

Life Without Life

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Chapter 1:

It is the year of our Lord, thirteen hundred and thirty-eight. For many years, Emily-Elizabeth, her two brothers, and her sister have lived on their Lord's estate in Nottinghamshire, Britain. Their parents, gone from this forsaken, heartless world, died some time ago. Their father, a peasant who toiled on the land, was forced to fight for the baron against an opposing Lord. There he died in the heat of battle. Their mother, God rest her soul, was murdered by thieves who were pillaging the village. Emily was thirteen at the time.

For her, there was no time to think about growing up: at eight, she was taught how to keep house and at twenty she was to be married and tend to her own home. Now, at sixteen, she is as mature as she can be. The life she had so longed for has dissipated. She is now an abandoned peasant girl forced to tend to a home, a field of crops, her two brothers, and her sister. It is impossible to even consider a life of her own.

"Kathleen! Kathleen Marie, come here!" Emily-Elizabeth calls as she frantically searches the grounds for her lost sister. "Thomas John, have you seen Kathleen today? She was here a moment ago."

"Nay, I have not. I thought John Michael was watching her today."

"Nay, John is working in the fields. The Baron wants the harvest to be finished *before* the winter months. Will you go find her and bring her here?"

As Thomas John leaves to go search for his absent sister, Emily-Elizabeth finds herself meandering about the house. It is an unusual house, actually. The floor is earth and the only light is either shed by a miniature window on one wall or a tiny fire in the heart of the room. It is one immense room and in one niche stands a bed frame covered with hay stolen from the stables. The bed is only large enough to fit two people, so Emily-Elizabeth had decided that the youngest should sleep there; she and John Michael, the second oldest, slept on the dirt floor. Lying in an adjacent corner, is an average-sized chest. In it their mother kept some memorabilia. After her mother died, she never dared to open it. It just stood there, staring back at her, expressionless.

She snatches up a rug that is lying on the floor and carries it outside. As she is beating the rug with a broom, a young boy appears and inhales the dust.

"Could you please stop thrashing out that rug? It is making me. . . a-choo!"

Emily-Elizabeth turns around to see a young man standing before her. He is dressed in tatters but his broad shoulders tell her he is definitely a laborer, if not in the fields than somewhere else. *He reminds me of my father*, she says to herself.

"Sorry. I was not paying attention. I rarely do nowadays."

"It's quite all right. Are you by any chance Emily-Elizabeth, the farmer's daughter? I was told I might find you here."

"Indeed I am. And you are. . .?"

"Oh, my name is Timothy. I am an apprentice at the Blacksmith's shop down the road. Did you know that you are well known around here?"

"It is because I manage so much. I have been told I would have made an excellent wife."

"You are not married?!"

"You sound quite surprised, Timothy. No, I am not married."

"I am only surprised because an angelic girl like yourself should be in the arms of an admirable man."

"An admirable man such as yourself?" she questions playfully.

"Maybe. And what about your own life? Have you no time for yourself?"

"Never. Both my parents have been dead for three years. I was forced to tend to the field during the harvest and look after my younger siblings. I must take over from whence my mother and father left off."

"Do you have any time for companions?" he asks with a grin on his face.

"Nay. I do not have any companions, except if you would consider the elderly wives in the field as friends."

"Shocking! Who do you have to talk to?"

"I usually sing to myself as I am working. It's a way to get my mind off of loneliness."

"Do you suppose you might be able to find time to be friends with me?"

"I would be more than happy to find time in my busy life to be friends with you!"

"Well, I'd best be getting back to the shop. I was only supposed to be gone for a short while. I will talk to you in the future."

As Timothy walks away, Emily-Elizabeth realizes she may never see that poor boy again. She shrugs her shoulders and brings the rug back into the house. *I wonder if Timothy can find a way for me to forget my past?* she thinks to herself.

Chapter 2:

On another side of the manor lives a vivacious boy named Matthew. He is the Baron's son and is treated as such. He lives quite differently from Emily-Elizabeth, yet somehow is so similar. He must face the fact that some day, if not sooner, he will be compelled to marry another Lord's daughter. His father, the Baron of Nottinghamshire, only hopes for his son's happiness. What he does not realize is that his son thinks he is in love.

"Matthew, do you remember my good friend, the Baron of Cannock?"

"Aye, father, how could I not forget? You have been telling me continuously that I am to marry his daughter. But you do not seem to understand."

"What is there to comprehend? You should be privileged to be one of the favored ones to be betrothed to her."

"Aye, well, what of them?" he says bluntly.

"I am inviting them to a banquet to commemorate your marriage! All the arrangements have been made and the banquet will be held in January."

"Father, you do not understand! Then again, how could you? I am devoted to someone else."

"What is this devotion you speak of?" the Baron inquires.

"It is a name I cannot nor will not utter. I am under a secret oath not to reveal who she is or how we happened to rendezvous." With a tap of his feet, Matthew is outside the front gate of the castle.

The castle size itself is immeasurable. It occupies most of the grounds of the manor and is located on a low mountaintop. Surrounding the castle is a wall and beyond that wall is the village of Nottinghamshire. Once inside the main iron gate of the wall, stand within the courtyard. To one side there is an apple orchard; to the other is the servant's ward. Directly in the center lies a waterfountain statue of Ceres, goddess of agriculture, standing among a meadow of lilacs.

Matthew storms out of the castle and proceeds into the orchard. He recollects the first person he ever met here:

"Matthew, why must we meet like this, so secretly?"

"I do not wish for my father to find us hither. It is for that reason we must never see each other again!"

"Matthew, could you not reason with him, tell him of our love for each other. He is sure to understand how you feel for me."

"Em, I do love you, you know that. It's just that I

cannot go against my father's wishes. I must tell
you adieu."

Matthew attempts to forget that last kiss they had experienced, but it is implanted into his mind. The aroma of the autumn flowers in the orchard keep reminding him of the first time he had laid eyes upon that maiden. *That lonely peasant girl*, he thinks, as he goes into the stables to fetch his horse. *I wonder if she still remembers me.*

Chapter 3:

That evening, Emily-Elizabeth cannot sleep. All she keeps thinking about is her past. She gets up from her disturbing slumber and walks outside into the tranquil night air. *It is so peaceful at night*, she sighs to herself as she wanders on the dirt road. The air smells of winter and she knows that the townspeople will be disguising as performers to visit the Lord for the annual Christmas celebration.

Ah, the Lord. The Baron's son. She can no longer endure the misery of the time she had seen him last. That was unfortunately the final time she ever tasted his lips. A horse approaching the road awakens her from her mind's mirage.

"It cannot be Emily-Elizabeth, can it?! It cannot be you!" the young man says as he dismounts his horse.

"You know my name, kind sir. Everyone here knows my name, but there be only one who knows my heart. I have left him as well as my heart behind me."

"Emily-Elizabeth, it is you! Only you would be able to look upon the face that you see and obliterate it," he says as he advances toward a light glistening from the fire in the house.

"Matthew!! It cannot possibly be you!! I thought you would have been married by now! What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"I was out for a ride and did not expect to meet up with you." Before Emily-Elizabeth can protest, Matthew leans over to touch her lips with his own. It brings back every memory of the first time they had kissed, beneath the willow tree in the orchards of the castle. Just as the first kiss, this one made her feel as if she was surrendering her mind and soul into an illusion in which delicate flowers opened their velvet petals to her every touch. She gently pushes him away.

"What was that for?!" she asks, astounded but what has just occurred.

"It is but a token of my endless love," he says with a broad smile on his sympathetic face. She cannot see his entire face or any intricate details, but his soft, brown hair fell ever so lightly in front of his eyes. He moves his head slightly to remove his hair from his eyes. Emily-Elizabeth leans over and moves his hair away with her fingertips.

He pulls away abruptly and mounts his horse. Telling her he must go, he kisses her forehead and rides off into the moonlight. As Emily-Elizabeth wanders back into the house, she pinches herself just to make sure that what has just happened is not all a hallucination. She goes over to the bed and draws the blanket over Kathleen and Thomas, and finally curls up beside her brother John on the floor by the fire.

Chapter 4:

Because of the parched Summer season, drought had occurred and the crops failed to grow in early Autumn. To make matters worse, the Baron placed a vexatious tariff on the lands. The townspeople were forced to give virtually everything they owned in order to pay this tax. Now that autumn has arrived, everyone is gathering the little belongings they have left in order to endure the upcoming winter.

Emily-Elizabeth cannot endure these conditions as well as the new taxes, and is compelled to swindle food in order to survive. It is not much, though-- a scrap of bread here, an apple there. As the colder weather comes, she is stealing two or three apples at a time and whole loaves of bread.

One day, while her brothers are working in the fields and her sister is at the bookshop, the Sheriff and two of the Baron's guards come knocking at her door.

"Who is it?" Emily-Elizabeth asks through the locked door.

"It's the sheriff! Open up the door immediately!" cries a foreboding voice from the opposite side of the door.

Emily-Elizabeth unlocks the door to her house and encounters the most dreaded and feared man of Nottinghamshire, the Sheriff.

Trying to be polite, Emily-Elizabeth asks, "Can I help you, Sheriff?"

"Is this the home of Emily-Elizabeth, the farmer's daughter?"

"Aye, Sheriff, it is. May I ask what for?"

"Emily-Elizabeth, you have been seen stealing bread from Jack, the baker, and apples from Mrs. Smiths' grocery stand. You are under arrest for the crime of theft. I will have to ask you to accompany us so that your sentence can be carried out," the sheriff says as he escorts her out the door and onto the dirt road.

"I do not understand. I have not stolen anything! I am not a thief!"

As she is being taken away by the sheriff's guards, Timothy scurries out of the Blacksmith's shop. "Emily-Elizabeth, where are you being taken?"

"Close your mouth, youthful sprite!" one of the guards remarks, shoving Timothy to the ground. "Keep walking!" he demands to Emily-Elizabeth.

They walk to the iron gate of the Castle of Nottinghamshire and halt. Two other guards, standing opposite them, open the gate. Emily-Elizabeth hears the massive gate thundering behind her and knows her fate has now been sealed. *What about Thomas and John and Kathleen!* her mind screams as she is brought before the Baron in the great hall. From the corner of her eye she notices the knights and their

ladies scrutinizing her as she crosses the floor. When she approaches the Baron, she raises her head and is face to face with Matthew!

"What crime have you committed that you be set before me?" asks the Baron, not a smile upon his solemn face.

"She has been caught swindling from the marketplace, milord," the sheriff announces, kneeling in front of the Baron.

"This is nonsense! Sheriff, I do not have time to deal with such petty crimes as you set before me. I have lands to protect. Send her down to the dungeonroom to wait for the sentence!"

"Aye, milord. Come with me, peasant woman!" he says, seizing her arm and hauling her across the great hall and over to a flight of stairs.

"Sheriff, stop! Let me escort the peasant woman to the dungeonroom," Matthew says, crossing the threshold of the great hall.

The Sheriff gives Matthew a doubtful look but the Baron bids him to stop. "Sheriff, allow my son to escort the prisoner to the dungeonroom," says the Baron sternly.

"Aye, milord," he bows graciously.

Matthew strides over to Emily-Elizabeth, takes her arm from the sheriff, and leads her away. Without saying a word, they walk down a curved staircase leading into the dungeon room. Matthew brings her to a chamber at the far end of a long corridor and gently pushes her in.

"I am truly sorry I have to do this to you, Em," fastening the cell door as he speaks. "I just have one thing I ask: Why did you do it? Why did you have to steal from the marketplace?"

"Matthew, I swear to you, I was helpless. We had no food and we were practically starving- -"

"That's no excuse! As the Baron's son I must see to it that order is kept on my father's lands. What you have done is a crime and the punishment is likely to be banishment from all of my father's lands."

"Please, Matthew, have mercy upon me! I only did what I had to do so I could survive to see you!"

"Emily, please, stop this! I am to be married within the next two months!"

"Matthew, what are you saying? Do you not love- -"

"I am saying that it is probably for the best that you are to be banished! I must go! Adieu!" he says as he marches away.

"Matthew, please! Do not leave me here! I do not belong here!"

Chapter 5:

It is the year of our Lord, thirteen hundred and thirty-eight. The day: 24 November. I have been in isolation in this pit for nearly one week and just now they have given me paper and ink. They say my punishment is banishment but I have not even gone above to see the Baron about my sentence. I might as well be banished, though. I have lost my Matthew and he will be married shortly. Occasionally a Baron's son can be just as stubborn as his father! I just hope I get out of here alive so that I may live out my sentence.

Truly yours,
Emily-Elizabeth

It is the year of our Lord, thirteen hundred and thirty-eight. The day: 28 November. I have just received word that my sister, Kathleen Marie, has come down with The Fever. I asked and pleaded with the guards to let me go back to my weak sister, but they would not believe me. They thought I was lying just to get out of prison! I must see her before she becomes worse! If they find these papers, they will surely burn them. "It is a plot against the King!" they would say. Such fools they are!

Truly yours,
Emily-Elizabeth

It is the year of our Lord, thirteen hundred and thirty-eight. The day: 1 December. Already the colder weather has arrived. Either that or the castle is very drafty! I am to leave this chamber on the eve of 5 December, pack my belongings, and leave this land "as quickly and as quietly as possible." The feasting will begin for my Matthew's wedding and I do not wish to interfere. My Matthew, ha! He is no longer mine and apparently never was!

Truly yours,
Emily-Elizabeth

It is the year of our Lord, thirteen hundred and thirty-nine. The day: 3 January. It has now been a month since I last wrote. They told me I could leave to see my sister but they lie! They never expected me to leave! They expect me to remain here until I die of either starvation or of self pity! I must go now, there someone here to see me.

Truly yours,
Emily-Elizabeth

"What do you want?" she says as she is greeted by a peculiar young face she has never before seen.

"I have come to speak with Emily-Elizabeth, the farmer's daughter."

"You have come to the right chamber. Who might you be?"

"My name is Josette. I have come to ask you for a small favor if you be so kind."

"Are you Josette of Cannock, the one who is betrothed to my Matthew?"

"Aye, but *your* Matthew? What on earth are you talking about?!"

"I am sorry. I always find myself identifying him as such. Please excuse me for being so impolite."

"I beg your pardon but, why do you call him your Matthew? I was told he was not married to anyone."

"He is *not* married at the moment."

"I don't understand. Please, continue."

"Aye, milady. There was a time from whence I believed Matthew could love but one soul. That soul was mine. For that reason, I find myself calling him 'my Matthew'."

"You speak of a love you had in the past. Do you still love? Or has Matthew not returned your love?"

"At one time I thought he did love, but recently my thoughts have changed. He seems so heartless and distant. I think he never wants to see me or be near me again."

"I see your point. As I was riding into town I met up with a very handsome, young man. I am not sure, but I think he works for the Blacksmith. Do you know of whom I am referring to?"

"Aye, that I do. You are speaking of my friend Timothy, the Blacksmith's apprentice. Why do you ask of him?"

"I was thinking, if I can get you out of here, you may be able to help me with Timothy."

"I would be more than happy to help, but how do you plan on getting me out of here?"

"I haven't exactly thought about it yet. Give me time and I am sure I can figure something out."

Chapter 6:

"Your Excellency, I have a proposition for you," Josette says as she reenters the great hall. "If you and my father, the Baron of Cannock, wish for me to marry your son, Matthew, I ask to be granted one wish."

"What is it you ask of me, milady?" questions the Baron of Nottinghamshire.

"That you have the prisoner Emily-Elizabeth be permitted to attend to her sick and dying sister and then have her banishment be carried out as ordered."

"Have you gone mad, child?! Has she been putting these thoughts into your head in order to stay alive?!" bellows the Baron.

"Good heavens, no! Your excellency, please, hear me out. I know that her sister, Kathleen Marie, has indeed come down with Fever and will probably die unless properly taken care of. All I ask is that if I am to marry your son, I should be allowed one wish. This is my wish."

"Give me twenty-four hours to decide on your 'proposition'. By then I will have made my decision," the Baron says as he arises and storms out of the great hall and through the corridors of the castle.

As Josette is patiently waiting the Baron's reply, she begins to wander through the castle corridors. She hears someone or something whistling from down in the garden below and she quickly runs to a window to see. As she peers out at the gardens below and the meadow afar, she discovers the old willow tree, thin and weak from the winter's dusting.

How exquisite that tree must be in the spring, she contemplates as she listens to the pleasant melody of a robin perched on one of its gigantic branches. She is interrupted from her meditation by footsteps coming down the corridor behind her.

"Josette, I can hardly believe you could even think of letting that prisoner go!"

"Well, well, it's 'Mr. Man-of-the-hour himself! How are you, Matthew?"

"Do not 'How are you Matthew' me! Why did you do it, Josette? Why did you have to choose a proposition like that?!"

"What, are you afraid to let that thief loose, or are you just upset that she will be free and out of your life forever?!" Josette teases as she brushes past Matthew.

"Do not walk away from me, Josette! Answer the question!" he hollers, seizing Josette's arm and whirling her around.

"Get your hands off me, Matthew!" Josette exclaims as she snatches her arm free from his grasp.

"Then answer me! Why did you ask for that wish? Why did you have to ask for my Em to be let go?"

"Because- -"

"Because why?"

"Just because."

"Tell me why?!"

"Because I know how much she loves you and I know it means more than anything to her to be free from someone who does not return her love! There, I have said it. Let me leave you now!"

"Wait a minute! Do you mean to tell me that she 'adores' me so much that she would rather be banished than stay here on *my father's* manor?!"

"Matthew, we are to married in less than one month and you expect her to sit in a dungeon cell while her beloved marries another? And what's worse, her sister is probably dying of the Fever because your obstinate father will not allow Emily-Elizabeth to go to her!"

"My father is not obstinate! I cannot believe I allowed my father to talk me into marrying someone like you!"

"What is that supposed to mean, Matthew? Do you really think I enjoy the fact that I am to be married to a man, no *boy*, that is just as stubborn as his father?!"

"How dare you call me stubborn! Just because I am not in love with a baron's daughter does not make me stubborn!"

"So you can stand here and openly admit that you are in love with Emily-Elizabeth?!"

"I never said that- -"

"You just said you were not in love with a Baron's daughter and I know for a fact that you loved her with all your heart and soul! Now that you admitted that, I guess it is my turn."

"What, are you 'in love' with one of the commoners?" he says mockingly.

"Maybe I am, but what is it to you?"

"I was just wondering."

Just then, a guard enters the room with orders that Matthew is to follow him into the great hall.

"What is this all about, guard?"

"Your father's niece has come for a visit and you are to be her tour guide of the lands of the manor."

"Great," he utters as he starts walking away. "I am not finished speaking to you!" he says to Josette. Josette turns around and peers out the window. The robin is gone.

Chapter 7:

"Josette, did you get me out of here?" Emily-Elizabeth asks anxiously from the cell door.

"Well, not exactly. I gave the Baron a proposition that if I was to marry Matthew I was to be granted one wish."

"That sounds reasonable. What was your wish?"

"That you should be able to see your sister and have your sentence be carried out as planned."

"So you are going to go through with the marriage after all? I cannot believe you! I thought you were a friend!" Emily-Elizabeth turns her back on Josette just as Josette had done to Matthew.

"Now, Emily-Elizabeth, be reasonable! There was no way out of this. If I had told them about Timothy, they would never have let you go and they would have probably married us tomorrow!"

"So you do love Timothy?! I was right all along! I knew you could not stand to see him but once!"

"That is not the point here!"

"Oh, and what is the point Josette? That you are about to marry a man who does not love you when you are not capable of love? Is that it, Josette?"

"I don't know!"

"What do you mean, you don't know?! You are not capable of an love and you will not even admit it!"

"All right! Is that all you want? Well, fine! Aye, I am not capable of loving Matthew, as Matthew is not capable of loving me! Matthew is in love with you! There, I have said it. Are you satisfied?"

"Did you say that Matthew loves me? Now that is a complete lie! Take it back because I will not believe it!"

"I will not take it back because I know it is a true statement from Matthew himself!" Just then a guard enters the dungeonroom corridor to see what all the commotion is all about.

"What is going on here?" he bellows as he advances towards Emily-Elizabeth's cell.

"Nothing that cannot be taken care of, Michael," Josette says, as politely as possible.

"What is this, Josette? You know every guard by name?!" Emily-Elizabeth says from her inside her cold, dank cell. "You haven't lived in this castle long enough to remember all of the knights and their ladies by name, yet you know the guards?!"

"If it were not for Michael, I would not be able to have this conversation with you tonight!"

"Oh, just leave me alone!" Emily-Elizabeth shouts as she turns her back on Josette once again.

"Fine, you want me to leave, then I will! But do not come weeping to me when *he* marries me. Oh, give my respects to your sister. That is, if you ever get out of here to see her!" She walks down the long dungeonroom corridor and slams the iron door behind her.

"Are you all right, milady?" asks Michael from the opposing side of Emily-Elizabeth's cell door.

"Aye. I just wish to be left alone," she sobs as she peers out her cell window into the twilight.

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"Good evening, Katherine," Matthew replies as he strolls across the threshold of the great hall.

"Good evening, Cousin," answers Katherine as she stands at the left hand of the Baron of Nottinghamshire. Matthew takes her hand and lightly kisses it, as it is often custom to do.

"I hear that I am to be a tour guide. Father, shall we go this evening or shall we wait until dawn's first light?"

"My son, always speaking in a minstrel's tongue. To answer your question, my boy, start your tour during this twilight hour and continue in the morning."

"Come, Katherine, let us ride into the night," he says as he takes her hand and leads her into the stables. They pass the garden with the giant willow tree. *It seems to be wilting*, he thinks to himself. *But then again, it is winter and it is probably just an illusion of the moon.* They ride together through the desolate town, sometimes side by side, sometimes one behind the other, until nightfall is upon them. Then, as before, side by side or one behind the other, they ride home.

Chapter 8:

It takes another week for the Baron to make his decision about Josette's proposition. On the eve of 11 January, the Sheriff descends down into the dungeonroom. The entire room falls silent as the Sheriff makes his way towards Emily-Elizabeth's cell. Not a smile upon his face, he unrolls a scroll in front of him.

"Emily-Elizabeth Berkeley, daughter of the deceased farmer, Joseph Berkeley, you are hereby sentenced to banishment from all of the lands of Nottinghamshire. You are to leave immediately from the castle grounds, collect all of your belongings, and exit through the East Woods."

It takes Emily-Elizabeth a few seconds to realize what has just been said. She is being banished! But she is to be free! Free from what, though? Free from this dank cell, free from this castle? She is happy yet she is enraged. She is able to see her dying sister one last time but at the same time she is at the realization that Josette has betrayed her.

The Sheriff unlocks her cell and Emily-Elizabeth walks past him, everything in a haze. She turns around to see that she is really leaving and it is not some figment of her wild imagination. No, she is leaving and returning to her sister.

She ascends the stairs, following close behind the Sheriff. The faster she leaves this dreary place, the farther away she can be from this horrible nightmare. The Sheriff opens the large iron door at the top of the stairs and holds it open for Emily-Elizabeth to step out. She had been in that cell for almost three months and now she is reentering the great hall where she once stood accused.

This time no one but the guards stand on duty and occasionally a servant would scurry across the hall to the servant's ward. *Where is everybody?* she thinks to herself as she is escorted out to the courtyard. She glances around by the stables and sees no one. Then, she sees it: the willow tree from her past!

"Sheriff," she asks, stopping to turn and face the orchard and the meadow, "is that willow tree wilting?"

"Nat, milady, it is not." Then he quickly adds, "It is probably the light of the moon's reflection."

"Aye, well I guess you are right," she says, walking behind the Sheriff.

She follows him to her own home in the village. God, it did feel good to be home. But now she wouldn't have any home to go back to. She opens the door and runs to her sister's side. *Or any sister to come home to*, she thinks to herself.

"Kathleen!" she says, seating herself on the bed next to her sick sister. Kathleen Marie begins to cry while her sister cradles her weak body.

"Emily, I missed you," she sobs, her voice low and choked with tears.

"Hush. You will lose the energy you need to get well."

"Emily-Elizabeth, can I talk to you for a moment?" Her brother, John Michael, speaks then, fear in his voice. Being the new "man-of-the-house", he always seemed to speak the way her father did. Even now, Emily-Elizabeth is looking at her brother and looking into her father's eyes. Slowing she gets up, never taking her eyes off the Sheriff standing in the doorway.

"What is it, John?" she asks, shakily.

"Emily, she is getting worse," he flatly replies.

"What do you mean getting worse? I thought she was getting better!" She tries to remain calm even though her head is spiraling.

"What I mean is that her fever is not breaking." Then he adds in a low whisper, "She probably will not make it through the remainder of the night."

"Are you telling me my sister is dying?!"

"Nay, I am saying that *our* sister is dying."

"John, I - - I must tell you that we are to leave, immediately if we can." She turns away and looks hopefully into the Sheriff's cruel, brown eyes.

"Why must we leave, Emmy?" questions Thomas John from the other side of the room. (Funny how Thomas always seemed to appear when you least expected it.) He is seated opposite his sister on the bed, looking up at Emily-Elizabeth through big, teary, brown eyes. At the age of ten, he still knows how to get right to your heart.

Ignoring Thomas John completely, John Michael replies, "Emily, you are being banished, aren't you? I knew you could not have been trusted! It was Matthew, was it not?! You were caught with him, were you not?!"

Trying desperately to defend herself, Emily-Elizabeth protests, "No, John, I swear it! I only stole a couple of loaves of bread to get us through the winter months!"

The Sheriff overhears this and interrupts the conversation, "John, what is it that you know about this peasant girl and milord, Matthew?"

"John, please," Emily-Elizabeth pleads more to herself than to her brother.

"Wait a moment, Sheriff. Do you think I am talking about Matthew, the Baron's son? No, no, I am speaking of another brother of ours. Aye, poor soul that he was. He became an outcast in our family and Emily-Elizabeth was told by our father before he died to have nothing to do with him," he lies.

"As I recall, boy, there were only four children in this household when the last census was taken four years ago."

"Aye, but as I stated before, he was cast out of our home and Father refused to put him as one of his children."

"Very well. Collect your belongings and leave immediately! I will have my guards escort you there."

"But we can't leave our sister here!" shouts John Michael, unaware that Kathleen Marie and Thomas John are still in the room.

Chapter 9:

While packing the few things they own, Thomas John walks over to the chest where it stands in the corner. He fumbles with the lock for some time but cannot get it to open.

"Emmy, is there a key for this chest? I can't open it."

"Thomas, we haven't any time to waste opening up old, worthless boxes," replies John Michael as he is placing some clothes in a small suitcase.

"It is not worthless, John! That chest belonged to our mother! Aye, Thomas, there is a key," says Emily-Elizabeth fastening her suitcase with a snap.

She walks over to a shelf above the chest and picks up a small heart-shaped box. After opening it, she takes out a shiny gold key hanging on a small piece of string.

"Here, Thomas. Open the chest and see what Mother has left us," she says, passing him the key.

It rotates easily inside the keyhole and he raises the top to reveal their mother's "treasures": Four letters, each with their names printed in elegant feather and ink. Thomas John brings the letters out of the chest and holds them up for all to see.

"There is one for me and one for Kathleen! And, oh 100k, one for John and one for you Emmy!" he exclaims as he passes out the letters. With special care Emily-Elizabeth opens her letter and reads it aloud:

"To my dearest Emily,

You have grown up to be a very lovely young lady.

Stay that way always. I do not know when you will read this or how old you will be. Just know that I love you dearly and that I will be with you always. You have spent many a day slaving around the house and taking care of your brothers and sister, and for that I am truly grateful. Hopefully, you would have been married with your own children by the time you read this but, if not, know this: there is always some form of peace and serenity out there, you just have to look for it in the right places. I love you with all my heart and soul.

Love Mother."

She cries then, not just any tears, but the tears of happiness.

"Emily-Elizabeth," bellows the Sheriff, shaking her out of her trance, "you must leave now. Your time here has run out!"

"All right. Let us go," she says solemnly staring at her sister upon the bed.

"Emmy, why must we leave Kathleen? Can't we take her with us, please?" pleads Thomas John as he grasps Emily-Elizabeth's hand.

"Nay, Thomas. I wish there was some way. . ." she trails off.

John Michael places a protective hand on his sister's shoulder, "She is gone, Emily. And we have to go, too."

The Sheriff interrupts, "You will be escorted to the East Woods where you will travel on your own. Once you have reached a green marker in the dirt road, you will no longer be on the lands of this manor."

They leave their home that they had grown up in, with the Sheriff and two guards riding on horseback, along side them. With heavy hearts about leaving their sister, they stroll through the streets of the village trying all the while to keep their heads held high.

"Emily, where are you going? Why are you leaving?" questions Timothy emerging from the Blacksmith's shop, covered in soot. "And without your sister?!"

"Timothy!" she exclaims. "I am leaving, by order of the Baron. I will not be able to see you again.

"But- -" he tries to protest.

"I must go now. Good-bye!" She hurries back to her family and walks to the edge of the East Woods, not looking back once."

Chapter 10:

"What is this, Josette, even though you are going to marry 'his high and mighty ', you are still courting a common Blacksmith's apprentice?"

"Oh, stop your mockery, Timothy! I can't help it if I am betrothed but I am here, am I not? At least that counts for something." She dismounts her stallion and places her arms around his neck.

"Stop this Josette! I mean it!" Timothy abruptly pulls her arms away from his neck and steps around to the side of the shop.

She follows him while saying, "Timothy, what is wrong? I thought you cared about me! I guess I was wrong!" She turns her back on him like a little girl.

"Josette, I- - I did not mean it! It's just that I can't get the thought of you marrying another out of me head." He approaches her and puts his arms around her waist.

"Timothy, don't do that," she teases. Then, before vanishing behind the shop, she adds, "Besides, if we are caught out in the open, you are liable to be arrested."

"Josette, what are you doing?" he asks as he follows her back.

"You shall see!" she calls back before hiding behind a tree. She does not see that Timothy has gone around the other way and sneaks up behind her. "Timothy! You scared me!" she exclaims.

He leans her up against the tree while saying, "I do not care if anyone sees us." He passionately kisses her as her fingers move through his soft, blond hair. They stop kissing when a snap of a branch is heard from the distance.

"What was that noise?" Josette asks, her voice shaky and weak. "If we are caught. . ."

Timothy quickly places a protective arm around her waist. "Come on. We should get you back to your horse."

When they come to the horse tied to a tree in the front of the Blacksmith's shop, he helps her up and says, " 'Tis a sad good-bye, Josette."

She reaches down and cups his face with the palm of her free hand. "But not forever, my love." She softly kisses his lips one last time before leading her horse away from the Blacksmith's shop.

Timothy waves good-bye, then pivots, and strolls back into the shop. It is a shame to think that this is the only way to see her, so secretly. Now, the question is, will the love they share dwindle because of her betrothal to Matthew?

* * * * *

"Father, I refuse to go through with this marriage! She is nothing but a Hot-Headed, selfish wench- -!"

"You hold your tongue, Matthew, or I will be forced to remove it from your mouth!"

"But Father, please!"

"You know I cannot and will not go back on my word with the Baron of Cannock! You will marry his daughter and that is final!" With a click of his heels, the Baron storms out of the great hall, his footsteps bellowing around him.

"Well, there is one thing Josette is right about: my father is stubborn as stubborn can get!" Matthew aimlessly wanders up to his bed chamber where he is greeted by his cousin in the hallway.

"Good morrow, Little Cousin," Katherine says, bowing her head slightly. She takes one look at his grieving face and adds, "Matthew, what is it? I know that look. Come now, you can tell me what is ailing you."

"Cousin," he begins slowly, "have you ever lost a love before? What I mean is, have you ever loved someone and had that person taken away from you?"

"Oh, please, Little Cousin, do you even realize what real love is?"

"I do!" he says as he turns around and gazes out at the wilting willow tree in the orchard below.

"What is it you want me to do, 'Little Cousin'?" She lays her hands on his shoulders and leads him away from the window.

"First of all, stop calling me 'Little Cousin'! Second, I need you to help me to get out of this betrothal."

"Wait a minute! Are you telling me you want me to take part in a plan that could very well put my own life in danger?! You have to be joking!"

"Nay, Katherine, I am very serious. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Surely you jest!"

"Katherine, you don't seem to understand!"

"Matthew, please, tell me what it is I don't understand!"

"Nothing at all," he mumbles. Then he adds sadly, "Emily."

"You do not mean the Emily that was banished from the manor last evening, do you?"

"Aye, that I do. Her name is Emily-Elizabeth Berkeley, Katherine. I want my Em, I want her back!" He turns and dashes into his bed chamber, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 11:

Josette enters the great hall after her encounter with Timothy only to find it empty. She searches the downstairs and, finding no one, proceeds to the upstairs chambers.

"Hello, Katherine, how have you been?" she says while Katherine is closing a door behind her.

"What have you done to him?!" Katherine accuses.

"Done what to whom? Katherine, kindly explain yourself."

"Little Cousin, I mean, Matthew, is hurt," she replies, her voice now changed from cynical to serene.

"Hurt?! What has happened to him? Did he fall off of his horse? What?!" Josette exclaims, panic stricken.

"Josette, for someone who never seemed to care, you sound *so* concerned!" Katherine says mockingly. "I cannot explain it. You must see for yourself." She guides Josette into Matthew's bed chamber, the room from which she had just come out of.

They enter the room slowly, cautiously. There, sitting on his bed, is Matthew, a blank stare on his face. His eyes reflect pain and sorrow and suffering.

"Why does he look so?" Josette asks, almost a whisper.

"I do not know why. Ever since earlier today he has been staring out that window at the garden."

"Does he speak with anyone?"

"Nay. He mostly stares and mumbles words like 'wilting willow' or 'my lost Em' or even just 'Em'."

"What can I do to help?"

"You can tell your father and my uncle that you want this betrothal called off! Maybe then he can truly be at peace!"

"Why are you aggravated with me?! This is not my doing! I had nothing to do with what has happened to him!"

"I am not putting the blame on anyone but my uncle and *your* father! Matthew will not speak to anyone and I am afraid that if he goes through with this, he will never speak again!"

"All right! I shall speak to my father. But I do not believe it will do a bit of good." Josette takes one more look at Matthew and walks out of the chamber.

"All right, Matthew, your little performance is over," Katherine says after she makes certain that Josette is out of sight.

"Am I not a great actor?"

"I will admit, you did quite well for a 'Little Cousin'," she says, and, seeing his eyes light up, quickly adds, "but do not let it go to your head."

Chapter 12:

"Josette, dear, I cannot be bothered with such nonsense now. Besides, I do not believe a word you have just told me."

"Father, please try to understand. If we do this, he may never speak again!"

"You are talking crazy, child. He may just be nervous about the marriage. Now don't worry. You will be married sooner than you think."

"That is what I am afraid of," Josette mumbles.

"What was that, dear?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. Father, would it be all right if I go for another ride?"

"Dear, you were just on that horse. I think you should give her a rest for the remainder of the evening."

"All right, Father, whatever you say." She walks upstairs to her bed chamber and, after collapsing onto her bed, begins to wonder what life will be like after her marriage: married to one man while loving another.

"I have got to get out of here," she says to herself as she straightens up. "Maybe there is still time to run away. But, no, that would upset Father. Oh, I don't care anymore! I will not let my future husband wallow in sorrow and grief just because of me!" She gets up, walks downstairs, and out to the stables.

Even with her father's pleads and outcries, she still mounts her white stallion and gallops into the twilight. All that is going on her mind is *Why is fate doing this to me?* She rides until she gets to the Blacksmith's shop, dismounts, and quietly looks around for any sign of Timothy. Just when she is about to mount her horse again, he appears from the back door, covered from head to toe with soot and ashes from the hot-iron stove.

"Timothy, is that you?" she asks, trying to see his blue eyes through all of the soot.

"Josette, what are you doing here? We could get caught- -."

"I don't care!"

"What do you mean you don't care? If we are seen together and I am arrested- -!" She cuts him off by kissing him full on the lips.

He shoves her away saying, "Josette, what has come over you?! This is crazy! Just- - just leave! Leave this place before I am forced to do something irrational!"

"Irrational?! What do you mean irrational?"

"What I mean is that we must stop this, Josette. We should forget about each other and get on with our lives. You are to be married to the Baron's son in less than two months and I am nothing but a Blacksmith's apprentice! We should say adieu and be done with it!"

"Are you finished making a fool of yourself?!" she retorts.

"Aye, I am finished."

"Good. Timothy, listen to yourself! You are asking me to marry someone I do not care about and to forget everything we shared. I just cannot do it! I can't do it!" She begins to cry, knowing how Matthew had felt when his love was taken from him. He pulls her into his arms, allowing her to cry against him.

"I am truly sorry. I did not realize how much this would upset you."

"It's just that I wish I was not a Baron's daughter anymore and just a commoner like. . ."

"Like me, right? Is that what you think of me, Josette, a commoner?!" he says, pushing her away and looking into her eyes.

"Nay, Timothy, that is not what I meant at all. Look at us! Fighting as if we were married!" she laughs to herself.

"I wish we were," he mutters.

"Did you just say that you wish we were married?"

"Aye, that I did. You know very well we would not have to secretly see each other like we are doing now. It would be perfect."

"Then, come with me, Timothy,"

"Come with you? Where?"

"Anywhere but here! We could run away!"

"You can never run away from your problems."

"Timothy, what will you do after I am married to Matthew?" she asks, quickly changing the subject.

"I don't want to think about it," he says, turning his back on her and looking up at the sky. "Josette, stay with me tonight."

"Where? Remember, if we are caught- - -." He places his finger against her lips to silence her.

"Please. Allow me one night in which I can sleep in peace knowing you are not near *him*."

She pulls her arms up around his neck and says, "I will always be with you, in your heart."

"Josette, you make it sound as if you were dying. Are you going to stay?"

"Of course, but where are we going to sleep without being seen?" she inquires while mounting her horse.

"Out in the meadow, past the cornfield. The corn is so high, we will not be seen by anyone." He mounts his own horse, which is tied in the front of the shop, and the two of them ride into the meadow. That night, Josette and Timothy sleep under the stars.

Chapter 13:

"Emmy, how much farther? My legs are getting tired!" Thomas John complains.

"Emily, it was bad enough we had to be banished along with you, but did we have to bring 'complain boy' with us?!" retorts John Michael.

"All right, both of you stop this!" She stops walking and turns to face her brothers. "We are all in this together! The faster we reach the green marker, the faster we can go on with the rest of our lives!" Unfortunately, she is speaking more to Matthew than to her brothers.

"Emily, what are you saying? That you really want to leave? That you do not want to go back?"

"That is *exactly* what I am saying, John! Why on earth would I want to go back to that old, hideous life? Don't you see, here we can live a new life, full of new adventures and surprises. It's the one chance we may have to begin anew and actually live in happiness!"

"I can see why you were banished, Emily- -."

"And why is that, John?!"

"Matthew did something to your head! He- - it's like he has a spell on you!"

"Well, if you must know, I will never let love blind me again!"

"You do not speak truthfully, sister," he mocks.

"Joke all you want to, John, but I mean what I say. Here there are new adventures just waiting to be found!" She turns and starts walking again, searching for the green marker.

Catching up to his sister and grabbing her arm, John Michael whispers, "Emily, what's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. Why would there be anything wrong?"

"Because, you have tears in your eyes," he says flatly.

While wiping her eyes, she says, "I am not crying. The wind keeps making my eyes tear."

"Emmy!" Thomas John yells from up ahead. "Look, I found the green marker!"

As John Michael and Emily-Elizabeth slowly catch up with Thomas John, a knot begins to form in her stomach. The green marker, a long, wooden stick, is wedged into the dirt road. Fastened on the top of the pole is a green ribbon, symbolizing both freedom *and* imprisonment. Emily-Elizabeth turns her head to face the place where she has just come from and whispers into the morning air, "I will never forget you, Matthew." Before bursting into tears, she adds, "I hope Josette gets her wish."

* * * * *

Josette vaults upright from her sleep. She looks around her, fear in her mind that someone is watching her, someone is out there. She knows that sleeping where she slept was wrong yet somehow it felt so right.

Timothy stirring next to her leaps her mind back into reality. Trying not to wake him, she gets up and stretches.

"Josette, where are you going?" Timothy asks, sitting up and yawning.

"For a walk down by the creek. The water will probably be cold, but the view of the Western Mountains is incredible."

"If you will wait one moment, I will come with you," he says, getting up and reaching for his shirt.

They walk down to the creek, hand in hand. Josette was right. The view of the Western Mountains is unbelievable! At the top of the hill before the creek, you can see the tops of the Mountains, all tipped with white snow. The creek, almost totally frozen by the winter weather, is crystal-blue clear.

"I have to admit, Josette, it is beautiful here. But, it *is* a bit chilly." He massages his arms vigorously trying to stay warm. Even though the winter is in its mid-season, snow has only fallen once or twice. Now, all of that which had fallen, has now disappeared.

"So, did you have fun sleeping under the stars?" he asks.

"Actually, it was the first night I slept peacefully since I came to Nottinghamshire." She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him.

"Look, Josette, the first light of day has reached the tops of the trees. Does this mean you have to leave?"

"I wish I did not have to, but I must. I will come back tonight, I promise."

"I know you will, Josette, I know you will." He embraces her once more as he looks out at the Mountain view.

Chapter 14:

"So, Katherine, what do you think of my manor?" the Baron asks, taking her for a walk through the great hall.

"I don't know, Uncle. It seems too quiet for me."

"What on earth do you mean by that, dear?"

"Well, if you ask me, this place needs a little adventure or spice. We should have some kind of a tournament!"

"Katherine, you know we haven't any time for a tournament. We have less than two months to plan a wedding."

"Oh, Uncle, I almost forgot to tell you. I cannot stay for the wedding."

"What?! Not staying?! Why on earth not?!"

"Well, the reason is quite clear. I do not wish to see two incompatible people be forced into a marriage that would most likely bring down the entire manor!"

"Must we start this again?"

"Aye, we must! It is true, Uncle, and you know it! You know Josette is not right for your son and yet you insist on their betrothal!"

"Remember, Katherine, you yourself were betrothed as well. And yet you are happy together."

"Uncle, because of that fiend I married, I am now barren! I can never have children and you knew how much I wanted a little boy!"

"I am sorry to hear that, Katherine, but that is not the issue here!"

"What *is* the issue here, Uncle?! That you will not give your son the opportunity that I never had?!"

"What opportunity are you speaking of, my dear?"

"I never got to marry someone whom I loved. I had to build up that love only because he was my husband and I his wife. Do you not see? He should not have to be made to build a love. He should be able to fall in love on his own and marry *that* girl."

"You know that would be out of the question and besides, we must keep to the Nottinghamshire tradition! Marrying Matthew to Josette would do just that and more! It would unite two kingdoms together."

"Uncle, I refuse to listen to this any longer! You know my opinion on this situation!" She starts to walk away, but then adds, "Oh, yes, and *do not* plan on having me here for the wedding!"

Katherine storms out of the castle and into the courtyard where she meets Josette, on horseback. Josette dismounts her stallion and brings her into the stables, not even noticing Katherine. She comes back from the stables, finally taking notice to her.

"Good morrow, Katherine. I guess I did not see you standing there. How long have you been here?"

"Oh, long enough to figure out that you were not home last night," she says.

"What are you talking about, Katherine? I was home in the guest room all night. I went for an early morning ride so I could watch the sunrise."

"You were with that Blacksmith's boy, were you not?" she points an accusing finger at Josette.

"How did you- -?! I mean, what would give you an absurd idea like that? What I told you was the truth. I went for a ride down by the creek because the view of the Western Mountains is extraordinary. And, furthermore, since when did I have to answer to you? You are not my mother or my father, for that matter!"

"You may be right. I will give you the benefit of the doubt this time. But let me warn you, Josette, I have my eye on you!" With that last remark, Katherine walks out the front gates of the castle.

As Katherine is advancing towards the town, she decides to pay a visit to the Blacksmith's. On the way there, though, she is sidetracked with thoughts of her own life. She had been betrothed to someone with a ruthless, tyrant nature at the age of sixteen. When she first found out she was going to bear a child, her husband became furious.

He claimed that the child was not his and tried to have her punished for adultery. When his plans failed, he used another, more forceful technique. By beating her with his bare hands and forcing her to miscarriage, she became unable to have children.

Almost in tears, she reaches the Blacksmith's shop. Standing before her, working with the hot-iron stove, hammering away, is Timothy. With every stroke of the hammer, Katherine could see his strong arm muscles covered in sweat. *So this is who Josette has been with!* she thinks to herself.

"Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where I may find Timothy? I am told he works here."

"Aye, he works here."

"Well, then, can you kindly tell me where I may find him?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name is Katherine. I wish to speak to him on the matter of Josette of Cannock, the betrothee to my cousin, the Baron's son."

Timothy gulps before he speaks. "I- - I am Timothy. I have no idea who you are speaking of."

"Oh, on the contrary, Timothy, you know exactly who I am talking about!"

"I do not have time for this! I must get back to work!" He turns around, wipes his brow with his arm, and saunters out the back door.

Chapter 15:

"Katherine, what did my father say about this betrothal?" Matthew asks, looking out the window of his bed chamber.

"Well, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly? I thought I could count on you to- -!"

The Baron abruptly barges into his bed chamber shouting, "Aha, so you *are* the culprit, Katherine! You thought you could deceive me, did you not?! How long have you been plotting with my son, you despicable wench?! You are no more than a disgrace to this family than my own son!"

"Father, how can you say such a thing about Katherine? She is family!"

"Not any more she is! From this point forward, Katherine of Sleaford is no longer part of this family! As for you, Matthew, be prepared to be married to Josette of Cannock within the next two days! You *will* be married and will *not* disgrace this family as your cousin has chosen to do! Do I make myself clear?!"

"Aye, milord. . ."

"Good. Now, Katherine, kindly remove yourself and your belongings from this manor before I have my Sheriff arrest you for trespassing!"

"Aye, milord." She gets up, takes one more look at Matthew sulking on his bed, and walks out.

* * * * *

"Why are you back here again? Do you want me to get in trouble?" inquires Timothy, looking at Katherine with sinister eyes.

"I have come to help you," she says, taking a step closer to him and reaching out to caress his cheek with her fingers. "And to tell you that I am truly sorry for what happened this afternoon."

"Help me?! Earlier you came here claiming I was in love with Josette! Now you wish to help me?!"

"I am sorry for the outburst earlier but I do believe we can help each other. Just tell me if you have any feelings towards her and I will do the rest."

"I have no feelings for Josette of Cannock," he says flatly. "As a matter of fact, my wife is expecting a child within the next two weeks."

"Your wife?! But I thought that- -."

"You thought wrong! If you must delve into my life story, I am a happily married man of two years. I work at this shop for my day's rations so I can buy food for my wife and expected child. So, nay, I have no feelings for Josette."

Katherine gulps before replying. Being the older of the two she has one advantage; being the smaller of the two she is at a disadvantage. "So," she begins, trying to test his strength, "if I brought Josette here to look at you face to face, you could honestly say that I will not see one ounce of lust in your eyes?"

A pause then. Timothy realizes he has gotten himself into a bit of a bind. If he admits his love for Josette, he could be banished or even killed. But if he denies any recollection of her, he could lose her forever. By breaking the silence, he only speaks one solemn word, "Aye."

"Good. That is what I thought you would say. Wait here." Katherine walks out the front door of the shop, looks around the side, and guides someone into the room where Timothy is standing.

"Timothy, I would like to introduce you to- - -."

"Josette!!" he gasps as she comes away from the shadows and into the light.

"So you do know each other! Timothy, kindly tell Josette the story you told me."

"Timothy, what is she talking about?"

"Go on, Timothy. If you could stand there and tell me that you do not know her or have had any feelings for her, you can tell her the story you told me a moment ago."

"Is that true, Timothy? Do you not love me even when you say you do?" Josette looks deep into Timothy's blue eyes, as tears begin to form in hers.

"Nay, stop this! Katherine, what I told you was a lie, a total lie! Josette, I do care for you. There, I have said it! Is that what you wanted, Katherine?!"

"Timothy, listen to me carefully. I have been cast out of this manor by order of the Baron. I was caught trying to save my cousin from this marriage. But I can still help *you* out of this and you will be free and happy."

"Well, Katherine, what do you have planned up your sleeve?" Timothy places one arm around Katherine's shoulder and one around Josette's waist and leads them to the back of the shop.

As they walk back, Katherine begins, "I will visit you both tonight, separately of course, in order to give you instructions on how to stay away from the Baron's guards and still escape the manor."

Chapter 16:

After Katherine leaves the castle, the Baron has a brief talk with his son. He explains to him that it is imperious that he be married to Josette within the next two days. Matthew argues that it isn't right and he refuses to marry her.

"Matthew, what will it take to get through to you? You know the laws of this land: a Baron's son *must* marry another Baron's daughter. And you know how important this is to me as well as the rest of this manor."

"I am truly sorry, Father, but I cannot marry Josette," he says flatly.

"Well, once you make a statement like that, I must insist on asking you to explain yourself."

"Well for one," he starts but then realizes that all that he had before is gone. he has no choice but to marry Josette or face the consequences if he tries to leave the manor. "Nevermind, Father. I guess there are no reasons."

"Does this mean you are willing to go through with this marriage?" the Baron asks hopefully.

Before Matthew could answer his father, a guard barges into the chamber. He is out of breath but is able to speak three words, "Josette- - is- - gone."

"What?!" bellows the Baron. "What do you mean Josette is gone? Well, speak up boy!"

Catching his breath, the guard says, "She is gone, milord. Out towards the Western Mountains." Before the Baron can speak, he adds, "With that Blacksmith's boy."

"So, Katherine speaks the truth! I should not have been so hard on her or you, Matthew." He turns towards his guard and orders, "Have your men go into the Western Mountains and search for Josette. I do not care what you do with the boy, but bring Josette back to me!"

"Aye, milord." He bows and leaves the chamber.

"Matthew, we may have to postpone this little engagement but when we find her, you will be wed at once!"

Chapter 17:

"Timothy, slow down!!" Josette yells, trying to catch up.

"Will you *please* hurry up! We do not have time to waste! We have got to get to the Mountains before they send someone after us!" She reaches him and he grabs her hand, pulling her along.

"Where are we going to rest once we come to the Mountains?"

"There are caves we can sleep in until dusk. Then, after nightfall, we will start moving until dawn, where we will rest in the shadows," he says confidently.

She stops him by pulling on his arm and looks straight into his crystal blue eyes. "For someone who sounds so confident, your hands are shaking!" she mocks.

"I'm cold, what can I say?" he shrugs as he pulls her into his arms. No sooner had they begun to kiss more intensely, when a snap of a branch in the distance snaps them back into reality.

"Come on!" Timothy shouts, grabbing her hand and pulling her through the thick brush. Finally stopping at a clearing to catch his breath, Timothy pulls Josette into his arms, holding her as tightly as he can. "That was close. What do you think they would have done if they had caught up with us?"

"I'm not so sure. Probably bring me back to Matthew and marry us on the spot!" she says, a little out of breath.

"Well, we have too far to turn back around. So, let's find a cave before they find out." He starts to walk away, then adds, "I wonder what they would do to me after they take you back to him."

"Let us not think about that, all right?" Then she adds, more quietly, "I hope Katherine's plan works."

After a while of running through brush, getting caught in thickets, and losing almost all of their breath, they finally reach a small cave at the bottom of one of the mountains. They scramble into it only to find it cold, dark, and damp. They huddle close together, trying to stay warm and dry.

"Timothy, we made it!" Josette says after a while of silence. He wraps his arms around her waist and answers, "Now we can stay here together without any worry."

He kisses her long and incessantly, pulling her as close to his body as possible. "Josette, tell me you love me."

"Timothy, you know I love you and I would never leave your side for anything in the world."

"We will stay here in the shadows until nightfall and then keep moving until dawn. That is the plan in which was told to me by Katherine."

She moves around in his arms (for she was sitting sideways in his lap) in order to see him better. "Timothy," she says while looking straight into his blue eyes, "tell me what I can do to show you how much I love you."

"You can kiss me the way you did last night!" he says without hesitation.

"But, Timothy, I was not with you last night," she tries to protest.

"Aye, you were, Josette. I remember it clearly!" he interrupts her.

"Well if you remember it so clearly, tell me about it!" she says, beginning to get aggravated.

"Well, first you came into my room, saying you wanted to see me once more, and that you were told you were to be married the next day."

"Go on, I am interested in what you have to say."

"You came over to me and started to kiss me."

"Well, what was so different about the way I kissed you then and the way I kiss you now?" she asks suspiciously.

"For one thing, you took those soft lips and ran them up and down my neck. It was completely intoxicating, the way you kissed me, so I started to- - -"

"Why are you stopping? What is wrong?"

"I know what is wrong!" Out of the shadows of the cave steps Katherine, her hair in disarray from running to keep up with them.

"Katherine! What are you doing here?! How did you know where to find us?!" exclaimed Josette, unable to believe her eyes.

"My, my, aren't we full of questions tonight? Timothy, why don't you finish your story. You were just getting to the good part!"

"Katherine, please, leave me alone! I did nothing to you to deserve this!"

"What do you mean, nothing? Everything that happened the other night meant nothing? I bet there is something you have been meaning to tell Josette."

"Timothy, what is she talking about? I don't understand." Josette asks bewildered.

"Go ahead, Timothy, tell her all about the other night. Tell her that *I* was the one who visited you in your room! Tell her *I* was the one whom you caressed! Tell her *I* was the one whom you made love to that night, not her! Tell her!!!"

With that last sentence ringing through her ears, Josette turns her back on both Katherine and Timothy and weeps until she cannot weep any longer. Timothy tries to comfort her but she pushes him away, saying that all fate had brought them together and it would also tear them apart. She tells him that she is going to march herself back to the manor, marry Matthew, and live a peaceful life, forgetting that she ever knew him.

Chapter 18:

"Emmy, are we really free?" questions Thomas John after settling down against a large maple trunk.

"Aye, Thomas, we are free," she says sadly.

"Well, if we are truly free, why do you still look sad?"

"It is just that- - -."

"Emily! Emily-Elizabeth!" someone calls from the distance.

"Josette, what are you doing here? How did you know where to find me?"

"I guess you can say it was instinct. That and the fact that you left flower petals on the path."

Then she adds sarcastically, "Still playing 'He loves me, he loves me not'?"

"You still have not answered any of my questions, Josette. What are you doing here? You should have either been married to Matthew or off somewhere with Timothy by now."

"For one thing, Timothy is the lowest of the low!"

"But why? I thought he loved you."

"That is besides the point! If it were not for him I would not have had to sneak past the Baron's guards on the manor to get here! Listen, I have come to ask you for a favor."

"I simply cannot believe you came all this way just to ask me for a favor! What, do you need me to talk to Timothy for you?!" she mocks.

"Look, Emily, I did not come here to argue with you. You are about the only friend I have left."

"Friend?! You think I am your friend?! The one whom you insisted you could get out of jail but instead gets her banished and goes off to marry her love?! In my book that is certainly *not* a friend!"

"I do have to admit, what I did to you was cruel, but you must believe me, I had no other choice!"

"Where have I heard that saying before?" she retorts.

"Please, Emily, you are my only hope!"

"All right, all right! You do not have to sound so catastrophic about it. What is it you want me to do?"

"I need you to go back to the manor."

"What?! Have you lost your senses completely?! They would execute me on the spot for trespassing if I dared to show my face there again!"

"Listen to me, please! Go back there and be with the one you love. If there be only one of us that fate has meant to be happy, then let it be you. I deserve just punishment for the lust of this Blacksmith's apprentice and for being a Baron's daughter. Go back to Matthew, go back to the one you

love!" With this last statement not yet completed, she runs off, never to be seen or heard from by Emily-Elizabeth again.

"Come on, Thomas. Go get John and we shall go back."

"Nay, Emily, we are not going," says John Michael, approaching his sister.

"What do you mean you are not going back?"

"Just what I said, we are not going. If you wish to go back to your love, go ahead. But we are not going to be dragged into this once again!"

"What do you mean dragged into this again?!"

"I mean that because of you, we were banished from our home, having to leave our dead sister without a proper burial, and you expect us to go back and face even worse? Nay! Come on, Thomas. Say adieu to Emily, and let us go our own way."

Chapter 19:

"Katherine, why are you doing this?" Timothy asks, watching Josette run back towards the manor.

"Why else would I be doing this?" She saunters over to him and places her arms around his waist from behind.

"Katherine, please. What we did that night, it- - it was not right!"

"Aye, but now we can be together without her. Let her go. She deserves to go back to my cousin. You deserve better." She turns him around and kisses him, placing his hands on her hips.

He pushes her away and says, "Aye, I do deserve better! I deserve her and, aye, I will get her back!"

"Timothy, you are wasting your time. She is about to marry my cousin and I would not stand in her way, if I were you."

"Well you are not me. I will get her back!" He starts to leave the cave but Katherine grabs his hand. "Let go of me, Katherine! I must do this!"

"Why, so you can say you are a hero? To say that you saved the day and won your fair maiden as a reward? Please, Timothy, believe me, this is *no* fairy tale! She is where she belongs now, as you are." She walks over to a far corner of the cave and seats herself down on the floor. "Come on, Timothy, we deserve this second chance."

He strides over to her and sits down next to her watching her with doubtful eyes. She immediately wraps her arms around his neck, bringing his face down to meet hers.

"Nay!" he shouts, pulling his neck free from her grasp. "I will not give you the satisfaction!"

"Oh, come now, Timothy. Do not be a fool. You want me again. You want the one thing that you cannot and will never get from Josette!"

"Stop it! I must find her! I hope it is not too late!" He jumps up and heads for the mouth of the cave.

"It will be too late!" she shouts after him, laughing ecstatically. "It will be too late!!!"

* * * * *

"Josette! Josette, where are you? Please, tell me where you are!" Timothy shouts, running frantically through the woods back towards the manor.

"You, over there!" exclaims someone in the distance. "Come here!"

Timothy steps over to the man calling him, hoping he is not recognized. "Please, sir," he begs, "I must find my dog. He has run off and it will be dark soon."

"You may go only upon answering one question."

"Very well, sir."

"Have you seen a young girl about sixteen and a young boy about seventeen up in these parts?"

"Why, I have seen plenty of young boys and girls here but I could not tell you if I saw them today. I have been after that darn dog for close to five hours now," he lies, hoping the guard believes him.

"Fine. You may pass. If I see a dog scurrying around here, I will bring him to the manor and you can get him there."

After the guard leaves, Timothy lets out a sigh. One more incident like that and he would surely be arrested by the sheriff! He continues running, even when he is out of breath and almost collapsing. Even after running into that guard, he continues to look behind him to make sure that no one is following him.

"Excuse me, sir, please watch where you are going. Why are you running so fast?"

"Sorry, sir, I was not looking. But, as you can see, I am in a bit of a rush."

"Surely you know of whom you are speaking to. The Baron's son is no one to walk away from. And who might you be?"

"I cannot tell you who I am or why I am running. All that I can say is that I am looking for a girl, my sister. She was right behind me a moment ago and now she is gone. I must find her before dark," he lies, yet again.

"Very well. But surely you would not keep such secrets from your Lord?"

"I am not so certain that milord can uphold such secrets."

"Surely you do not doubt your Lord?" he questions in shock.

"I am only a Blacksmith's apprentice," he admits solemnly.

"Wait a moment. You mean *the* Blacksmith's apprentice? My father will have your head if he finds you here! Come with me and I will save you from my father's guards."

"But what about Josette? What will they do with her when they find her?"

"The question is not *when* they find her, but *if* they find her."

Chapter 20:

"Well, well, what have we here?" Katherine whispers into the cool night air. "A couple of fools are what I see!" Lying on two piles of leaves, fast asleep, is Timothy and Matthew.

Timothy awakens first and almost cries out at the sight of this figure standing before him. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Timothy, hush, you will awaken Matthew!" she whispers.

"Who *are* you?!" he demands, now in a quieter tone.

"I am not going to tell you who I am!" she teases. "I am going to let you guess!" She leans over him and gently kisses his lips.

"There is only one person I know with that foul of a taste on her lips, Katherine!" he torments.

"How well you know your kisses."

"How could I forget one so repulsive!"

"Come on, Timothy. Your old life is no more!"

"What are you talking about? I do not understand you!"

"Your old life is over. It is time to start anew. Your life was nothing before but now that can all be changed."

"All right, let me hearth your idea," he says reluctantly.

"Come back to the manor with me- - -."

"Have you lost your mind?! I will be arrested for sure!"

"Let me finish. Come back to the manor with me as my husband. This way you will not be arrested or harmed in any way."

"And what about Matthew? We are not going to leave him here, are we?"

"He can fend for himself. He is a big boy now!"

"Why *should* I go back with you? Give me one good reason why I should put my life in danger and go back as *your* husband!"

"You want to see Josette again, do you not?"

"Aye, but- - -."

"So come back with me. Or you could stay here in the cold and die of extreme frostbite!"

"I guess I will go back," he replies.

"I thought you would see it *my* way!"

"Katherine, what do you have up your sleeve?"

"What makes you think that I am up to something, Timothy?" she says while running her index finger down his chest. "I just want to see you happy," she slyly smiles.

"I still think you are up to something. You never cared to see me happy before."

"You were happy when you were with me, right?"

"I still would be happier if I could be with Josette."

"Now *that* is a lost cause! Face it, Timothy, you have lost her! Go on with your own life, with our life." He reluctantly agrees to return to the manor with her.

They walk for a while in silence, never talking to each other, never touching each other. They stop to rest in a clearing close to the edge of the manor. "Now this looks familiar, doesn't it, Timothy?" questions Katherine, as she sits herself down on a log.

"What are you talking about, Katherine?"

"Look beyond the trees and you will see what I mean." Beyond the tree line and towards the direction of the manor, is the corn field and the meadow. "Isn't that the same field you and Josette- -?"

"How did you know about that?!" he bursts out.

"Call it extreme instinct, Timothy, extreme instinct."

Chapter 21:

Going back to the manor is the hardest thing, next to seeing her sister die of Black Death, for Emily-Elizabeth to do. Just stepping past the green marker on the path brings tears to her eyes. Not only does she miss Matthew, but she misses her old life, as a peasant girl with a mother and a father and two brothers and a sister.

Being friends with Josette actually made it seem like a gift to be a peasant. No worries about servants and clothes and betrothals. Compared to Josette, Emily-Elizabeth was the one who lived in luxury. *I want my life back!* her mind screams as she re-enters the manor from the East Woods.

"Thief! Thief! Come back, help, thief!" someone shouts in the distance.

"This is certainly not of my doing! Nay, sir, you are the one who is mistaken!" another person argues.

"But I thought you wanted this, my dear? I did not know you changed your mind!" a husband pleads with his wife.

What has happened here, she thinks to herself. *Everything is in total chaos.* She walks through the town square, like an unseen shadow during the twilight hour, but pauses when she reaches her old home.

How odd it seems to be back here again, she thinks to herself. The house, with all its windows boarded up, seems dead in the first light of the sun. There is no friendly fire to make it look like a home; there is no sunlight shining through the windows to give it warmth.

"Good morrow, milady," an old woman says to Emily-Elizabeth from across the dirt road. "What brings you here to this old and decrepit home? The owners have gone away and there is nothing left but a forgotten chest that sits in the corner collecting dust. So I am often told."

"Do you mean the chest is still there?" she asks, forgetting for one moment who she is.

"Aye, milady, the chest is all that remains. But what is the use of asking? It has no use for you."

"I- I guess you are right. It is none of my business whether the chest is still there." As she walks down the dirt road she makes a mental note to find a way back to the house, *her* house, to look through the chest. She stops in front of a shop, now also boarded up. The sign hanging over the door is half off of its hinges and weather-beaten: Ye Old Blacksmith. *Timothy!* her mind says at the sight of the sign.

She steps into the shop and inhales nothing but ashes and dust. No sunlight had reached the inside of the shop for quite some time so the air feels cold and damp. *Why was everything in chaos back there, but here everything is so quiet?*

"Well, well, if it isn't Emily-Elizabeth Berkeley!" someone says, emerging from the shadows of the shop.

"Who are you? What do you want? How do you know who I am?"

"Please, one question at a time. I am a friend. A friend of a friend you could say," she says.

"I do not understand."

"Let me explain. I am married to someone who knows you quite well. I have always wanted to meet you and now I get to do so." She walks over to Emily-Elizabeth and embraces her. "My husband once worked on this manor but he lost his job when the owner was arrested for treason by the Baron. Here, let me introduce you to him." She pulls a young man out from behind the shadows.

Emily-Elizabeth can hardly believe her eyes. Standing before her is Timothy! Oh, how long it has been since she had seen him last! But who is this woman telling her that they are married? Does this mean that what Josette had said to her in the East Woods was true?!

"Timothy! How are you?!" she exclaims, running into his arms.

"I- I am fine. This is Katherine, my- my wife," he says dreadfully. He backs away from her and presents Katherine, with a wide smile clear across her face.

"Timothy, I had no idea!" Emily-Elizabeth gasps in surprise.

"Aye, well, now that our introductions have been properly made, my *husband* and I must be going. We do not want to be late for my cousin Matthew's wedding ceremony!" She pulls Timothy out of the shop by his arm and, when they reach the dirt road, locks her arm with his.

Matthew! her mind cries at the sound of his name. *But how could this be? Katherine speaks of a wedding ceremony! Does she not know of the fact that the one he is to marry is now far away from the manor? Does she even suspect the fact that the same one he was to marry was also in love with her new beloved Timothy?!*

Chapter 22:

During the first hours of dawn, Emily-Elizabeth slowly makes her way towards her home. Slipping past the old woman sitting in front of her house, across the road, she enters the home of her past, the home that for what seemed like years was empty and cold.

From the corner of her eye, she recognizes the chest, lying in the same place it had always been, the corner of the house, adjacent to the bed. It stares back at her, expressionless, as she steps further into the room. On the mantle above the chest, she reaches for the key.

Cautiously she opens the chest and gasps out loud while stumbling back. The chest is completely empty! *Who could have stolen these things that Mother so carefully kept for us to remember?* Without locking the chest, she leaves the house and stumbles onto the dirt road. The old woman still sitting across the road looks at her scornfully as Emily-Elizabeth emerges from her home.

"I told you, milady, that the house was no business of yours. You should *not* have gone there!"

"Who are you to tell me where I should or should not go?!" she says, unbeknownst that people are watching.

From the crowd of people gathering in the village square, she hears whispers, "It's her! It's her! She has come back from the grave to kill us all!"

"Please, milady," the old woman continues, "for your own sake as well as ours. Leave the place of your past! Leave, and never return!"

"I have done nothing wrong! I do not understand why I am being persecuted for nothing!"

"You have committed a crime worse than murder! Do you not comprehend the reason behind our suffering?! It is because of you that devastation has been brought about across our kingdom! *You* have caused chaos, disease, and many other evils to plague our lands! It has been a curse from the moment you laid lustful eyes upon our Lord! What, did you not think that people would take notice to your little rendezvous?! Leave us, evil one, and cast out your evilness with you!!"

All around her, Emily-Elizabeth hears the voices of the townspeople closing in on her, "Get out! Get away! Get out! Get away!"

Almost driven to the point of insanity, Emily-Elizabeth retreats from the town square, not knowing where to turn, not knowing which way to go. Trying to stay out of sight from the Baron's guards, she makes her way to the Blacksmith's shop at the end of the dirt road.

Pushing her way through the heavy iron door, she saunters into the shop, out of breath and frightened. There is silence all about her. Once again, she finds herself alone and helpless, unable to solve her problems or subside her fears. Unable to reason, she deserts the shop and proceeds towards the meadows.

When she comes to the realization that she is unapproachable by any means of danger, she relaxes herself down on the cool grass and weeps. *Has she been the reason behind all of this chaos? Has the love she once had for Matthew now turned to curse the Kingdom of Nottinghamshire?*

Chapter 23:

As the sun shines through the canopy of the trees, Matthew lazily awakens from an uneasy slumber in the Western Mountains. Surveying his surroundings and finding that Timothy is no where to be found, he starts to become alarmed. If he does not find Timothy soon, the Sheriff's guards will!

Getting up, he peers through the trees, searching aimlessly for any sign of Timothy. He begins to walk away but as he takes a step forward and looks at the ground, he notices the items he had kept secret from Timothy earlier. Yes, he is the one who stole the items from *her* treasure chest after the house had been boarded up.

Picking up the items from the ground, he recalls back to the time he was at her house. Before he had ventured into the Western Mountains in search of Timothy and Josette, he had visited the Berkeley home. Going back there brought back memories of a different kind, those of contentment and happiness, not evil and chaos.

The house, boarded up, reminded him of the past that once belonged to him, for now the present and the future belonged to some other force beyond his control. From the moment he placed his hand on the doorknob, he vowed that whatever happened from that day forward was just a part of fate's plans for him and that everything that occurred would be for the best.

When he opened the door, his eyes had jotted from corner to corner and were finally laid to rest upon the chest. He followed his instinct and strolled over to the chest, searching aimlessly for some sort of key to open it with. Reaching above him on the mantle, his hand embraced a shiny, silver key. Clasping it in his hand for quite some time, he finally decided to unlock the chest.

He shivers out of the daydream and heads for the palace, thoughts only on finding Timothy. Quickening his pace, as if someone is in close pursuit of him, he finally reaches the palace gates. Racing up the palace steps, half hoping and half wishing that Timothy is there, he gives the order for the doors to the great hall to be opened.

Once opened he is in total surprise. Standing before him is Timothy, shackles upon his wrists and a guard standing on either side! Just as he is crossing the threshold of the great hall, he gets a glimpse of Timothy's face before he is brought down to the dungeon.

"Father, who did you just sentence to the dungeons?" he asks curiously.

"Matthew, where have you been all this time? My guards have found Timothy but not Josette. To my utmost dismay, he was found with Katherine! Do you understand this?!"

"Father, what are you talking about? Where is Katherine now? Down in the dungeon chamber along with Timothy?"

"Katherine has run off to the East Woods in search of Josette. I have sent her to retrieve our betrothee."

"Father, you do not understand the impudent choice! Katherine will slay Josette if she finds her! I must go after her!"

Matthew departs in a hurry, eager to reach Josette before Katherine does. He unties his horse from the stables and saddles up. Riding as speedily as possible, he ventures out of the palace gates, toward the East Woods.

Chapter 24:

Katherine dismounts her horse and ties the reins to the trunk of a tree. She strolls aimlessly for quite some time, no sign of Josette anywhere. She travels down to the river to clean off her soiled boots and gazes across the bank at none other than Josette of Cannock!

"You have returned, Katherine, to destroy the rest of my suffering heart? You were my friend, yet you betrayed me and stole my heart away," Josette shouts from across the river, after finally catching Katherine's eye.

"You have unjustly wronged me, Josette. I have done worse things in my life, believe me. What I did to you was purely for spite."

"Spite, you say? That is not the truth! I will not believe you! You did this deliberately so you could see me suffer!"

"Josette, please, come across the bridge so we could talk easier. I do not like shouting across the river." Josette steps cautiously onto the bridge, unaware of what Katherine might do.

As Josette gradually reaches the other side, Katherine anticipates her next move. As soon as Josette advances onto the bank, Katherine seizes her arm, twirls her around, and lays her dagger against her throat. Josette attempts to escape, but the more she struggles, the tighter Katherine's grip becomes.

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Matthew searches far and wide, for any sign of Josette. At the present moment she can be either dead or alive! A scream to his left causes him to lurch the reins, almost toppling himself, as well as his horse, into the mud. Collecting his speed again, he races towards the place where the scream came from. Coming to a halt by the banks of the river, he spots a girl lying on the ground, clutching her side, and another girl running towards the other bank. He dismounts his horse and follows in close pursuit of the girl.

"I order you to halt in the name of the Baron!" The girl stops running and pivots on her heels, drawing a sword from its sheath tied to her belt.

"Well, well, if it isn't my little cousin out to get revenge!" she taunts.

"Revenge has nothing to do with this, Katherine! Since you have been here, everything have gone wrong!" he retorts, also drawing his sword.

"Oh, come now, cousin! All I wanted was to add a little spice to this dreary manor!"

"You have dishonored this family as well as destroyed any trust and trust I had in you!"

"So this is what it come down to, Matthew? The weapon has been chosen. It is but a fight to the death then."

"I do not wish to fight you."

"Well then, why have you drawn your sword, Cousin?!" she says, lunging forward. They cross swords once, twice, three times. They each perry in turn, their swords clashing and glistening in the sunlight.

Out of the clearing, the Sheriff and a group of soldiers emerge, swords drawn and ready to attack. Katherine turns and tries to flee, but Matthew trips her and lowers his sword just above her neck.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you now!" He raises his sword above her throat and says, "Parting is such sweet sorrow, Cousin!"

"Matthew, in the name of your father, let her go!" exclaims the Sheriff, racing to his side.

"What do you mean let her go? She deserves the just punishment she is about to receive!" he returns, keeping his sword poised above her neck.

"Katherine, you are under arrest by order of the Baron of Nottinghamshire. Follow me the palace." Katherine pulls herself up, as Matthew pulls his sword away, and follows the Sheriff back to the palace .

Matthew hurries to Josette, who is still lying on the ground, bleeding profusely.

"Are you all right, Josette?"

"Nay. She has cut me too deep!" She attempts to move, but pain causes her to lie back down again.

"Do not say such things, Josette! All we have to do is stop the bleeding!"

"Nay, it is no use! I have been run completely through!"

"Do not leave, Josette, please!"

"Why do you care? You will go back to the manor a hero for sparing your cousin's life and not spilling her blood on your hands!"

"I won't leave without you! I swear, I will not go back to the manor without you!"

"Nay, go, and let me rest. Tell my father adieu!" Josette leans her head on his arm, closes her eyes, and breathes her last breath.

* * * * *

"Katherine of Sleaford, you are hereby banished from all of the lands of Nottinghamshire," replies the Baron.

"I will not leave this place unless Timothy goes with me!" she replies vainly, glancing over at Timothy standing in shackles beside her.

"Timothy, I will give you a choice. You may go with her and live a life as an outlaw or you may stay here and become a servant upon my lands. The choice is yours."

"Your excellency, I will gladly stay on the manor, if you will allow it," he says, not once giving Katherine the satisfaction of gazing into his blue eyes again.

"Timothy! This is an outrage! I am leaving this retched place!" She rushes out of the great hall and mounts her horse. At that same moment, Matthew enters the great hall with Josette in his arms.

"Josette! What have you done to her?!" accuses Timothy, running to her side after having his shackles taken off.

"What have *I* done?! It was Katherine who did this to her! I tried to stop her, I swear I did. But it was too late and she was cut too deep!" was Matthew's solemn reply.

"Give her to me!" shouts the Baron of Cannock from across the hall. He gently picks her up from Matthew's arms and cradles his daughter. "Well, Baron, it looks to me that instead of having a wedding, we will be conducting a funeral service."

"I am truly sorry, Lord Cannock. My niece should be arrested and tried for murder this very instant."

"But it is too late, Father, for you have sent her away," Matthew says, looking sadly at his father.

"Very true, my boy. But I have no doubt in my mind that killing an innocent women will be pain enough for her bear. Sheriff, prepare the priest for the funeral service that will take place this afternoon."

"Aye, milord."

"Timothy," Matthew says, pulling him aside, "how much did you love Josette?"

"Is the answer to that question going to have me beheaded?"

"Nay, nay. I was just curious."

"I loved her with all my heart and soul," he replies, almost in tears.

"I know exactly what you mean, Timothy. *Exactly* what you mean." They both follow the Baron of Nottinghamshire and the Baron of Cannock to the chapel, where Josette's body is finally laid to rest.

Chapter 25:

Katherine storms out of the castle gates, out of the village, out into the meadows, and finally into the Western Mountains. She only stops her horse once by a stream to take a drink. Only then does she hear the faint sound of a weeping girl.

As she walks towards her, the girl relinquishes her crying and looks up. Katherine is very surprised to be face to face, again, with Emily-Elizabeth! For the longest time, she had waited to meet her again. Now she has the opportunity to resolve some "misunderstandings".

"Please, Emily, tell me why you look so forlorn?" she asks in her sweetest, most delicate voice.

"I do not wish to speak to you." Emily-Elizabeth turns her head to look out at the mountains.

"Please, Emily," she pleads once more, "I wish to know more about you. I wish to learn about the life of your past."

"What do you care about peasant life? You are *not* a peasant. You would not even wish to become one if you could!" Even with Emily-Elizabeth's protests, Katherine seats herself beside her.

"If you must know, I must tell you, for you have a higher nobility than I. I was born into a poor family, peasants as we were often called. I am the second oldest of five children, though the census has me as the oldest of four. My eldest brother, Kenneth Berkeley, was cast out of my father's house when he was only fourteen.

"Barely a young man, he ventured out into the East Woods and my family never heard from him again. By that time I was twelve and never really thought that by the next year both my mother *and* father would be dead." Her eyes fill with tears, yet still she persists to tell her story.

"It was a shock to us all how my mother died. Some say she was raped and killed, others say she was killed by pillagers passing through our lands. At the same time, our good Baron was at war with an opposing kingdom. My father was forced into battle and there he died on the battlefield.

"From that moment forward, I was forced into a life I did not want. By that time I would have been married and by this time I would have had a family of my own. All that changed, all my plans hopeless, all my expectations ruined. I had to remain at home, my parents' home, and continue where they left off- - caring for my two younger brothers and my one younger sister." She stops then and glances, teary-eyed, at Katherine, who is in such a state of shock, she cannot speak a single word.

Emily-Elizabeth continues: "We had a great life, the seven of us. Can you imagine, five children living in one house! Well, at one time there were only three of us: my brother Kenneth, my brother John, and me.

"Since I was the only girl, I always played boys' games, but when the youngest boy, Thomas, was old enough to play, I was thrown out of the game. I was often told by my brothers that a girl's place is

either out in the fields or in the home. I would go home crying to Mother saying that I wished I was a boy over and over again."

"Emily, I had no idea of the life you had. I am truly sorry about your parents."

"Do not be so. For it is what I believe fate has meant for me."

"What are you to do with yourself now? I do not see your brothers or your sister anywhere."

"My brothers have gone off in search of their own adventure. My sister, she died."

Katherine gasps in surprise but quickly says, "I had no idea. Again, I am truly sorry. May I ask how she died?"

"She caught the Plague when it swept across our land only a few months ago. Being the youngest and most vulnerable, she was affected but the rest of us were spared."

"You are free to join me on my journeys through these distant lands if you choose to."

"Nay, that is quite all right. I will be fine on my own." Katherine and Emily-Elizabeth say their good-byes and depart, each in a separate direction, each with a different adventure laying ahead.

Epilogue:

"When the sun rises early in the morn, and the first light touches the horizons, you hear the sweet melody of the singing bluejays. As the sun reaches the canopy of the trees, flowers begin to open their petals and show their elegant colors. The snow has withered its way into the back of our minds, and warm weather comes again."

To my eldest daughter, with love, Mother

For many days after all Josette's burial, the only item Matthew persists to read is this-- one letter from a mother to her daughter, advising her that life does continue and that there is still hope left in a world filled with evil and chaos. He places this paper next to one of his own, written as follows:

"In a world of chaos and evil, there is still hope. Life does not always satisfy our greatest expectations. Life is *not* a fairy tale and occasionally desires and aspirations do *not* become real.

"Society and fate have more control upon our lives than we truly want to believe. The question that now arises is this: Are we living a life without really living a life? For the life that we are living is controlled by society and fate alone."

THE END