

'A must-read for fans of
The Handmaid's Tale and *The Power*'

Bustle



THE
**GRACE
YEAR**

KIM LIGGETT

Praise for *The Grace Year*

‘Part coming-of-age tale, part adventure story; this is not a cry against oppression – it’s a bold, beautiful howl.’

Heat Magazine

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Kirkus (Starred Review)

Kim Liggett, originally from the rural Midwest in the US, moved to New York City to pursue a career in the arts. She's the author of *Blood and Salt*, *Heart of Ash*, *The Last Harvest* (Bram Stoker Award Winner), *The Unfortunates*, and *The Grace Year*.

Kim spends her free time studying tarot and scouring Manhattan for rare vials of perfume and the perfect egg white cocktail.

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YEAR

KIM LIGGETT



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*For all the daughters,
and those who revere them*

*A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere,
as long as it stays inside the maze.*

—MARGARET ATWOOD,
THE HANDMAID'S TALE

*Maybe there is a beast . . . maybe
it's only us.*

—WILLIAM GOLDING,
LORD OF THE FLIES



No one speaks of the grace year.

It's forbidden.

We're told we have the power to lure grown men from their beds, make boys lose their minds, and drive the wives mad with jealousy. They believe our very skin emits a powerful aphrodisiac, the potent essence of youth, of a girl on the edge of womanhood. That's why we're banished for our sixteenth year, to release our magic into the wild before we're allowed to return to civilization.

But I don't feel powerful.

I don't feel magical.

Speaking of the grace year is forbidden, but it hasn't stopped me from searching for clues.

A slip of the tongue between lovers in the meadow, a frightening bedtime story that doesn't feel like a story at all, knowing glances nestled in the frosty hollows between pleasantries of the women at the market. But they give away nothing.

The truth about the grace year, what happens during that shadow year, is hidden away in the tiny slivers of filament hovering around them when they think no one's watching. But I'm always watching.

The slip of a shawl, scarred shoulders bared under a harvest moon.

Haunted fingertips skimming the pond, watching the ripples fade to black.

Their eyes a million miles away. In wonderment. In horror.

I used to think that was my magic—having the power to see things others couldn't—things they didn't even want to admit to themselves. But all you have to do is open your eyes.

My eyes are wide open.

A minimalist line art illustration of autumn foliage and flowers. The drawing features several large, broad leaves with prominent veins, some of which are slightly curled or damaged, suggesting the texture of autumn leaves. Interspersed among the leaves are several flower buds and open flowers. One flower in the upper left is a bell-shaped bellflower. Another flower in the lower right is a large, trumpet-shaped flower, possibly a morning glory. The entire illustration is rendered in a single, thin black line on a white background. The word "AUTUMN" is centered horizontally across the middle of the image, overlaid on the floral elements.

AUTUMN



I follow her through the woods, a well-worn path I've seen a thousand times. Ferns, lady-slipper, and thistle, the mysterious red flowers dotting the path. Five petals, perfectly formed, like they were made just for us. One petal for the grace year girls, one petal for the wives, one for the laborers, one for the women of the outskirts, and one for her.

The girl looks back at me over her shoulder, giving me that confident grin. She reminds me of someone, but I can't place the name or the face. Maybe something from a long-forgotten memory, a past life, perhaps a younger sister I never knew. Heart-shaped face, a small red strawberry mark under her right eye. Delicate features, like mine, but there's nothing delicate about this girl. There's a fierceness in her steel-gray eyes. Her dark hair is shorn close to her scalp. A punishment or a rebellion, I cannot say. I don't know her, but strangely enough, I know that I

love her. It's not a love like my father has for my mother, it's protective and pure, the same way I felt about those robins I cared for last winter.

We reach the clearing, where women from all walks of life have gathered—the tiny red flower pinned above their hearts. There's no bickering or murderous glares; everyone has come together in peace. In unity. We are sisters, daughters, mothers, grandmothers, standing together for a common need, greater than ourselves.

"We are the weaker sex, weaker no more," the girl says.

The women answer with a primal roar.

But I'm not afraid. I only feel a sense of pride. The girl is the one. She's the one who will change everything, and somehow, I'm a part of all this.

"This path has been paved with blood, the blood of our own, but it was not in vain. Tonight, the grace year comes to an end."

As I expel the air from my lungs, I find myself not in the woods, not with the girl, but here, in this stifling room, in my bed, my sisters glaring down at me.

"What did she say?" my older sister Ivy asks, her cheeks ablaze.

"Nothing," June replies, squeezing Ivy's wrist. "We heard nothing."

As my mother enters the room, my little sisters, Clara and Penny, poke me out of bed. I look to June to thank her for quelling the situation, but she won't meet my gaze. She won't or she can't. I'm not sure what's worse.

We're not allowed to dream. The men believe it's a way we can hide our magic. Having the dreams would be

enough to get me punished, but if anyone ever found out what the dreams were about, it would mean the gallows.

My sisters lead me to the sewing room, fluttering around me like a knot of bickering sparrows. Pushing. Pulling.

"Ease up," I gasp as Clara and Penny yank on the corset strings with a little too much glee. They think this is all fun and games. They don't realize that in a few short years, it will be their turn. I swat at them. "Don't you have anyone else to torture?"

"Stop your fussing," my mother says, taking out her frustration on my scalp as she finishes my braid. "Your father has let you get away with murder all these years, with your mud-stained frocks, dirt under your nails. For once, you're going to know what it feels like to be a lady."

"Why bother?" Ivy flaunts her growing belly in the looking glass for all of us to see. "No one in their right mind would give a veil to Tierney."

"So be it," my mother says as she grabs the corset strings and pulls even tighter. "But she owes me this."

I was a willful child, too curious for my own good, head in the clouds, lacking propriety . . . among other things. And I will be the first girl in our family to go into her grace year without receiving a veil.

My mother doesn't need to say it. Every time she looks at me I feel her resentment. Her quiet rage.

"Here it is." My oldest sister, June, slips back into the room, carrying a deep-blue raw-silk dress with river-clam pearls adorning the shawl neckline. It's the same dress she wore on her veiling day four years ago. It smells of lilac

and fear. White lilac was the flower her suitor chose for her—the symbol of early love, innocence. It's kind of her to let me borrow it, but that's June. Not even the grace year could take that away from her.

All the other girls in my year will be wearing new dresses today with frills and embroidery, the latest style, but my parents knew better than to waste their resources on me. I have no prospects. I made damn sure of that.

There are twelve eligible boys in Garner County this year—boys born into families that have standing and position. And there are thirty-three girls.

Today, we're expected to parade around town, giving the boys one last viewing before they join the men in the main barn to trade and barter our fates like cattle, which isn't that far off considering we're branded at birth on the bottom of our foot with our father's sigil. When all the claims have been made, our fathers will deliver the veils to the awaiting girls at the church, silently placing the gauzy monstrosities on the chosen ones' heads. And tomorrow morning, when we're all lined up in the square to leave for our grace year, each boy will lift the veil of the girl of his choosing, as a promise of marriage, while the rest of us will be completely dispensable.

"I knew you had a figure under there." My mother purses her lips, causing the fine lines around her mouth to settle into deep grooves. She'd stop doing it if she knew how old it made her look. The only thing worse than being old in Garner County is being barren. "For the life of me I'll never understand why you squandered your beauty, squandered your chance to run your own house," she says as she eases the dress over my head.

My arm gets stuck and I start pulling.

"Stop fighting or it's going to—"

The sound of ripping fabric causes a visible heat to creep up my mother's neck, settling into her jaw. "Needle and thread," she barks at my sisters, and they hop to.

I try to hold it in, but the harder I try, the worse it gets, until I burst out laughing. I can't even put on a dress right.

"Go ahead, laugh all you want, but you won't think it's so funny when no one gives you a veil and you come back from the grace year only to be sent straight to one of the labor houses, working your fingers to the bone."

"Better than being someone's wife," I mutter.

"Never say that." She grabs my face in her hands, and my sisters scatter. "Do you want them to think you're a usurper? To be cast out? The poachers would love to get their hands on you." She lowers her voice. "You cannot bring shame on this family."

"What's this about?" My father tucks his pipe into his breast pocket as he makes a rare appearance in the sewing room. Mother quickly composes herself and mends the tear.

"No shame in hard work," he says as he ducks under the eave, kissing my mother on the cheek, reeking of iodine and sweet tobacco. "She can work in the dairy or the mill when she returns. That's entirely respectable. You know our Tierney's always been a free spirit," he says with a conspiratorial wink.

I look away, pretending to be fascinated by the dots of hazy light seeping in through the eyelet curtains. My father and I used to be thick as winter wool. People said he had a certain twinkle in his eye when he spoke of me.

With five daughters, I guess I was the closest thing to a coveted son he'd ever get. On the sly, he taught me how to fish, how to handle a knife, how to take care of myself, but everything's different now. I can't look at him the same way after the night I caught him at the apothecary, doing the unspeakable. Clearly, he's still trying for a prized son, but I always thought he was better than that. As it turns out, he's just like the rest of them.

"Look at you . . .," my father says in an attempt to draw my attention. "Maybe you'll get a veil after all."

I keep my mouth clamped shut, but inside, I want to scream. Being married off isn't a privilege to me. There's no freedom in comfort. They're padded shackles, to be sure, but shackles nonetheless. At least in the labor house my life will still belong to me. My *body* will belong to me. But those kinds of thoughts get me in trouble, even when I don't say them out loud. When I was small, every thought showed on my face. I've learned to hide behind a pleasant smile, but sometimes when I catch my reflection in the glass, I see the intensity burning in my eyes. The closer I get to my grace year, the hotter the fire burns. Sometimes I feel like my eyes are going to sear right out of my skull.

As my mother reaches for the red silk to tie off my braid, I feel a twinge of panic. This is it. The moment I'll be marked with the color of warning . . . of sin.

All the women in Garner County have to wear their hair the same way, pulled back from the face, plaited down the back. In doing so, the men believe, the women won't be able to hide anything from them—a snide expression, a wandering eye, or a flash of magic. White ribbons for

the young girls, red for the grace year girls, and black for the wives.

Innocence. Blood. Death.

"Perfect," my mother says as she puts the final touches on the bow.

Even though I can't see the red strand, I feel the weight of it, and everything it implies, like an anchor holding me to this world.

"Can I go now?" I ask as I pull away from her fidgeting hands.

"Without an escort?"

"I don't need an escort," I say as I cram my sturdy feet into the fine black leather slippers. "I can handle myself."

"And what of the fur trappers from the territory, can you handle them as well?"

"That was one girl and it was ages ago." I let out a sigh.

"I remember it like it was yesterday. Anna Berglund," my mother says, her eyes glazing over. "It was our veiling day. She was walking through town and he just snatched her up, flung her over his horse, and took off into the wilderness, never to be heard from again."

It's odd, what I remember most about that story is that even though she was seen screaming and crying all through town, the men declared she didn't fight hard enough and punished her younger sister in her stead by casting her to the outskirts, for a life of prostitution. That's the part of the story no one ever speaks of.

"Let her go. It's her last day," my father pleads, pretending to give my mother the final say. "She's accustomed to being on her own. Besides, I'd like to spend the day with my beautiful wife. Just the two of us."

For all intents and purposes, they appear to be in love. The past few years, my father has spent more and more time in the outskirts, but it's given me a fair amount of freedom, and for that, I should be grateful.

My mother smiles up at him. "I suppose it'll be all right . . . as long as Tierney's not planning on skulking off into the woods to meet Michael Welk."

I try to play it off, but my throat goes bone dry. I had no idea she knew about that.

She tugs down on the bodice of my dress, trying to get it to sit right. "Tomorrow, when he lifts Kiersten Jenkins's veil, you're going to realize how foolish you've been."

"That's not wha . . . that's not why . . . we're just friends," I sputter.

A hint of a smile slips into the corner of her mouth. "Well, since you're so eager to be out and about, you can fetch some berries for the gathering tonight."

She knows I hate going to the market, especially on veiling day when all of Garner County will be out on full display, but I think that's the whole point. She's going to make the most out of this.

As she takes off her thimble to fetch a coin from her deerskin pouch, I catch a glimpse of the missing tip of her thumb. She's never said as much, but I know it's a memento from her grace year. She catches my gaze and shoves the thimble back on.

"Forgive me," I say as I look down at the worn wood grain beneath my feet. "I'll get the berries." I'd agree to anything to get out of this room.

As if sensing my desperation, Father gives a slight nod toward the door, and I take off like a shot.

"Don't stray from town," my mother calls after me.

Dodging stacks of books, stockings drying on the banister, my father's medicine bag, and a basket full of unfinished knitting, I rush down the three flights of stairs, past the disapproving clucks of the maids, bursting out of our row house into the open air, but the sharp autumn breeze feels alien against my bare skin—my neck, my collarbone, my chest, my calves, the bottom half of my knees. It's just a little skin, I tell myself. Nothing they haven't seen before. But I feel exposed . . . vulnerable.

A girl from my year, Gertrude Fenton, passes with her mother. I can't help but look at her hands; they're covered in dainty white lace gloves. It almost makes me forget about what happened to her. *Almost*. Despite her misfortune, even Gertie seems to still be hoping for a veil, to run a house of her own, to be blessed with sons.

I wish I wanted those things. I wish it were that simple.

"Happy Veiling Day." Mrs. Barton regards me as she clings to her husband's arm a little tighter.

"Who's that?" Mr. Barton asks.

"The James girl," she replies through gritted teeth. "The middle one."

His gaze rakes over my skin. "I see her magic has finally come in."

"Or she's been hiding it." Her eyes narrow on me with the focus of a vulture pecking away at a carcass.

All I want to do is cover up, but I'm not going back inside that house.

I have to remind myself: the dresses, the red ribbons, the veils, the ceremonies—they're all just distractions to keep our minds off the real issue at hand. The grace year.

My chin begins to quiver when I think of the year ahead, the unknown, but I plaster on a vacant smile, as if I'm happy to play my part, so I might return and marry and breed and die.

But not all of us will make it home . . . not in one piece.



Trying to get hold of my nerves, I walk the square where all the girls of my year will be lined up tomorrow. It doesn't take magic or even a keen eye to see that during the grace year, something profound happens. We'd see them when they left for the encampment each year. Though some were veiled, their hands told me everything I needed to know—cuticles picked raw with worry, nervous impulses flickering through cold fingertips—but they were full of promise . . . alive. And when they returned, the ones who returned, they were emaciated, weary . . . broken.

The younger children made a game out of it, taking bets on who would make it back, but the closer I got to my own grace year, the less amusing it became.

"Happy Veiling Day." Mr. Fallow tips his hat in a gentlemanly fashion, but his eyes linger on my skin, on the red ribbon trailing down my backside, a little too long for comfort. Geezer Fallow is what they call him behind his

back, because no one knows exactly how old he is, but he's clearly not too old to give me the once-over.

They call us the weaker sex. It's pounded into us every Sunday in church, how everything's Eve's fault for not expelling her magic when she had the chance, but I still can't understand why the girls don't get a say. Sure, there are secret arrangements, whispers in the dark, but why must the boys get to decide everything? As far as I can tell, we all have hearts. We all have brains. There are only a few differences I can see, and most men seem to think with that part anyway.

It's funny to me that they think claiming us, lifting our veils, will give us something to live for during our grace year. If I knew I had to come home and lie with someone like Tommy Pearson, I might walk straight into the poacher's blade with open arms.

A blackbird lands on the branch of the punishment tree in the center of the square. The scratching of its claws against the dull metal limb sends a sliver of ice through my blood. Apparently, it used to be a real tree, but when they burned Eve alive for heresy, the tree went with her, so they built this one out of steel. An everlasting emblem of our sin.

A group of men pass by, shrouded in whispers.

There have been rumors circulating for months . . . whispers of a usurper. Apparently, the guards have found evidence of secret gatherings in the woods. Men's clothes hanging from branches, like an effigy. At first, they thought it might be a trapper trying to stir up trouble, or a jilted woman from the outskirts trying to get even, but then

the suspicion spread to the county. It's hard to imagine that it could be one of our own, but Garner County is full of secrets. Some that are as clear as fresh-cut glass, but they *choose* to ignore. I'll never understand that. I'd rather have the truth, no matter how painful the outcome.

"For the love of God, stand up straight, Tierney," a woman scolds as she passes. Aunt Linny. "And without an escort. My poor brother," she whispers to her daughters, loud enough for me to hear every syllable. "Like mother, like daughter." She holds a sprig of holly to her upturned nose. In the old language it was the flower of protection. Her sleeve slips from her wrist, exposing a swath of pink puckered skin on her forearm. My sister Ivy said she saw it once when she went on a call with Father to treat her cough—a scar running all the way from her wrist to her shoulder blade.

Aunt Linny yanks down her sleeve to block my stare. "She runs wild in the woods. Best place for her really."

How would she know what I've been up to unless she's been spying on me? Ever since my first bleed, I've gotten all kinds of unwanted advice. Most of it asinine, at best, but this is just plain mean.

Aunt Linny glares at me before dropping the sprig and continuing on her way. "As I was saying, there's so much to consider when giving a veil. Is she pleasant? Compliant? Will she bear sons? Is she hardy enough to survive the grace year? I don't envy the men. It's a heavy day, indeed."

If she only knew. I stamp the holly into the ground.

The women believe the men's veiling gathering in the barn to be a reverent affair, but there's nothing reverent

about it. I know this because I've witnessed the last six years in a row by hiding in the loft behind the sacks of grain. All they do is drink ale, sling out vulgarities, and occasionally get into a brawl over one of the girls, but curiously, there's no talk of our "dangerous magic."

In fact, the only time magic comes up is when it's convenient for them. Like when Mrs. Pinter's husband died, Mr. Coffey suddenly accused his wife of twenty-five years of secretly harboring her magic and levitating in her sleep. Mrs. Coffey was as meek and mild as they come—hardly the levitating sort—but she was cast out. No questions asked. And surprise, Mr. Coffey married Mrs. Pinter the following day.

But if I ever made such an accusation, or if I came back from my grace year unbroken, I would be sent to the outskirts to live among the prostitutes.

"My, my, Tierney," Kiersten says as she approaches with a few of her followers trailing behind. Her veiling dress might be the prettiest one I've ever seen—cream silk with strands of gold woven in, glinting in the sun, just like her hair. Kiersten reaches out, skimming her fingertips over the pearls near my collarbone with a familiarity we don't share. "That dress suits you better than it did June," she says, looking up at me through her sugary lashes. "But don't tell her I said that." The girls behind her stifle wicked giggles.

My mother would probably be mortified to know they recognized it was a hand-me-down, but the girls of Garner County are always on the lookout for an opportunity to dole out a thinly shrouded insult.

I try to laugh it off, but my undergarments are laced

so tight, I can't find the air. It doesn't matter anyway. The only reason Kiersten even acknowledges me is because of Michael. Michael Welk has been my closest friend since childhood. We used to spend all our time spying on people, trying to uncover clues about the grace year, but eventually Michael grew tired of that game. Only it wasn't a game to me.

Most girls drift away from the boys around their tenth birthday, when the girls' schooling is over, but somehow, Michael and I managed to remain friends. Maybe it's because I wanted nothing from him and he wanted nothing from me. It was simple. Of course, we couldn't run around town like we used to, but we found a way. Kiersten probably thinks I have his ear, but I don't get involved in Michael's love life. Most nights we just lay in the clearing, looking up at the stars, lost in our own worlds. And that seemed to be enough for both of us.

Kiersten shushes the girls behind her. "I'll keep my fingers crossed you get a veil tonight, Tierney," she says with a smile that registers on the back of my neck.

I know that smile. It's the same one she gave Father Edmonds last Sunday when she noticed his hands were trembling as he placed the holy wafer on her awaiting pink tongue. Her magic came in early, and she knew it. Behind the carefully arranged face, the cleverly tailored clothes meant to accentuate her shape, she could be cruel. Once, I saw her drown a butterfly, all the while playing with its wings. Despite her mean streak, she's a fitting wife for the future leader of the council. She'll devote herself to Michael, dote on their sons and breed cruel but beautiful daughters.

I watch the girls as they flit down the lane in perfect formation, like a swarm of yellow jackets. I can't help wondering what they'll be like away from the county. What will happen to their fake smiles and coquetry? Will they run wild and roll in the mud and howl at the moon? I wonder if you can see the magic leave your body, if it's taken from you like a bolt of heat lightning or seeps out of you like slow-leaking poison. But there's another thought creeping into my consciousness. What if nothing happens at all?

Digging my newly buffed nails into the fleshy part of my palms, I whisper, "The girl . . . the gathering . . . it's only a dream." I can't be tempted into that kind of thinking again. I can't afford to give in to childhood fancies, because even if the magic is a lie, the poachers are very real. Bastards born to the women of the outskirts—the reviled. It's common knowledge they're out there waiting for a chance to grab one of the girls during their grace year, when their magic is believed to be most potent, so they can sell their essence on the black market as an aphrodisiac and youth serum.

I stare up at the massive wood gate, separating us from the outskirts, and wonder if they're already out there . . . waiting for us.

The breeze rushes over my bare skin as if in response, and I move a little quicker.

Folks from the county are gathered around the greenhouse, trying to guess which flower the suitors have chosen for which grace year girl. I'm happy to hear my name isn't on anyone's lips.

When our families immigrated there were so many different languages being spoken that flowers were the only common language. A way to tell someone I'm sorry, good luck, I trust you, I'm fond of you, or even I wish you ill. There's a flower for nearly every sentiment, but now that we all speak English, you'd think the demand would have faded, but here we are, clinging fast to the old ways. It makes me doubt anything will ever change . . . no matter what.

"Which one are you hoping for, miss?" a worker asks, swiping the back of her callused hand over her brow.

"No . . . not for me," I say in an embarrassed hush. "Just seeing what's in bloom." I spot a small basket tucked under a bench, red petals peeking through the seams. "What are those?" I ask.

"Just weeds," she says. "They used to be everywhere. Couldn't take a step out your house without comin upon one. They got rid of em round here, but that's the funny thing bout weeds. You can pull em up by the root, burn the soil where they stood, might lie dormant for years, but they'll always find a way."

I'm leaning in for a closer look when she says, "Don't worry bout it none if you don't get a veil, Tierney."

"H-how do you know my name?" I stammer.

She gives me a winsome smile. "Someday, you'll get a flower. It might be a little withered round the edges, but it'll mean just the same. Love's not just for the marrieds, you know, it's for everyone," she says as she slips a bloom into my hand.

Flustered, I turn on my heel and make a beeline for the market.

Uncurling my fingers, I find a deep purple iris, the petals and falls perfectly formed. "Hope," I whisper, my eyes welling up. I don't hope for a flower from a boy, but I hope for a better life. A truthful life. I'm not usually sentimental, but there's something about it that feels like a sign. Like its own kind of magic.

I'm tucking the bloom into my dress, over my heart for safekeeping, when I pass a line of guards, desperately trying to avert their eyes.

Fur trappers, fresh from the territory, click their tongues as I pass. They're vulgar and unkempt, but somehow it seems more honest that way. I want to look in their eyes, see if I can sense their adventures, the vast northern wilderness in their weathered faces, but I needn't dare.

All I have to do is buy the berries. And the sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can meet Michael.

When I enter the covered market, an uncomfortable din permeates the air. Normally, I pass through the stalls unnoticed, slipping in and out of the strands of garlic and rashers of bacon like a phantom breeze, but today, the wives glare as I walk by, and the men smile in a way that makes me want to hide.

"It's the James girl," a woman whispers.

"The tomboy?"

"I'd give her a veil and then some." A man elbows his young son.

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I feel ashamed and I don't even know why.

I'm the same girl I was yesterday, but now that I'm freshly scrubbed and squeezed into this ridiculous dress, marked by a red ribbon, I've become entirely visible to

the men and women of Garner County, like some exotic animal on display.

Their eyes, their whispers feel like the sharp edge of a blade grazing my skin.

But there's one set of eyes in particular that makes me move a little faster. Tommy Pearson. He seems to be following me. I don't need to see him to know he's there. I can hear the beating wings of his latest pet perched on his arm. He has a fondness for birds of prey. It sounds impressive, but there's no skill involved. He's not gaining their trust, their respect. He's just breaking them.

Prying the coin from my sweaty palm, I drop it in the jar and grab the closest basket of berries I can find.

I keep my head down as I maneuver through the crowd, their whispers buzzing in my ears, and just as I've nearly cleared the awning, I run smack into Father Edmonds, mulberries spilling all around me. He starts sputtering out something cross, but stops when he looks at me. "My dear, Miss James, you're in a hurry."

"Is that really her?" Tommy Pearson calls out from behind me. "Tierney the Terrible?"

"I can still kick just as hard," I say as I continue to gather the berries.

"I'm counting on it," he replies, his pale eyes locking on mine. "I like them feisty."

Looking up to thank Father Edmonds, I see his gaze is fixed on my bosom. "If you need anything . . . anything at all, my child." As I reach for the basket, he strokes the side of my hand. "Your skin is so soft," he whispers.

Abandoning the berries, I take off running. I hear laughter behind me, Father Edmonds's heavy breathing, the eagle furiously beating its wings against its tether.

Slipping behind an oak to catch my breath, I pull the iris from my dress only to find it's been crushed by the corset. I clench the ruined bloom in my fist.

That familiar heat rushes through me. Instead of dampening the urge, I breathe it in, coaxing it forward. Because in this moment, oh how I long to be full of dangerous magic.



A part of me wants to run straight to Michael, to our secret spot, but I need to cool off first. I can't let him know they got to me. Plucking a hay needle, I drag it along the fence posts as I pass the orchard, slowing my breath to my measured steps. I used to be able to tell Michael anything, but we're more careful with each other now.

Last summer, still reeling after I caught my dad at the apothecary, I let some snide comment slip out about his father, who runs the apothecary, runs the council, and all hell broke loose. He told me I needed to watch my tongue, that someone could think I was a usurper, that I could be burned alive if they ever found out about my dreams.

I don't think he meant it as a threat, but it certainly felt like one.

Our friendship could've ended right then and there, but we met the next day, like nothing happened. In truth, we probably outgrew each other a long time ago, but I think we both wanted to hang on to a bit of our youth, our innocence, for as long as possible. And today will be the last time we'll be able to meet like this.

When I come back from the grace year, *if* I make it back, he'll be married, and I'll be assigned to one of the labor houses. My days will be spoken for, and he'll have his hands full with Kiersten and the council during the evenings. He might come by for a visit, under the guise of some type of business, but after a while, he'll stop coming, until we both just nod to each other at church on Christmas.

Leaning on the rickety fence, I stare out over the labor houses. My plan is to lie low, get through the year, and come back to take my place in the fields. Most of the girls who don't get a veil want to work as a maid in a respectable house or at least at the dairy, or the mill, but there's something appealing about putting my hands in the dirt, feeling connected to something real. My oldest sister, June, loved to grow things. She used to tell us bedtime stories about her adventures. She's not allowed to garden anymore, now that she's a wife, but every once in a while, I catch her reaching down to touch the soil, digging a secret cocklebur from her hem. I figure if it's good enough for June, it's good enough for me. Fieldwork is the only job where men and women work side by side, but I can handle myself better than most. I may be slight, but I'm strong.

Strong enough to climb trees and give Michael a run for his money.

As I make my way to the secluded woods behind the mill, I hear guards approaching. I wonder why they're all the way out here. Not wanting any trouble, I dive between the bushes.

I'm crawling my way through the bramble when Michael grins down at me from the other side. "You look—"

"Don't start," I say as I attempt to untangle myself, but a pearl gets caught on a twig and pops off, rolling into the clearing.

"Such poise." He laughs, dragging his hand through his wheat-colored hair. "If you're not careful, you might get snapped up tonight."

"Very funny," I say as I continue to crawl around. "Won't matter anyway, because my mother is going to smother me in my sleep if I don't find that pearl."

Michael gets down on the forest floor to help me look. "But what if it's someone agreeable . . . someone who could give you a real home? A life."

"Like Tommy Pearson?" I loop an imaginary rope around my neck to hang myself.

Michael chuckles. "He's not as bad as he seems."

"Not as bad as he seems? The boy who tortures majestic birds for fun?"

"He's really very good with them."

"We've talked about this," I say as I comb through the fallen scarlet maple leaves. "That's no life for me."

He sits back on his heels and I swear I can hear him thinking. He thinks too much.

"Is this because of the little girl? The girl from your dreams?"

My body tenses.

"Have you had any more?"

"No." I force my shoulders to relax. "I told you, I'm done with all that."

As we continue to search, I watch him out of the corner of my eye. I should've never confided in him about her. I should've never had the dreams at all. I just have to last one more day and then I can rid myself of this magic for good.

"I saw guards on the lane," I say, trying not to be too obvious about my prodding. "I wonder what they're doing way out here."

He leans in, his arm grazing mine. "They almost caught the usurper," he whispers.

"How?" I ask a little too excitedly, and then quickly rein it in. "You don't have to tell me if—"

"They set up a bear trap, out in the woods, near the border of the county and the outskirts last night. It went off, but all they caught was a light blue stretch of wool . . . and a lot of blood."

"How do you know?" I ask, being careful not to seem too eager.

"The guards called on my father this morning, asked if anyone had come into the apothecary looking for medicine. I guess they called on your father, as well, to see if he treated any injuries last night, but he was . . . indisposed."

I knew what he meant. It was a polite way of saying my father was in the outskirts again.

"They're searching the county now. Whoever it is, they won't last long without proper care. Those traps are nasty

business.” His gaze eases down my legs, lingering on my ankles. Instinctively, I tuck them under my dress. I wonder if he thinks it could be me . . . if that’s why he was asking about my dreams.

“Found it,” he says, plucking the pearl from a bit of moss.

I brush the dirt from my palms. “I’m not knocking it . . . the whole marriage thing,” I say, desperate for a change of subject. “I’m sure Kiersten will worship you and bring you many sons,” I tease as I reach for the jewel, but he pulls his hand back.

“Why would you say that?”

“Please. Everyone knows. Besides, I’ve seen the two of you in the meadow.”

A deep blush creeps over his collar as he pretends to clean off the pearl with the edge of his shirt. He’s nervous. I’ve never seen him nervous before. “Our fathers have planned out every detail. How many children we’ll have . . . even their names.”

I look up at him and can’t help but crack a smile. I thought it would be strange picturing him like that, but it feels right. How it’s meant to be. I think he went along with me all those years mostly on a lark, something to pass the time, away from the pressures of his family and the grace year ahead, but for me, it was always something more than that. I don’t blame him for becoming who he was supposed to be. He’s lucky in a way. To be at odds with your nature, what everyone expects from you, is a life of constant struggle.

“I’m happy for you,” I say as I peel a red leaf from my knee. “I mean it.”

He picks up the leaf, tracing his thumb along the veins. "Do you ever think there's something more out there . . . more than all of this?"

I look up at him, trying to gauge his meaning, but I can't get caught up in this again. It's too dangerous. "Well, you can always visit the outskirts." I punch him on the shoulder.

"You know what I mean." He takes a deep breath. "You must know."

I snatch the pearl from him, slipping it into the hem of the sleeve. "Don't go soft on me now, Michael," I say as I stand. "Soon, you'll have the most coveted position in the county, running the apothecary, taking your place as head of the council. People will listen to you. You'll have *real* influence." I attempt a simpering smile. "Which brings me to a tiny favor I've been meaning to ask."

"Anything," he says as he gets to his feet.

"If I make it back alive . . ."

"Of course you'll make it back, you're smart and tough and—"

"*If* I make it back," I interrupt, dusting off my dress the best I can. "I've decided I want to work in the fields, and I was hoping you could use your position on the council to pull some strings."

"Why would you want that?" His brow knots up. "That's the lowest work available."

"It's good, honest work. And I'll be able to stare up at the sky anytime I want. When you're eating your supper, you can look down at your plate and say, my, that's a fine-looking carrot, and you'll think of me."

"I don't want to think of you when I look at a damn carrot."

"What's gotten into you?"

"No one will be there to protect you." He starts pacing. "You'll be open to the elements. I've heard stories. The fields are full of men . . . of bastards one step away from being poachers, and they can take you anytime they want."

"Oh, I'd like to see them try." I laugh as I pick up a stick, lashing it through the air.

"I'm serious." He grabs my hand, midswipe, forcing me to drop the stick, but he doesn't let go of my hand. "I worry for you," he says softly.

"Don't." I jerk my hand away, thinking how strange it feels to have him touch me that way. Over the years, we've beat each other senseless, rolled around in the dirt, dunked each other in the river, but somehow this is different. He feels sorry for me.

"You're not thinking straight," he says as he looks down at the stick, the dividing line between us, and shakes his head. "You're not listening to what I'm trying to tell you. I want to help you—"

"Why?" I kick the stick out of the way. "Because I'm stupid . . . because I'm a girl . . . because I couldn't possibly know what I want . . . because of this red ribbon in my hair . . . my dangerous magic?"

"No," he whispers. "Because the Tierney I know would never think that of me . . . wouldn't ask this of me . . . not now . . . not while I'm . . ." He pulls his hair back from his face in frustration. "I only want what's best for you," he

says as he backs away from me and goes crashing into the woods.

I think about going after him, apologizing for whatever I've done to offend him, take back the favor, so we can part as friends, but maybe it's better this way. How do you say good-bye to your childhood?



Feeling irritated and confused, I walk back through town, doing my best to ignore the stares and whispers. I stop to watch the horses in the paddock being groomed by the guards for the journey to the encampment, their manes and tails braided with red ribbons. Just like us. And it occurs to me, that's how they think of us . . . we're nothing more than in-season mares for breeding.

Hans brings one of the horses closer so I can admire its mane, the intricate plaiting, but we don't speak. I'm not allowed to call him by his name in public, just "guard," but I've known him since I was seven years old. I'll never forget going to the healing house that afternoon to find Father and instead finding Hans lying there all alone with a bag of bloody ice between his legs. At the time, I didn't understand. I thought it was some kind of accident. But he was sixteen, born to a woman of the labor house. He'd been given a choice. Become a guard or work in the fields

for the rest of his life. Being a guard is a respected position in the county—they get to live in town, in a house with maids, they're even allowed to buy cologne made from herbs and exotic citrus at the apothecary, a privilege Hans takes full advantage of. Their duties are light in comparison to the fields—maintaining the gallows, controlling a rowdy guest or two from the north, escorting the grace year girls to and from the encampment, and yet, most choose the fields.

Father says it's a simple procedure, a small cut and snip to free them of their urges, and maybe that's true, but I think the pain lies elsewhere, in having to live among us—being reminded day in and day out of everything that's been taken away from them.

I don't know why I wasn't afraid to approach him, but that day in the healing house, when I sat down next to him and held his hand, he began to weep. I'd never seen a man cry before.

I asked him what was wrong, and he told me it was a secret.

I said I was good at keeping secrets.

And I am.

"I'm in love with a girl, Olga Vetrone, but we can never be together," he said.

"Why?" I asked. "If you love someone you should be with them."

He explained that she was a grace year girl, that yesterday she'd received a veil from a boy and would have no choice but to marry him.

He told me that he'd always planned on working in the fields, but he couldn't stand the idea of being away from

her. At least if he joined the guard, he'd be able to be close to her. Protect her. Watch her children grow up, even pretend they were his own.

I remember thinking it was the most romantic thing in the world.

When Hans left for the encampment, I thought maybe when they saw each other, they'd run away, forsake their vows, but when the convoy returned, Hans looked as if he'd seen a ghost. His beloved didn't make it home. Her body was unaccounted for. They didn't even find her ribbon. Her little sister was banished to the outskirts that day. She was only a year older than me at the time. It made me worry that much more for my sisters, but also, about what would happen to me if they didn't make it back.

Come winter, when I saw Hans alone in the stable, practicing his braiding, his cold fingers deftly weaving in and out of the chestnut tail with the ribbon, I asked him about Olga. What happened to her. A shadow passed over his face. As he walked toward me, he stroked his hand over his heart, again and again, as if he could somehow put it back together again, a tic he carries to this day. Some of the girls make fun of him for it, the constant rubbing sound it makes, but I always felt sorry for him.

"It wasn't meant to be," he whispered.

"Will you be okay?" I asked.

"I have you to look after now," he said, a hint of a smile in his voice.

And he did.

He stood in front of me in the square to block my view of the most brutal punishments; he helped me sneak into