do you say the duke and not father?” Daniel asked.

“I’ll come to that,” I said “At first, Sir Andrew was very kind and we began to treat him like family. He soon became the duke’s most trusted knight and friend.

Then my brother Randle fell in love with a servant girl and married her. My mother had little problem with it, since her own mother hadn’t been pure royal blood. But the duke, I thought he would kill him, he was so outraged. I remember hiding under one of the tables in the great hall, just watching the whole scene unfold. He insisted that Randle send her away and forget all about her. Randle did the stupidest thing he could have, he fed my father’s anger. “Would you do that to mother?” he asked.

The duke got furious and sent my brother from the room, hurling anything he could find at him. My mother tried to calm him down, but she finally left the hall as well. Then Sir Andrew came out of the shadows along with Coraton, the duke's counselor, they spoke to him in hushed tones. I tried to get a better look at what was going on, that was when Coraton saw me. Before he could say a word, I flew out from under the table, clearly startling everyone in the hall. I dashed for the door and up several stairs towards my mother's rooms. On the way I tripped over a carpet next to the nursery and hit my head on a table so hard that it knocked me out instantly."

I took a deep breath; this was the part that I hated, the part that I dreaded. "When I awoke, mother was holding me, her green eyes held pools of tears that leaked down her pale cheeks..."

"Millie you don't have to tell him this."

I jumped when David came and squatted down beside me. I looked at him with tears in my eyes. "Yes I do. I owe him that much."

"You owe him nothing, Millie." He started to pull me up by my arm.

I yanked away from him and continued to sit. "I need to do this," I said.

"No you don't need to do this," he replied.

"I need to do this," I whispered, tears ran down my cheeks, "for me."

He sat down. "I still don't see..."

"When were you going to tell me that I talked in my sleep?" I said. I stared into his eyes.

He looked to Daniel, who shrugged. "You just talked while you were unconscious," he said, although he still studied Daniel. "I told you not to say anything." His dark blue eyes setting off spark.

Daniel flinched.

They spit things back and forth, but I didn't listen. How many other things was David not telling me? If he hadn't told me this simple little thing, how many bigger things had he kept from me?

"Are you alright, Millie?"

I nodded. I felt better than I had for years. Just talking about, it helped lift a huge load off of my conscience that had been there for so long.

"I'll continue," I said, not even glancing at David, who was sure to be glaring. "Smoke was coming from the nursery. I remember my mother picking me up and holding me closer. Yelling reached our ears; I looked up with tears in my eyes from the pain in my head and held out my arms to a huge man, "Father!" I cried. He glared at me with a hatred that could have scared a bear into its den. Tears streamed down my face and I cuddled closer to mother. "Don't ever call me that again!" he snarled. I went even farther into mother's arms. "You are no longer my daughter." The tears came harder.

"I found out later that there had been a candle on the table that I had hit. It had gone flying into the nursery and had set it ablaze before anyone realized it. My little brother Jonathan had been in that fire. By the time they found where the fire was, it was too late."

I looked up but only saw the face of my little brother; the little brother that I had killed. His big blue eyes, with that cute little button nose below them, a smile that could light up any heart of stone, and his fuzzy reddish, brown hair.

"To make matters worse, Randle and his wife secretly left that night with the help of Charles. When my father found out a few days later, he banished them, including Charles. After that day, things got worse. The Duke put all his anger on me and in a way I was banished as well. I was

confined to my rooms at all times unless I was called for.” I finally looked to Daniel and, for the first time ever, I saw understanding in his eyes. No one had ever understood how difficult it was, until now, except...Outlaw.

“I’d watched the world crumble,” I said.

I let myself finally cry. I cried harder and harder. When David tried to comfort me I pushed him away and got up. I walked back to our camp, I laid my head down on a blanket. I let it all come out like a river, until I was dried out and tired.

## Chapter Nine

The wind blew through the golden orange leaves, making them brush and rub together for the familiar rustling sound of early fall. Along with this, was the sound of the birds singing their songs to make the day pass in a lighter tone and the squirrels busily gathered there nuts for the winter.

‘If only things were that nice down here,’ I thought.

We had been back on the trail for the past three days. Since I had told Daniel of my past, the memory wouldn’t allow me to enjoy anything. Why was I born a clumsy girl that ruined the lives of all those that I loved so dearly? Sure, they said that it was an accident and how was I supposed to not trip all the time. It didn’t help any when little Robert tried to console me. His exact way of putting it was, “you were just being Millie,” in his serious four year old voice. Life will never be the same ever again. I sighed.

David stayed quiet most of the time after trying to cheer me up, but failing miserably. I know he blamed Daniel for what happened that night and glared at him throughout the day and night.

Daniel seemed to be affected by it as well, only in a different way. He withdrew into himself, even more than when Outlaw had died and looked to be in deep thought, at other times I would find him staring at me with a look of regret. What can I say? I’d regret it too if I helped a murderer.

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“We should reach the bridge in a day or so,” said Daniel.

We continued our way through the barren woods. The birds still sang their little songs and the squirrels still gathered their acorns. What would it be like to be a bird or squirrel, without a care in the world? The thought gave me cause to smile. Without a care in the world, now what would it be like, to just fly through the sky or jump from tree branch to tree branch. To sing a song to make the day go faster and work to make a safe warm nest, or to lie on a branch of a maple tree soaking up the sun while all the other squirrels gathered the nuts for the winter.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of finally seeing a smile come on that face again?” I shook my head and looked over to see David as he continued to walk straight ahead.

“What?” I said.

“You were smiling.”

“Just day dreaming,” I said.

“What about?” he asked, still staring ahead.

“Nothing important,” I said, yawning lazily.

“Nothing important, I haven’t seen a smile on your face for I don’t know how long and you say it’s nothing.”

“Yes,” I said.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him turn his head, so that he looked down on me.

“Come on Millie, we’ve been friends too long for this, you can tell me anything. You’re like a sister to me.”

He was obviously hurt by my not telling him, as simple as it was. And he was right; he was like a brother to me.

“Squirrels,” I said.

“Squirrels?” he said, with a frown.

“Yes, squirrels.”

With that I picked up my pace. I didn't feel like talking right now! My head started to throb a bit. I knew that I should probably tell them that I needed to stop for a bit, but didn't feel like it, since that would most likely mean someone would ask me a question that I would have to answer.

“Millie! Run!” shouted David.

I looked back to see a huge brilliant white horse as it charged toward us. The rider on the creature's massive back wore silver armor. The visor of his helmet was up allowing me to see the face of Sir Andrew.

I started to run; Daniel ran ahead of me and David behind. My breath caught in my throat, how could we have been so careless about not keeping our tracks covered? How did we mindlessly leave a trail for him to follow? My legs started to shake and tingle which made it harder to run.

I ran through the woods, I was jumping and tripping over dead branches, roots, and bushes. I felt like a poor animal being hunted for my life. A searing pain came from my leg as I hit it against the bark of a tree. I drew in a breath; my head started to throb even worse. I wished that I had asked for a break, but who knew that we would be on the run through the woods for our lives from a berserk man with a giant sword.

Someone grabbed my arm, and pulled me straight toward a tree; I held my hand up and winced when it came in contact with the tall oak.

“Sorry,” Daniel said, as he continued to drag me into a dense thicket, David still behind us.

“I don’t think he can bring his horse through here,” shouted David.

“That was the plan,” Daniel shouted back.

We kept running, Daniel still held onto my arm. My head throbbed. I stopped, going down on my knees, gulping in air.

“I can’t go on anymore! My head is in pain, my legs ache and I can hardly even breathe!” I said.

Daniel didn’t seem to hear. He had a faraway look in his eye. “Hey, Millie?” he asked.

I looked at him.

“Do you remember how to catch a skunk without getting sprayed?”

I shrugged, this did not sound good “Why?”

He smiled and nodded towards a tree, there at its base were two big skunks. “I’ve got a plan,” he said.

A feeling of dread washed over me. “Now what did I have to do?” I thought, a groan came from my lips. His smile just widened.

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How on earth did I let them talk me into this, I had asked myself at least a thousand times. When Daniel had told us about the plan that had formed in his head, David had been all for it, I on the other hand, had not. They first made me catch the skunks. Alone (well they helped some by getting one of our blankets and making a half circle so that I could herd them towards it)! They said that I was the only one that had ever been able to catch one without getting sprayed (at least not right away)

and that I had a gift with animals. Somehow that won me over and I went after the skunks, using baby talk while what I really wanted to do was take a branch and knock out their brains.

After getting sprayed enough for a life time, I finally caught them in less than two minutes. I couldn't believe it; though it might have had something to do with the blanket/net that the boys had made. We managed to put them in a bag. We then hung the bag loosely from a tree with Daniel holding the end of the rope, hiding behind the trees nearby. When Sir Andrew went under it, Daniel would let go of the rope and bam!

Daniel positioned the skunks' bag directly over where the "grizzly bear" would be on the narrow path that ran through the woods (which Daniel told me was a deer trail that outlaws often use to get around without being caught).

David went ahead around the bend so that it looked as if I were left behind and that Sir Andrew would hopefully think he had a good chance to get me (which he did) and chase me without a thought. Maybe if we're lucky he decided to leave his men behind.

Now I stood in the middle of a very small path waiting for him to come take me back to my doomed life; that is, if the plan doesn't turn out right. If it doesn't, I'll be one mad lady living for the sole purpose of searching out two little men that I will personally kill with my bare hands. I had told them this very thing right before they left me. Daniel had laughed, while David had looked at me, saying with his stare, 'would you really do that to us?' To answer that unspoken question I said, "You guys had better hope this goes right."

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The sound of rustling branches brought me out of my thoughts. I felt my heart pace quicken, along with my breathing. Then just as I got in the position to run, a squirrel ran across the path. A sigh came from somewhere deep inside me. I turned my head slightly, smiling at the thought of a squirrel scaring me, when I saw it. A slight bit of red fabric showed through a thicket to the right of me. My pulse started to pick back up as I heard a noise right next to me. I couldn't stand it anymore, I turned and ran, I heard a crashing noise behind me. I spun my head far enough around to see Sir Andrew as he came after me.

Turning back around, I saw that the turn was coming, quickly. Just to convince him that I was far behind I called out "Wait up!". It seemed to work too, since Sir Andrew picked up his pace. I came around the bend and saw David waiting farther ahead to make it look as though he was coming back for me. When Sir Andrew rounded the bend, David and I were already a good deal ahead of him, but he gained on us rapidly. We heard the startled yelp, and then a thump. I turned my head far enough to see sir Andrew on the ground with two large mad skunks next to him spraying with all of their stinking might.

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We kept on until our limbs were so sore that we could hardly move. I stopped to catch my breath, David, who was right behind me, ran into me causing us both to lose our balance and fall to the ground. I sat up having landed on my face once again; I twisted my head over to see David sprawled out on the ground, as he gulped in air.

"Who's the clumsy one now?" I said.

He smiled. "You are."

I looked at him quizzically

"You stopped right in front of me Millie," he said.

I felt my face getting hot and knew that I must be turning a shade of red. Daniel came back and stood looking down at us. “As much as I would love to catch my breath,” he said, “Sir Andrew is probably right behind us.”

“I doubt that,” David said, “we’re probably miles ahead by now. I think we could take a little rest.”

Daniel looked at him. “Do what you want, but I’m going to keep on going.” He tipped his head towards me, “You going to come with me or stay with him?” he asked. I looked from one to the other; I knew that my choice probably wouldn’t set well with David. Although I trusted him, I still thought that we should keep ahead of Sir Andrew as long as we could, and said as much.

“I don’t think he is close at all,” argued David, “After all he probably lost our trail trying to find water to clean off that retched skunk smell. Here I’ll prove it,” he said. He got up and walked to the edge of the woods where the path started, and just stood there.

“See, no Sir Andrew?” he said.

“David,” I said, “be that as it may, I still think....”

I stopped and screamed, as out of nowhere, a huge grizzly hand came and grabbed David by the arm, pushed him to the ground and put his armor covered foot on David’s stomach. Sir Andrew stared back at us. I saw that his glowing sword point was on David’s chest. Daniel had his dagger out in no time, he handed an extra one to me.

“Well I certainly have you now don’t I, my lady?” Sir Andrew said to me.

I swallowed.

“Now you come right over to me or else I kill your little friend here.”

My chest tightened as panic and horror gripped me making breathing almost impossible; I felt the beat of my heart quicken. My eyes went to Daniel who stood at the ready; he looked like he would attack the man with his bare hands. I gazed into the clear blue eyes of David who was struggling to raise his head. There was only one way to save David.

“You had better come now,” Sir Andrew said.

I started towards him.

“Millie, don’t do it!” David said. The sword tip cut into his skin.

I looked at him as if he had lost his mind. How could he possibly say that with a sword pressed against his body, ready to go through to his heart at any second?

“Come now or else he is dead!” Sir Andrew yelled, his bearded, scarred face contorted into that of a grizzly bear. I knew without a doubt that he would kill David.

“Look at me, Millie?” said David “Don’t listen, just run! Run!” His eyes pleaded through his pain. The sword’s tip went in a little farther into his skin, causing more blood to trickle down soaking into his tunic. I looked away. How could I just leave him to be killed?

I met his gaze, tears spilled over my eyes. “I can’t.” With that, I started to walk towards him and Sir Andrew.

“No! No! Run Millie, run!”

But I kept on, not listening. As soon as Sir Andrew had his hand around my arm in a tight grip, he smiled an evil smile. “Say good bye to your friend.”

My eyes widened in horror as Sir Andrew pushed the blade into David. The breath went out of me and I just stared at him, shock written all over my face. I screamed over and over, and then the tears came. They came

so hard that they shook my body; I gasped for breath, my lungs needed it, just as my heart broke. I looked into his clouded eyes. Then I saw his lips move as he wheezed out one final word. “Run.”

Sir Andrew still had a tight hold on my arm, but I barely felt it as anger welled up in me. With all my might I turned around and drove my dagger into his hand and drew it out, he yelled out in pain and surprise, still he didn't let go of my arm. I leapt forward again and stabbed his shoulder between his armor. That was enough for him to let go. With that I turned around and started to run, grabbing Daniel's arm along the way.

Letting go of Daniel's arm, I ran numbly, only feeling the pain of once again losing someone dear, tears blinded my vision.

## Chapter Ten

I ran, not caring which direction I went, just as long as it was far away from the beast that had taken yet another brother from me. I don't know how long I ran, all I know is that when I saw blue sky up ahead, I doubled my speed. I came out into the open, the trees abruptly ended to meet dirt and the edge of a cliff. My feet wouldn't stop; fear penetrated into me as I sat down hard, but continued to go down a slant till I came almost to the very edge of the cliff. Strong hands took hold of me and pulled me up. Frankly I didn't care whether I fell off the edge of a cliff or not.

“Are you alright?” Daniel asked.

I shook my head, my vision still blurred with tears that had not yet fallen.

Daniel gently brought me to my feet and led me back to the cover of the trees where he made me sit down on a rotten log.

“We can only rest for a few seconds. Then back on the run,” he said.

I just nodded, tears still in my eyes. This was all my fault, if I hadn’t decided to climb those stupid rocks, the slide wouldn’t have happened and I wouldn’t have gotten hurt. If I hadn’t made them climb, we would still be far ahead of Sir Andrew and David would never have been killed. A sob broke from my throat and racked my body. Daniel watched helplessly as I cried my heart out.

“Millie, I need to tell you something, and I wouldn’t blame you if you ended up hating me.”

I turned toward him, what on earth could he say that would make me hate him more than I already do?

“You remember when I told you that Outlaw was my father?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well...I...he wasn’t my real father. He’s my uncle and stepfather,” he said, “You see my mother’s father was in debt to a knight, in payment of that debt he gave the knight my mother. Well, she fell in love with the knight’s brother, which happened to be Outlaw. They ran off together after she found out she was going to have me,” he said.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“Because Sir Andrew is that knight, he’s my father,” he said, in a defeated voice.

My heart pounded in my ears, Daniel was Sir Andrew’s son. I looked at him in disbelief.

“Sir Andrew went after them; thankfully, he lost their trail five days from Kentmorr. Outlaw and mother made it to Kentmorr and Outlaw became a stable man for the duke, your father. Outlaw and my mother married, and in time, I had a little sister and brother, named Abby and David.”

He looked at me “David was my brother, yet he never knew it. Outlaw and mother kept me hidden when they found out Sir Andrew was once again on their trail. That is why no one knew about me. He found us in the middle of the night and had our house set on fire. We all escaped except for David. We thought he was dead until a few weeks ago.”

I didn’t know what to say, but then a question came to mind. “Where is your mother and Abby?”

“They live with my grandmother in the hills, west of Hartman village; it’s about a two day ride from there to the hills. Outlaw and I lived with Laurence. That is, until the villagers found out that he was Sir Andrew’s brother. Sir Andrew raided their village quite often; we were lucky to escape with our lives.”

“That was why the villagers were so mad.”

He nodded, “Well, we have to go now, Millie.”

He helped me to my feet and once again we were on our way.

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We made our way to the edge of the gorge again, shock still going through me. How could it be that Daniel was Sir Andrew’s son? Frankly that didn’t help anything, it just added to the fact that David was just killed not only by the man that is trying to make me his bride, but also his uncle! What kind of family is this? At least my father doesn’t try to

kill me. Although I think I might be better off dead, than live the life that I've been forced into for nearly ten years.

Daniel got a rope out from a bush and started to tie it around a tree near the cliff's edge.

"Where in the world did that come from?" I asked, my face all scrunched up; which must have been a sight, my hair not having been combed for weeks.

"Hey when you're an outlaw always running for your life, you learn how to play the game of hide and seek."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that we have certain things tucked away all over the forest to save our 'beeps' (I put "beeps" instead of the actual cuss word since it isn't very ladylike for a duke's daughter to repeat) from being strung up." He sounded really ticked off.

I just nodded. Then I noticed that he was testing the strength of the rope and putting it over the gorge's ridge.

"Wait," I said, "we are climbing down the edge of a 3,000 foot gorge?"

"Yes. Either this or would you rather go down a river that leads into a water fall," he looked at me with one of those annoying smiles. "And it's only a 100 foot gorge, not 3,000."

Somehow the thought of a waterfall didn't sound as terrifying as climbing down the edge of the gorge and falling to my death. I took a deep breath, "I want to go down the river."

Daniel looked at me as if I had a spear in my chest. "I am not going to let you do that. We could get killed!"

“Being killed is better than marrying your father and becoming your new step mother; frankly, that does not sound very appealing.” I had made a decision and I was going to stick with that decision.

He was quiet and then started to head off in another direction. We walked hurriedly till we came to a large quiet river that flowed gently along.

“This isn’t exactly how I pictured it from your description,” I said.

“I was describing what it will be like further down,” he said, as he started to pull on a tree branch.

After standing there for a few seconds, I said in an exasperated voice, “You do know that however long you pull, that isn’t coming off.”

He pulled more and a makeshift raft appeared out of the trees and bushes, the front plastered with them, for what I assumed was camouflage.

“How did that get there?”

“Like I said before, when you’re an outlaw always on the run for your life...”

“...you learn the game of hide and seek,” I finished for him.

He just smiled. Then we heard rustling in the trees behind us. Daniel hurriedly pushed the boat in the water and motioned for me to get on. I climbed on, while Daniel got a strong piece of wood that was about 10 foot long. He hopped on behind me after giving the raft a push. He pushed the pole on the bottom of the river bed as fast as he could. And I could soon hear water crash on rocks and trees or whatever it crashed against that had fallen into the river. A few minutes later I saw raging

white waves and the raft started to bounce around. Water sprayed my face as I hung on. Then I saw no more water, just thin air! I closed my eyes and hung on when I felt the raft fall. I screamed as I hit water. I heard Daniel laugh. I looked behind me to see what was so funny and that was when I noticed the two foot waterfall we had just come down.

“I thought you said it could kill us!” I said.

“It can. But that wasn’t it,” he said.

“Then where is it?” I asked. My heart really started to pound. If that little one almost killed me, what would the big one do to me?

He tilted his head even as I felt the boat tip. I looked down into an endless sea of mist. It seemed like time stood still as we went over the edge. And that was when I screamed with all the life in me, my hands slipped from their hold on the raft. I kept screaming even when I hit the frigid water.

Chapter Eleven

I felt cold water seep through my trousers and shirt. I felt sand cover my face, my lungs burnt with a passion as water sputtered out. I opened my eyes; they were met with the sun brightly shining on my face, no doubt my nose would be burnt.

“You almost gave me a heart attack, Millie,” a voice said from above. I opened my eyes wider; Daniel looked down on me, completely drenched from head to foot.

“Of all the things you could have done. You had to keep screaming when we went under water and swallowed half of the lake into your lungs. You could have died!” He screamed it at me like it would change the fact that I nearly died.

“Like I could help it,” I said, half moaning. I pushed myself up, my wet waist length hair pulled the other way, making it harder. I looked around, we were in the middle of the gorge, its sides towering high above us. Rocks and sand covered its floor. There was not a single tree or blade of grass in sight, all of it was brown with a river flowing through it.

“How long have we been down here?” I asked, twisting my hair between my hands to get as much water out of it as possible. It instantly felt lighter.

“Ten minutes at the most. I first had to drag you from the water and then get it out of your lungs,” he said, “Your hair sure made things harder.”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at him; I tilted my head a bit.

“And how pray tell, would you mind explaining to me, did you do that?” I asked him, and laughed when he turned a shade of red.

“Just like I would anyone else!” he said, as he averted his gaze from me.

“How comforting,” I said.

“Come on we had better get moving. The sooner we climb that wall, the sooner you’ll be at Dove’s ridge.”

“Isn’t there another way than climbing it?” I asked.

“No,” he said and started to walk toward the side of the gorge

I sighed, got to my feet and followed. My wet hair was heavy on my head. “I think I should cut it,” I said to myself.

Daniel looked at me. “Cut what,” he asked.

Had I said that out loud? I caught up to him, “My hair.”

He stopped. “Why.”

“It’s getting to heavy.”

“How much will you take off?” he asked.

“I don’t know? Why should you even care?” I asked. I wish he would just shut that big yap of his. “Shouldn’t we go? I mean, there are better things to do than talk about my hair.”

He turned around and started back towards the cliff, “If you ever do cut it, I’d like to have it,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’d like to make it into a coat,” he laughed.

I just rolled my eyes.

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I watched Daniel slowly climb up the cliff. The plan was a simple one; he would get to the top and find a rope, which once again was hidden for outlaws (how they can remember where they put all the stuff I'll never know) He would tie it to something and then pull me up with the rope round my middle. The hardest part of it had been to find an easy way up.

He made it to the top and struggled to pull himself up. He disappeared for a few minutes then came back to the edge and dropped the rope over the side

“Come on up, Millie!” he shouted down, his voice echoed off the gorge’s walls.

I tied the rope around my waist and pulled on it three times. My hands gripped the rope with all of the strength in me; I closed my eyes hard and gritted my teeth as Daniel began to pull me up.

The pulling stopped, I opened my eyes. My gaze went downwards, but it quickly went back up. I held the rope even tighter; Daniel still didn’t start to pull again. I glanced up to see him at the edge of the cliff, lying on his stomach, his nose only five inches away from my own.

“Get to pulling now!” I ordered.

“You scared, Millie?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “I’m terrified.”

When I made it to the top I let out a huge breath of air and realized that I had been holding it the whole trip up. Daniel started to untie the rope from a dead stump, as I untied my waist. Then he took it and threw it over the edge.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“So that someone else can use it,” he said.

“But why not just leave it tied to the stump.”

“I don’t know, ask Rolf the next time you see him,” he said, mentioning the outlaw leader. “Now let’s go.”

I looked around for the first time. We were on a wide path with a wood on one side and meadow on the other that abruptly ended to collide with a thin line of trees. Above all of those trees in the distance were two tall towers. I walked up the path far enough to see around the thin lining. There it stood, tall and majestic, Dove’s Ridge.

I turned to tell Daniel that I could see the castle, but he wasn’t there. My heart pounded in my ears as I looked around. He was gone. Had Sir Andrew taken him and was now after me, hiding in the trees to catch me next? Thousands of other thoughts crossed my mind but that was the only one that stuck. Then my heart slammed out of my chest. What if he had killed Daniel just like he had killed David? My heart stopped beating, my body went ridged and stiff as hot breath fell of my neck.

“Boo,” A voice said.

I jumped high in the air and turned all at the same time causing me to land on my bottom. Daniel looked down on me, laughter came from his mouth.

“Why you no good... no good... if I weren’t a lady of honor I would call you a very rude name.” I stood up and walked away, not able to finish my thoughts. “I think I dislike you more now than ever.”

“Millie, I’m sorry,” he said, as he came up behind me. I stood with my arms crossed over my chest. “I couldn’t resist it.”

“You couldn’t resist it. You just couldn’t resist!” I yelled at him. “Here I thought that Sir Andrew had come and killed you and all you can say is that you just couldn’t resist it?”

“I’m sorry Millie, I didn’t think of it like that,” he said.

“Oh yes, forgive him, Millie. He just couldn’t resist.”

We both turned around to see Sir Andrew leaning against a tree, in his hands he was casually tossing a rock the size of an apple from one hand to the other. How could this be? He couldn’t have climbed up the cliff that fast. He saw the shock on my face and laughed with all the hatred he must feel towards me.

“Surprised?” he asked, as he pushed away from the tree and took a step toward us. I stepped closer to Daniel. “After you went for that little ride down the river I found a much, much easier route. You see, before I left, your father suggested that should I be in this area that there was a secret tunnel leading under the gorge. It was much faster than the climb that you and your friend made. Your father had a feeling Dove’s Ridge is where you were headed.”

I looked at Daniel; he never once took his gaze off of Sir Andrew, even as he whispered, “When I give the signal, run.”

“And what would that be?” I whispered, trying hard not to move my lips.

His answer was to turn around and push me backwards, just as a rock went whizzing by my head.

“Run,” he said.

I didn’t need to be told twice, I got up and ran. Halfway up a hill I heard a loud thump and then I felt a heavy weight land on my legs. I fell to the ground, almost hitting my head on a protruding rock. I blocked it with my hand, my entire weight landed on it. I yelled out in pain as I felt the rock go through my skin. I picked my hand up, my eyes widening in horror at the sight of blood gushing out of the newly opened wound.

I turned around to see what was so heavy on my legs and there lay Daniel. An arrow stuck out of his calf. His upper part was twisted as if he had turned to see what had happened, he had a gigantic red mark on his forehead. Was he dead? My mind searched for answers. I found my answer when I looked down to see a rock lying next to his head. My eyes went to the path leading down the hill. Sir Andrew slowly made his way up, looking as if he had all day. I glanced up the hill to where I could see the very roof of Dove's Ridge.

I looked back to Daniel. I could easily leave him and make it to safety, but I couldn't. Even if it meant I had to spend the rest of my life miserable, I couldn't leave him, even if he was dead. I just couldn't do it, and something deep down inside told me I was doing the right thing. "Maybe I don't hate him as much as I thought" I whispered.

I moved to put myself between him and his father; funny how a father and son could have the same blood in them and be completely different in every other way.

"Well I finally have you," Sir Andrew said, "You've caused me a lot of trouble, Malinda." A smug smile was on his face. He pulled out the dagger I had stabbed him with when he had killed David. What was he going to do with it? "Now I am going to give you a choice," he said.

"How considerate of you," said I, my voice dripped with sarcasm.

The once smug smile was now replaced with a scowl, he slapped me across my face. My wounded hand went to my cheek, leaving a trail of blood. I stifled a scream, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing that it hurt.

"You will address me with respect young woman; I hold your very life in my hands." He seemed to calm down, "Now, as I was saying, I'm going to give you a choice. Either you can come back peacefully and as

soon as we are married I'll let you go where ever you want, or you can fight the whole time and I'll make the rest of your life long and miserable.”

Was he giving me a way out? That is not the man I've known. I might as well go fighting because one thing was for sure, I was not going to let him win easily.

“I will never ever go with you on my own accord!” I yelled at him.

He shrugged. “Have it your way,” he said. He held up his hand, where a bandage was covered in dried blood. He started to unwrap it and study the wound. “Do you remember this?” he asked, showing me the palm of his hand that was gushing out a strange yellow/green goo with blood sticking to an open cut. He then turned his hand around so that I could see that the same gooey mixture was on that side as well. My stomach churned, I closed my eyes and turned my head away from the disgusting sight before me.

“You gave this to me after the death of your dear friend. You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, ruining this hand.” He studied the wounded hand a bit longer, “A lot of pain too.”

He looked at me his, black eyes staring daggers. “So I'm going to cause you that same pain,” he said, “And more.” With that he took the dagger and stabbed it in my already throbbing hand. I screamed as I felt the cold steel go through my skin and bones pinning it to the ground.

“I think I'm going to enjoy this,” Sir Andrew said.

I stared at him through tears. “You won't get away with this. Even my father isn't this heartless.” I screamed out in pain when he played teasingly with the dagger by turning it in my hand, still pinned to the ground.

“I won’t get away with saving his daughter from a bunch of worthless outlaws?” A smile had come to his lips, showing me yellow rotted teeth. How interesting that Sir Andrew lived a life of leisure, his teeth rotting, while Outlaw had lived in the woods with perfect white pearls.

“You disgust me,” I said.

He frowned. “I see your outlaw there is still alive. I’ll just have to remedy that.”

His smile returned when he grabbed his sword, the same sword that had killed David was now going to take yet another person’s life away. Then he stopped and looked at me.

“I started the fire,” he said.

What on earth was he talking about? What fire? He saw my quizzical look.

“The one that killed your little brother; there was a candle already aflame on the table, as you well know. When I came over your pathetic little body lying on the floor, I realized that there was a way to get rid of yet another one of your useless brothers.” He smiled. “So I started the fire.”

“But why?” It was all I could even say or think.

“Because, your brothers are all that stand between me and being the next duke of Kentmorr. Having gotten rid of your two older brothers and one younger brother, now all I have is two more and then you.”

He was going to kill my brothers? Then another thought dawned on me, that was why marrying me was so important. Without marrying me he would have no chance of ever becoming duke. That was when it hit me, I hadn’t started the fire! I wasn’t the one who had killed my little

brother. It wasn't my fault, it was the fault of the man before me; he had killed Jonathan.

Anger welled up in me as he once again started towards Daniel's unconscious form. Without even thinking of how it might feel, I pulled the dagger from my hand and stabbed Sir Andrew's leg. He stopped and looked at me, pulled the dagger out, studied it, then took my hand and stabbed it once again into the ground. I screamed. He then took up his sword in one hand and my free hand in the other. He held the sword's razor sharp blade above it. He was going to cut it off. He was going to cut my hand off!

I started to struggle for all I was worth. I screamed frantically, hoping against hope that someone would hear me. He brought the sword down, then stopped, his face etched with pain. He dropped my hand and his sword, his eyes widened. He staggered forward then fell down face first. An arrow protruded from the back of his head; I stared in shock at the lifeless body that lay in front of me.

My attention was pulled away when I felt a pain in my leg. I swooned when I saw the gash Sir Andrew's sword had made when it fell from his lifeless hands. It hurt like crazy as the blade continued to cut through my skin. I would have removed it but had to work on getting the knife out of my hand first.

I heard a slight whistle; it brought my focus away from the dagger to the road. I saw a man coming up the hill, bow and arrow in hand. He reached where I sat. Kind black eyes looked at me.

"Outlaw," I said.

He smiled at me just before everything went black and all of the pain disappeared.

## Chapter Twelve

The sun shone down on my face as I stood on the battlements over the main gate. I took it all in to make up for the last four and a half weeks of bed rest, waiting for my leg to heal. Still after all of these weeks it hurt, but itched more than anything. It didn't bother me nearly as much as my hand, which sent pain through my body if I so much as moved a finger.

Finally being at Dove's Ridge was wonderful! Randle was more than happy to let me stay with him and his family, and furious when he learned of what Sir Andrew had tried to carry out. He grew quiet distressed when he was told of David's death and of how it had come to pass. My brother sent a few of his men out to find and bring back the body for a proper burial. But the guards could not find the place in which Daniel had described. It was always possible that someone or something had gotten to it before the soldiers could.

When Randle heard of how Daniel and Outlaw, whose real name turned out to be Landerbuff (I would have changed my name too), had saved my life from Sir Andrew he was very thankful. Just guess how happy he was to learn that Sir Andrew was now dead! He rewarded Outlaw, I mean Landerbuff, with land and animals to start his own farm. He also promised that he would let Daniel and Outlaw have all the supplies needed for the first ten years, as long as they would sell Dove's Ridge the best livestock that they sold. He also promised lifelong protection to him and his family. My sister-in-law, Mary, told me also that he would let Daniel, if he chose to, train to be a knight.

I sighed and continued to let the sun hit my face, as the wind played with my hair, which I had cut to the middle of my back, (and yes I gave the hair to Daniel). They were leaving today to get started on building their farm, and later after it was built, return to the hill for their family. I sighed again and looked down to where two horses stood saddled in the courtyard far below me.

Daniel was down there to look over his horse, he patted the creature on its nose. His gaze averted up to where I stood, then turned back to the horse. I spun round to I watch the waves, for Dove's Ridge sat on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The sun had started to set, making the sky have a pinkish tint to it. So much had changed in the last months, from being locked in a tower, to living with outlaws (not really somewhere I wanted to be), to being free. And this last month of bed rest allowed Daniel and me to become...um...friends of sorts.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Daniel's voice said from beside me a few minutes later.

"Yes," I said.

"How does it feel to be out of bed?"

"Fine," I said.

"Just fine, not wonderful?" he asked, reminding me of David when he tried to find out why I was smiling at squirrels.

"Just fine," said I. "My leg itches and hurts every time I move it, but it does feel wonderful not to be in a bed, yes." A smile came to my lips.

He laughed a deep, rich, sound. "I'll bet it does."

He was just about to say something else when Outlaw called to him, telling him to get his big “beep” down there and on the horse.

Daniel smiled “Guess this means goodbye, eh?”

“Yes, I guess it does.” I turned and faced him, my warm, burgundy, velvet skirt getting caught in the cold autumn wind. “Don’t hit your thumb with a hammer and don’t smack Outlaw with any wood...and take care of that leg,” I said.

He laughed again “Well I had better get down there before he beats my...hum...before he beats me. I’ll see you in a year.”

I looked at him curiously. “Why will I see you in a year?”

“I am going to train to be a knight,” he said, his cheeks flushed bright red.

“Then I’ll see you in a year,” I said.

He nodded, walked down the stairs back to the courtyard and jumped on his horse. A guard opened the door, he then pulled down the draw bridge and away they went.

I stood there and just watched Outlaw and Daniel ride off on the path far above the ocean leading them away. Once again, people who had become close to me were leaving, only this time they would come back.

The sunset of baby pink and gold reflected on the water, giving it the look of a large tapestry hanging from the world’s end. A tear slid down my face. I turned away not able to watch anymore and started to walk back to my chamber. A year from now, I would once again stand there, but then, they will be turning their backs to the woods and facing me. And who knows, maybe when the duke hears it was Sir Andrew that lit the nursery on fire, he will let me return to Kentmorr, or at least

acknowledge me as his daughter. Then I would once again be in the loving embrace of my mother, maybe, just maybe.

*The End*

**People in the book,**

- 1. The duke of Kentmorr... Millie's father**
- 2. The duchess of Kentmorr...Millie's mother**

- 3. Sir Andrew... the duke's favorite knight**
- 4. Coraton...the duke's counselor**
- 5. Randle...Millie's brother**
- 6. Charles...Millie's brother**
- 7. Phillip... Millie's brother**
- 8. Richard...Millie's brother**
- 9. Lady Clair...Millie's lady in waiting**
- 10. Verlon...Family's tutor**
- 11. Norlean...Millie's maid**
- 12. Valichina...the duchesses' personal maid**
- 13. Rolf... king of outlaws**
- 14. Robby...Rolf's brother**
- 15. Outlaw...an outlaw**
- 16. Daniel...Outlaw's spy**
- 17. David...the stable boy**