

At the cottages life is sweet. Until the day comes when you get chosen to replace a deceased or banished aide. We all get to come here after aide school. There are five cottages all filled with aide students. We all have one large breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the long picnic table outside in the middle of the circle of wooden houses and sheds. Everyone is friendly, and I know why. They try to be as social as they can before they get sent off.

I sat there in our cottage thinking about how often people get chosen to be an aide. I had only seen about five or six people leave once they turned eighteen, but other than that I had just seen people come in.

My best friend, Laura and I walked down the creaky stairs to see what everyone else was doing.

“Hey guys!” our other cottage mate, Sunshine yelled down the hall to us.

“Hi,” we groan. She *really* was just a drop of sunshine, but most of us found her joy plain annoying.

“Well, we’re off.”

“Alright!”

Laura and I walked out the door.

I had been there for three years. I came with every dream of a happy life, never going to the palace. Thirteen and hopeful, the world was a happy place for me. It still was at this point but, I realized very soon that life is not always as sweet as it seems.

Later that night as I laid in my bed, a light gust of cold wind rushed through my open window. I shivered and pulled the dark blue covers of my light gray painted bed over my head the way I used to before aide school, when I heard my parents fighting. It comforted me to feel the down blanket brush against my face, making my long acorn brown hair stand up and stick to the comforter.

Laura once again threw my door open, rushing in. This time her face was filled with fear.

“Get up!” she screamed. I pulled my head out from under the covers to see her beady eyes staring into mine as she sat on the foot of my queen sized bed.

“What?!”

“I had a horrible dream!” she shouted.

“Oh, good. I thought it was something important.” She gave me an evil glare as she continued her story.

“Anyway, as I was saying, in the dream you got taken away to be an aide and I was left here alone... but, then this guy came and told us that you had been executed because you didn’t listen to the queen when she told you to wash her feet, and then everything went into slow-motion while I cried and so did all the newbies and *especially* Sunshine...” There was a long silence until she finally finished with, “and then everything went black except for the screams of everyone in the cottages.”

“That sounds... horrible. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“But, the worst part is that I think it might actually happen,” she replied.

“It won’t, I swear.”

“Okay... but, you have to promise me that you if you do get taken away, you’ll never, ever, ever, e-”

“Get on with it!” I interrupted.

“Disobey the queen,” she said with a suddenly stern face.

“I promise.”

The next morning I walked into the center where breakfast and everyone else but Laura was waiting for me. Luckily I did not have kitchen duty.

Laura stumbled out of our cottage, her hair knotted into a yarn ball.

“Hey late risers!” our cottage advisor, Danielle yelled over to us from the end of the table.

A cottage advisor is there to make sure that everyone and thing goes well and no one tries to escape.

“Hi, Danielle. How was *your* night?” I ask while rubbing my eyes.

“Fine. But, there was something that I thought I should tell everyone... and now that *everyone* is here, I can tell you,” she paused with her hands in her lap and her face proper, as if she was trying to hold something back, “There has been a problem with our security and well... look around.” We all searched for something out of place. Back and forth and back and forth, our eyes shifted.

“Just tell us already!” Sunshine shouted across the table. Everyone stared at her in awe. Sunshine? Screaming?

“Okay, Sunshine I will. One of the girls is missing... it’s Annabelle,” Danielle spoke softly with her hand raising to the top of her head, where it then pulled at the long wavy strands of hazel nut, brown hair dragging them to the back of her head. She looked to all of us. We looked

back into her deep grey eyes with sadness.

At twelve o'clock in the afternoon we were all sitting in our rooms, just thinking of the possibilities. *Was she lost? Or had she actually run away? If so, that must mean we could all get out. Away from our horrid fait.*

"No!" we all heard a scream from the center. There was a loud thumping down the stairs as all of us rushed to see what had happened.

The main door was flung open when we all shoved our way to the front, where we then saw a man holding Sunshine's arm. He was standing next to her kneeling body, her arm above her head and her eyes squinting with pain.

"Get off of her!" I scream while running toward the man with my fist raised.

"Who are you?!" another girl from our cottage screamed.

"I am her father and I am here to take her home!"

"Dad! Don't! *You* need to go home," she said with fear in her eyes as she stared up to him. He raised his arm into the air as it began to swing down on her, I took my already clenched fist and drove it into his face. There was a loud smack as his hand met her face and mine, his. His cheek morphed to my hand. The feeling of his fat sticking to my skin was unbearable.

"Cassidy! No!" Penelope, another cottage advisor yelled as she charged at me with a face as red as a tomato. She dragged me by my left arm into cottage two.

"You know violence is unacceptable here!" she screamed.

"Yeah, but it was to protect a fellow aide! And don't we just-so-happen to have a rule that says to never let another aide down?!" I shouted back.

"Go to your room while I call the queen and speak to her about your behavior."

"Fine, at least this means I can't be an aide!" I said as I stomped off out of the cottage and into my own, passing the crowd huddling around Sunshine and her father. There was a silence as I passed. Everyone stared at me and my still uncombed hair. I felt a tear begin to develop in my right eye. I turned to my cottage and quietly let out a gasp of air as if I had been holding my breath.

In my room I sat on my bed whimpering like a dog. I opened my window and felt the cold fall wind nipping at my face where the long leftover streams down my face still remained from the former tears I had released at the thought of being executed or even sent to a behavioral school. I stared out to the open plane where I had been so happy for the past three years, running

with my friends, laying and watching the stars dance in the moonlit sky, and even having my first interaction with someone from the outside world. How could I ever leave here? My life was here. The first day I had come to the cottages was the best day of my life. If I left, my life would be over, I would be an empty body. No soul.

“Cassidy, I need to speak with you,” Penelope’s voice entered the room, separating the silence.

“What?” I say with a surprised voice.

“I didn’t call the queen. I’m sorry to have scared you like that but, you were acting recklessly and with behavior like that-”

“I know, ‘comes consequences’,” I say with a roll of my eyes.

“You know, it worries me that you know that by heart.”

“It’s only six words, with-behavior-like-”

“I get it,” she replied with exhaustion. “Just remember, somethings are better left undone.”

“I know... But sometimes, the people you care about have to come before the rules,” I say turning my head toward the window.

Penelope opened the door to see half the cabin standing outside. Eyes wide with hope.

“She’s staying,” she said with a slight smile. She turned to me and her smile grew. I smiled back and returned my gaze to the field. The hallway filled with conversations, I could hear bits of them, some positive, “Can you believe it?! I can’t imagine the cottages without her!” Some negative, “What a lunatic, she ought to be in some dungeon somewhere.” My heart sank to my feet, *why would people hate me for protecting a fellow aide?*

“Hey!” I heard Laura’s voice yell to me through the crowded hall, “How are you! I’m so glad you can stay!” she said without giving me time to answer the question.

That night I stared at the ceiling trying to convince myself that if I fell asleep I wouldn’t be awoken by strange men dragging me to an execution center. *She said I could stay.*

I saw three men pulling me out of my bed, two of the men grabbed my arms. One of them had short, blonde hair, the other had long, shiny, dark brown hair. We struggled. The third man grabbed my feet, one in each hand. His arms were muscular, like a horse. No. Like a pit bull.

My eyes burst open, *that was a dream? How? It was so real... so, frightening.*

“Breakfast is ready, I hope you can control yourself on the walk down the stairs.” I turned to the door, where Danielle now stands.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” I shouted across the room to her.

“It means that, just because you got off the hook with Penelope, doesn’t mean you’re off the hook with everyone else.” She looked at me with her eyebrows pointed down toward her nose like some kind of cartoon character.

I walked down the stairs slowly, my hands felt like the heaviest weights. *How can people be angry at me? All I was doing was protecting a... friend, I guess I could call her that. I mean I’ve never really had a friend who didn’t annoy me.* I see everyone sitting around the table through the window above the front door at the bottom of the stairs. No words. Everyone watched me as I stepped out of the cottage with dark circles surrounding my eyes. They stared and stared. Would things ever go back to normal? They were still staring, how long can forty girls just *stare*? I walked to the end of the table and sat. Sunshine’s eyes met mine from across the table. Her father had been sent to the queen’s guards for endangering one of her future aides.

I could always tell what people were thinking through their eyes, but with hers, at that moment all I saw was a stare, just a plain stare, had her soul been taken? Had she escaped from her body when he hit her? Just the way I thought I would if I got taken away? Did he hit the soul right out of her? I stared back at her, hoping that if I stared hard enough, long enough I would be able to see her, see the old Sunshine. Where had she gone?

I stuck my fork into the soft egg in front of me, my fingers gripped the fork as hard as they could without breaking it in half. I could feel the morning sun beating down on me, sweat slowly dripping down my face from the very edge of my hair.

Penelope looked up from her food that she had been staring at all morning, "Well, we can't just sit in silence all day! Now, I know that a lot of people are mad at Cassidy for doing what she did but, she was only protecting a friend. And to me... that's a whole lot more important than some dumb rule." It seemed like the whole world was silent at that moment-although, I bet the queen was off in her palace yelling at some poor aide.

"You can't truly think that what Cassidy did was okay!" Danielle shouted across the table.

"Yes I can... and I do! She may not be the best at controlling her emotions or her actions, but she is one of us and we can't just turn our backs on her!"

"Well, I believe that when you use you body for evil, you are no longer one of us," Danielle replied again with a look of hatred.

"Well, in that case, you aren't one of us! And neither am I." We all turned to Penelope, "Or,

for that matter, none of the other cottage advisors... Or the queen!" Gasps came from all edges of the table. The biggest rule to being an aide or an advisor was that you never, ever said anything bad about the queen.

"Excuse me?!" Danielle replied as if someone had just stabbed her in the heart.

"Everything we do is evil! These poor girls are going to spend the rest of their lives either in fear that they will be chosen to be an aide or being slaves of the queen! Don't you remember? Or are you too evil to have any feelings at all?... Even back then."

"Stop! Both of you! This is crazy! You, Penelope are using the queen in your little game of hatred and you, Danielle you're just mad because you never had the courage to do anything as brave Cassidy!" Annabelle's voice breaks through the crowd.

"Annabelle?!" we all screamed.

"I know all about what happened... because... well, I was never really gone. I just wanted to get away from this place. And I think you know why, I mean you two are right in the middle of it. I was starting to lose my mind here, every night there was a lingering fear that I would be taken away. I had terrible dreams of men dragging me from my bed and bringing me to the palace. I couldn't stand it anymore." We all stared at her. "I realized later though, that it was no better. I always felt afraid that one day I would get caught."

Danielle looked at Penelope with her eyes drooped and her lips quivering. Penelope ran around the table to her and wrapped her arms around her. Danielle rested her head on her shoulder, "You're right, I *am* evil."

"No, you're not. You didn't choose to be an advisor... you were chosen." They hugged for another ten seconds before parting ways and going into their own cottages. Danielle wiped a tear from under her eye with her wrist, pushing it toward her ear.

We all stood. We walked to our cottages, our heads facing the brown dirt that covered everything.

Silence spread itself through the cottages. No one had said anything since that morning. I had been in my room waiting for someone to come in and tell me that food was ready. No one ever did, I guess they were all too scared that someone else would be down there too.

That night I had the dream again but, this time only one of the men was there, dragging me by my arms through the cottage. Down the stairs. In the dream I heard Annabelle scream, I struggled to get free from the man but, it was the blonde one. The pit bull. I heard her scream

again and again. I died inside every time I heard her scream. I must have died over one hundred times that night.

I woke up to Laura shaking me, over and over.

"What?!" I screamed in fright.

"You were screaming over and over last night!"

"I was? Well, it was just a bad dream."

"Seems like you've been having a lot of bad dreams lately, are you okay?"

"Yeah... fine," I replied hesitantly.

"Okay..." she said with one raised eyebrow. "Well, it's still silent around here."

"We can't stay like this. The cottages are supposed to be a place to get your mind off the fact that we are all going to die slaves of the queen but, in silence... there's nothing else to think about."

We heard a knock on the front door, "Hello?!" I shouted back.

"I'm from the palace!" A man's New York accent called up the stairs as we heard the door slam behind him. I recognized his accent from the year before when a woman came to the cottages to tell us about the outside world, should we ever get out of there. She brought a device that played different peoples' voices and she explained the differences in them and where they came from. I never thought I hear one in real life but, I guess that was one upside to the fact that a strange man was standing in our doorway and telling us the most terrifying news we would ever hear.

We stepped out and saw all the other girls standing at the top of the stairs.

"What do you want?" one of them asked.

"I'm looking for a..." he paused to lift a paper on his clipboard and drag his finger down the page and then continued, "Cassidy Nortman." My heart stopped. Danielle rushed over, dishrag in hand and a glass covered in soap.

"What?! Who sent you!?"

"Well, the queen of course, our last aide was executed so, she needs a new one and, she's on the top of the list ma'am."

It has been a long time since then. I have been working for the queen for thirteen years now. I am pretty satisfied with my life. You have to learn to be easily entertained when you are an aide but, I'm humble.

Sometimes I look back at when I was living in the cottages and think about the one thought that came to me when the man said I was being sent off to be a palace aide, *Two years and I would've been free. Two.*

But the thing that has kept me going for all this time is that I kept my promise and never questioned the queen.