

The Last Gift

I don't notice her approaching.

My eyes are fixated on the limp blade of grass between my fingertips, as I carefully tear a hole through the middle, looping another through the gap. She treads lightly, weaving through the clumps of heather.

"Hello."

Her voice has a golden lilt to it, and it flows through me like syrup. Almost too sweet. My breath hitches, but I say nothing. I can just imagine the corners of her eyes crinkling like they do when she's assessing someone, trying to figure them out.

She sighs. I watch her sit down, smoothing her skirt. I gave her that. She told me years ago she loved the feeling of them whooshing around her, soft against her skin. I let myself give a small smile at the memory of her dancing up my garden path, skirt rippling in the breeze, eyes laughing in the sunlight.

"So, you're not all moody today." She sings the words, and I see her silvery hair swirl around, as she turns to face me. "You can't stay mad at me forever."

That's true. Her matter-of-fact voice just sets it in stone, making it real. I know what's going to happen. This facade will go on for a few days. I'll tell myself I'll do it this time, I'll stay away, and make her too, but then she'll weave her way back into my life, like she never let go.

She untangles her legs and stretches them out in front of her, just like me, and nudges my shoe with her tattered brown boots. I gave her those. She could never join me outside with the sparkly trainers she had before. She wanted to share the forest with me, and instead of telling her that the wild and beautiful place wasn't for anyone to share, I looked into those bright, eager eyes, and said yes. As if nature was something people could dish out as they please.

"I'm really sorry." She doesn't mean it. I know her. "I didn't mean to make you upset. It was just a joke. Everyone else thought it was funny."

I squeeze my hand into a fist, clutching the grass loop in the other. She doesn't understand. No-one's ever hurt her. No-one's ever pushed her to the edge.

I look up at her face, soft and pleading. She picks at the yellow scrunchie around her wrist, pulling and flicking it back and forth, a habit she's had for years. I gave her that. I picked it out for her because yellow is the colour of warmth, happiness. A glowing ray of sunshine, brightening every day, no matter what. She never used it to tie up her hair. She said it made her feel constricted, trapped.

I scan the heather in front of me and pick one of the small white flowers embedded in the purple, and weave it into my grass chain, the gentle breeze whipping my hair across my face.

When I pull it out the way, she's staring at me, expectant. I stare back. She tilts her head, her eyes crinkling at the corners. Maybe if she didn't know I could read her like a book, she wouldn't keep herself so open.

"Let's go back down to the lake. They said they won't laugh at you again, don't worry."

I want to do it so much. I can say yes, like I do all the time, and everything will go back to the way it was. Her rosy lips curl upwards slightly, and she pulls a loose strand of hair away from her eyes. They glitter.

They do say the eyes are the window to the soul.

"No."

The wind doesn't go insane and yank us off balance... The birds don't scream and screech.

She doesn't yell, pull my hair and cry.

She sits there. Silent. As if, being denied wasn't something she thought could happen to her. As if it was a joke.

I look down at the grass chain in my hand. It's lumpy, messy, tied up in all the wrong places. Absolute chaos, but still beautiful.

A bit like life.

I stand up slowly, a newfound freedom taking over me. She does too. But hers is a different kind of freedom.

Gently, I pull her hand towards me, and wrap the grass chain around her wrist, next to the yellow scrunchie. I let her eyes pierce mine for a second, but I don't read them. I don't have to anymore.

I'm free.