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The Glass
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Dedication

To Andrew, Max, and Lincoln, who know the long road home
and have enriched our lives immeasurably for taking it.

chapter 1

Captured!

Avery dragged her three-year-old brother behind a boxwood bush and listened for footsteps in the brittle leaves. She couldn't be sure which was louder—the person on their trail or her own heart, galloping like a stallion in her ears.

With one hand over Henry's mouth, Avery looked down at the nicest dress she owned. Not only had she torn the ruffles and destroyed the hem, but the white linen stood out in the shadowy woods, making her an easy target.

If she survived this afternoon and made it home tonight—and that felt like a giant *if*—her father would demand to know why her dress was stained with grass and mud and tinged with blood.

She would tell him the truth.

How could she possibly have known that a simple walk in the woods would turn dangerous? It was her thirteenth birthday, and she'd had no intention of spending the day cooped up in their small, dusty cottage, doing chores that would need to be done again tomorrow.

Now Avery was sure she heard twigs snap. Crows bolted, and she felt someone or something watching her. Her father would understand the ruined dress.

Clothes, after all, could be replaced.

People, as their family knew all too well, could not.

“Don’t let go of my hand,” Avery whispered as Henry wiggled. She squeezed his shoulder until he twisted his face and nodded.

He looked scared, and why wouldn’t he? Instead of playing with the paper boat tucked in his pocket, he was hiding in the ghostly woods while a cold wind whistled through the trees.

“I’ll figure a way to get us out of here,” Avery whispered next to Henry’s ear. “Just don’t make a sound, and do exactly what I say.”

Henry nodded, tears dotting the corners of his big brown eyes.

Normally, hiding behind a bush was a dumb idea. Tall and long legged, Avery was the fastest runner among her friends. No one laughed about her unusually big feet or made fun of her unruly inky hair, because she could outrun everyone, including the boys. She knew she could easily outpace someone in the woods—if she didn’t have Henry.

So, while the unpleasant sounds of the woods rose up around them, Avery hatched a plan.

They would move to the one place she had always felt safe.

It was now or never.

Wait, the wind seemed to whisper, but Avery didn’t obey.

Taking a deep breath and grabbing Henry’s hand, she ducked from behind the boxwood. Head bent and body low, she pulled her brother to the next bush and the next until they reached a butternut tree deep in the thickets—but not just *any* butternut tree. This was where their father had built the most spectacular tree house when Avery was a little girl.

Rising before them stood a castle tree house—two stories high with an open turret and stairs that wound through a trap door that led to a tiny chamber at its highest point. The castle included a sky bridge, a tower prison, a tunnel, and a library—perfect for a girl with a bright imagination and a hunger for stories.

In the castle Avery could be anybody she wanted to be. On sunny days, she pretended to be queen and made Henry one of her loyal subjects. She painted watercolor castles and wrote poetry while sending Henry to collect blackberries or fetch water from the nearby stream for their snack. At night, when the sky was as black as ink, Avery would lie on the roof and imagine the stars were diamonds in her crown.

This castle held many secrets—among them, it supposedly sat atop an intricate system of tunnels—but whether any of them were true, Avery had no idea. Most importantly, it was the last place Avery saw her mother before she left and never came back.

Today it would be a hiding place.

Avery decided she and Henry would stay in the tree house until night fell, and then they would sneak home where Avery would explain everything to their father. He would be angry at first but would eventually soften. He might even loan her the money to buy a replacement dress since she had saved her brother's life.

Avery was just about to lead Henry into the arched doorway of the thick tree trunk when he yanked free of her grasp and raced into the open.

“Bronte!” he shouted, dropping to his knees and wrapping his pudgy arms around the mutt that was the family dog.

As Bronte’s matted fur splattered Henry with mud, Avery’s hopes of her father’s forgiveness vanished.

She had been so sure she and Henry were in danger.

Dumb dog, she thought, both relieved and ashamed.

They were not being chased as she had suspected, but she had ruined her one good dress and Henry was covered in filth. Her father would say she had let her imagination get the best of her *again*, and she would spend the rest of her birthday alone in her bedroom, likely without any gifts or treats.

“Oh, Bronte,” Avery said, joining Henry in scratching Bronte’s floppy ears. She couldn’t stay mad at the dog for long. They were the same age and had been best friends for as long as she could remember.

“Let’s go home.”

“But why?” Henry said, his voice rising to a whine the way it did when he was made to eat his vegetables or take a bath. “You said we were going to play hide-and-seek. Nobody found us.”

“Good thing,” Avery said. “But now it’s time to go home for supper.”

This news made Henry smile. “We’ll have apple sausages and cheese,” he said.

Avery was about to tell him they didn’t know what their father had planned but that they would be grateful for whatever they were given. But then she heard it—

The snapping of twigs.

And she saw it—

The crows bolting.

And she felt it—

Someone or something was watching them.

And this time, Avery knew it wasn't the dog.

She grabbed Henry around the waist and ran as fast as she could move toward the tree house. But just as she leapt inside and shouted, "Hang on!" everything went dark.

All that remained was a bell clanging in the distance.

chapter 2

Trapped

The cramped, dark cart smelled like boots left in the rain.

Avery sat with her back pressed against splintering boards, chin on her knees and her neck aching from leaning forward—for how long she had no idea, but the pain was intense. A salty, bitter rag covered her mouth, and she couldn't move her legs. Her stomach hurt more than it ever had, though she couldn't be sure if it was from hunger or something else.

Worse, she had no idea what had happened to Henry. The thought of him scared and hungry in another cart sent a fresh stab of pain through Avery's chest and she gasped for air.

I was supposed to protect him. I was the one who took him out of the house.

Suddenly, she realized the cart was moving.

She struggled to raise her hands—tied tightly at the wrists—and pounded the top of the cart as hard as she could manage until her knuckles stung.

Everything halted, and an old woman's bulging eyes appeared between the slats. Avery recoiled from hair that looked like long white wires and a face filled with so many creases she might easily be a hundred years old.

“So you’re still alive!” the woman said, cackling. “Wasn’t sure there for a while. I was wondering if I’d have to bury you out ’ere. Didn’t want to mess with digging another grave.” She smiled a gummy grin and added, “Looks like it might rain.”

Another grave?

All Avery could see in her mind was Henry’s scared face. She threw her body at the sides of the cart, hoping to break out, but the box wouldn’t budge, and the woman stopped smiling.

“Relax,” she said. “You’re not going anywhere. This cart has been my sturdy companion longer than you’ve been on God’s green earth.”

Avery could see the woman wore a royal-blue cloak, and the tip of her nose was cherry red from the wind. Despite her age, her voice was strong and her black, beady eyes serious as a snake. “No banging and no yelling, you ’ear me? Or there will be consequences.”

“I’m not scared of your threats,” Avery said, her voice muffled by the rag around her mouth. “I’m stronger than you.”

The woman smiled again, light dancing in her dull eyes. “But your brother’s not. If you don’t want anything to ’appen to ’enry, you’ll be quiet.”

He’s still alive. This, at least, brought Avery a small measure of comfort.

The old woman began to laugh—a hollow, unhappy sound—revealing several missing teeth and a deep scar along her right cheek.

She knows Henry’s name. What else does she know? How did she

make him talk? What did he tell her?

Avery knew she should scream and hope someone would come. She could easily overpower the woman. How fast could an old woman run?

But she has Henry.

“Are you listening?” the woman said, slapping the cart with a hand as red as blood.

Avery nodded.

“You kids are all the same,” the woman mumbled, wiping her forehead with the edge of her cloak. “So much trouble and so ungrateful.” Her knuckles rose like mountains against the soft, flat flesh of her hand, and Avery saw a ruby ring that looked like it could be worth a fortune.

Who does she work for?

The old woman shuffled away, saying, “I almost forgot. ’appy birthday. Make a wish, darling.”

The woman laughed again, the sound sending a rush of cold up Avery’s spine. Then the woman disappeared and the cart began to bump along the road again.

Avery rested her chin back on her knees as hot tears sprang to her eyes. It was only supposed to be a walk. This was not how she had imagined spending her special day. She wished she could start the day over and do what her father instructed.

As her ruby flower necklace pressed against her collarbone, she knew she had made a terrible mistake to leave the house without her father’s permission. He would look for them in the tree house, but he would have no idea where to look when he did

not find them there.

A thick darkness settled, and with it, cold air.

Suddenly, the old woman began to sing in a voice as low as a man's—

*Tonight the moon is watching as we ride toward the sea,
The sky above, the ground below will sing in 'armony.
"You're free!" we'll sing and "free!" again—You're free,
young Avery.*

But Avery suspected her freedom had been left in her tree castle in the woods.

As the night grew colder, the woman slowed and her breathing grew loud and labored. The flat, gravel roads gave way to steep climbs and craggy hills, and Avery feared the old woman might have a heart attack and leave them both to freeze to death in the middle of nowhere.

Hours of travel felt like days.

Suddenly, Avery's sad and weary eyes settled on a scene that rose before the slats of the cart. Hundreds of brightly lit windows and dozens of turrets touched the sky, making the city in the distance look like a pyramid of gold perched on a pile of puffy clouds, a sort of glass castle illuminating the night sky. Its vibrant colors pulsed with life unlike anything Avery had ever seen. A thousand times she had imagined being found in a place that looked just like this—like it belonged in a fairy tale.

Her mother had spun tales of an evil king's castle—filled

with secret passageways and tunnels. Her stories about the underground colonies, which she called “the underworld,” were the best. When she told them late at night by candlelight that cast wide shadows on the bare walls of their tiny house, Avery forgot everything else in the world, including the fact they were poor and hungry. Those moments, curled beside her mother in bed, were her most treasured memories.

Now her stomach twisted.

Every fairy tale has its dragon.

She longed for the apple sausages Henry had talked about in the woods. She would even settle for the thick pea pottage that made their usual meal. She didn’t care about her ruined dress anymore, even if she owed her father a lifetime of Saturdays sweeping the endless dust from the floor of his shop to buy a new one. She just wanted to go home.



Sloping rooftops and pointed turrets gave way to foreboding walls and dancing shadows so powerful they made Avery’s heart sink. Whoever lived in this magnificent city on a hill had money and power, so this kidnapping wasn’t about a ransom. Her father had nothing of value to offer rich people.

Eventually, the cart halted again and the woman barked an order to someone Avery couldn’t see. Bartering ensued, followed by the clanking of coins, and the cart was pushed onto something that moved up and down slowly.

Avery pressed her face against the slats.

I'm being sold. To whom? For how much?

And then another thought was slow to follow—

Hopefully Henry and I are sold to the same person so we can stay together.

And then a final thought—

A raft. I don't know how to swim.

Chances of rescue looked slimmer by the second. Even if she escaped the box, she would never escape the water.

On the other side of the raft, another box bore another frightened face pressed against its slats. Their eyes met and held briefly before the boy—who looked to be about Avery's age—moved quickly out of Avery's view.

She turned her attention to the sea, where moonlight shimmered off choppy waves that made the raft bob, and she feared she might get sick.

I cannot make a scene if the risk is a watery grave.

The raft inched closer to the glowing city, its lights so dazzling that it looked as if it had been dusted with crystals. And it wasn't perched on puffy clouds after all, but on its own island.

The raft maneuvered around a thick tree trunk and glided smoothly over the glassy surface of the suddenly stilled water. The moon appeared large and lavender in its brilliance.

Avery knew that wherever she was going was unlike anywhere she had ever been.

For good or for evil—and she suspected evil—her life was about to change forever.

chapter 3

Kate

The raft came to a standstill, and the old woman pushed the cart onto dry land with a grunt.

She must have gotten a second wind during their ride on the raft, because she pushed with renewed energy over the winding hills to where a steep road led to a thick wooden door under an enormous towering archway. Two burly guards with pockmarked faces and chests as round as barrels stood on either side of the door, each holding a heavy torch in his hand with flames that licked the air and spit out heavy smoke as black as midnight.

One of the guards grunted and Avery felt the beat of her heart in her neck.

She was thankful, at least, to have survived the raft. Now she hoped to survive these men. She didn't have the energy to fight. And from the size of these two, she would need more than energy if they intended to harm her.

Avery suspected people did whatever these men required.

She could only hope that her father was out looking for her and Henry by now and that he had already alerted the authorities.

Of course he has. He is looking for us right now. We'll be home by breakfast.

“What’s in the cart?” one of the guards asked, kicking the box with his enormous boot.

Avery moved as far back and out of sight as possible.

“Potatoes and blackberries,” the old woman said, a surprising unease in her voice.

Avery didn’t know whose side the men would take if she called for help, but she knew she had a better chance defending herself against the old woman than against men with muscles the size of bread bowls and boots the size of planets.

More words. More grunts. More kicking the cart.

Finally, they opened the door to a set of narrow limestone steps that seemed to lead forever up an unlit stairway. Before Avery had time to think about what it meant for her own cramped and aching back and legs—

Ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk.

Someone—surely not the old woman—was dragging or pushing the cart up the steps one painful thud at a time. Avery slammed back against the boards, her head hitting the top and the sides and her knees knocking the front when she tried to brace herself. She wanted to cry out in agony, but who might hear her and what consequence might that bring? She bit down on the oily rag to keep from screaming. By the time the cart stopped, she ached all over and knew that even if she were able to escape, she wouldn’t get far.

Was that the plan? *Injured birds never fly far.*

A door opened to a stream of welcoming, golden light, and all at once everything became pleasant. Avery longed for more of the

warmth that came with the light, no matter the cost.

The cart creaked backward, stopped, and was pushed upright, and a crowd gathered around it.

Avery peered through the slats.

Shimmery fabric. Eager voices. Hushed tones. *Dirty feet.*

When the old woman spoke, the room fell silent.

“This one ’ere is feisty! She might bite.” Nervous laughter rose like steam from broth. “You know the rules. Don’t let ’er out of your sight even for a moment. If you can’t break ’er will by morning, send for me, and I’ll do it.”

Avery didn’t like the sound of that, but before she could think about it too long, the lid to the cart was lifted and Avery was dumped out, a tangled mess of dirty white dress and long, gnarly black hair.

The crowd gasped.

Avery lay on her back and groaned, staring at the heavily painted mosaic ceiling as the crowd closed in around her. A sea of dirty young faces swam into focus, easily fifty pairs of unblinking eyes taking her in. Dozens of well-dressed kids with hungry looks and wide, expectant gazes.

“What’s her name?” a boy asked.

“Avery,” the old woman answered, untying Avery’s wrists and removing the cloth from her mouth.

Suddenly Avery sat up. “How do you know my name? What is this place, and why am I here? When can I go home? My father will find you and he’ll prosecute you to the full extent of the law, I promise!”

“Like I said, feisty,” the woman said, and she turned to leave.

Avery jumped to her feet and lunged, latching onto the woman’s shoulders, intending to tackle her and pin her to the ground, but the woman shook her off with surprising effortless-ness, fire burning in her black eyes. “Do not touch me, child!”

“Or what?” Avery shouted.

The woman swung a fist at Avery just as a pair of strong hands yanked Avery out of the way.

“I’ll handle her,” a deep voice said.

“Then teach ’er to show some respect. I should have left ’er in the woods to rot.”

“Rotting might have been the better option!” Avery bit back. Snickers went up from the crowd.

The woman disappeared into a dark stairwell and slammed the door as Avery turned to see who had spared her from the punch.

The boy was tall, with shaggy brown hair and alarming green eyes bright as sea glass.

“You’re welcome,” he offered with a smile.

“Next time, don’t interfere!” Avery said louder than she intended.

He raised his hands. “Okay.” Then, leaning closer, he added, “But at least talk to Kate. She’s nice. She’ll help you.”

“Who’s Kate?” Avery snapped.

He pointed to a girl with strawberry-blond hair, warm brown eyes, and delicate cheekbones. She stood out from the crowd because of her clean face and blue-blooded posture.

And slippers.

Kate stepped forward and put a hand on Avery's arm.

"Come with me," she said quietly.

And against her better judgment, Avery followed. But as they approached a dark hallway with no end in sight, she had a feeling that the worst of the day was yet to come.

chapter 4

The News

Arm in arm, Kate led Avery in silence down a long, narrow hallway lit by flickering candles on tall stands. A chill rose up around them as they walked.

Finally, in a wood-paneled room with a long, rough-hewn table and dozens of straight, wooden chairs, Avery eased away from Kate and moved to stand on the other side of the table to put space between them.

Trust no one.

Avery didn't want this refined girl being too nice to her. They weren't going to be friends. As soon as she found Henry, they would race for home. She would carry him all night if she needed to. She would even let him talk endlessly about what they would eat for breakfast. She didn't even care if her father forbade her from leaving the house for the rest of her life or yelled at her until morning.

"Do you have any idea why you're here?" Kate asked in a small voice.

"How could I? I don't even know where I am."

"Don't be mad. Everyone is mad on arrival, but there's no point. You'll figure out soon that we all want the same things."

“What do you know about what I want?”

Kate paused and seemed to look kindly at Avery for a long time. “Freedom.”

Avery couldn’t argue with that.

Kate continued, “Be patient. Answers will come in time.”

“I don’t have time. I need answers now. Where are we, and why am I here?”

“It’s complicated, but I promise you that following the rules will give you your best chance of survival.”

“What kind of rules?”

“No outside contact is allowed for any reason. And you must stay quiet.”

Avery was too tired to think and too tired to argue with someone she didn’t even know. She had no desire to play games with this girl. Why had the boy with the shaggy hair promised that she would be helpful? So far she was as useful as a red-bellied turtle.

Avery pressed her fingers to her temples.

“You’d better sit,” Kate said softly. “There’s more.”

Avery didn’t want to do anything this girl suggested, but because she was exhausted and sore, she collapsed into a chair as Kate moved to sit across from her, a gigantic bowl of fruit between them.

Kate’s perfect hair, the string of glass beads at her neck, and her gold-colored dress that shimmered in the candlelight made Avery wonder what she must look like in comparison.

Not good.

“I have one important question,” Kate said. “Are you thirteen?” Avery had almost forgotten it was her birthday. She nodded miserably.

“Interesting,” Kate said as a sort of relief seemed to wash over her. “Why does it matter?”

“Everyone here is thirteen,” Kate continued. “You were the second person brought here today.”

The boy from the raft. “Where is he?”

“Sleeping.”

Avery snorted and shook her head. She couldn’t imagine letting herself relax enough to fall asleep in this place.

Suddenly ravenous, she pulled an orange from the bowl, peeled it, and began to eat, the juice running down her arm. And it was the strangest thing. The fruit was the best thing Avery had ever tasted. Unable to stop herself, she ate the pulp, the juice, and even the peel.

As Avery licked the stickiness off her arm, Kate smiled. “I’m on your side. I’m not your enemy.”

“I don’t care. I’m not staying long enough to make enemies. Henry and I need to be free of here tonight.”

Kate nodded. “Everyone who arrives says the same thing.”

Suddenly, Avery remembered she hadn’t seen her brother since arriving—

“Where is Henry?”

Kate averted her eyes.

“Where is he?”

At Kate’s solemn stare, Avery pounded the table.

“I don’t know,” Kate blurted. “I didn’t want to tell you, but we’re all separated from our brothers and sisters. But doing what we’re told keeps them alive.”

Keeps them alive? Avery couldn’t speak. *Oh, sweet Henry!*

Tears clouded her vision and the room began to spin. She had assumed Henry was traveling in a box behind her all along and was now being entertained by a group of girls in another room. When Kate said, “Everyone here is thirteen,” she meant it.

Henry isn’t here. He is lost. And it’s my fault.

She suddenly wanted nothing more than to feel his sticky hand in hers and to hear his endless chatter.

And she knew with sudden certainty she would kill anyone who hurt him, starting with the old woman.

Kate placed a hand on Avery’s arm, but Avery shoved it away and feared she would be sick. She stifled a scream that rose from the pit of her stomach and whispered, “Help me,” as thousands of pinpricks filled her head and her breathing grew labored.

Kate called for someone, and soon Avery heard a voice that seemed far away but sounded like the boy with the shaggy hair.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said. “I will help you.” Then to Kate, “Does she know where we are yet? Did you tell her?”

“She’s not ready to know the truth.”

chapter 5

Choosing Colors

When Avery came to her senses, she was in a large, musty room filled with dozens of lumpy mattresses lined side by side and topped with drab, woolen blankets. A few wooden wardrobes lined the plain walls, and a gray stone fireplace cast a weak glow.

She slid her gaze to Kate, who sat unmoving on the floor beside her.

Avery pushed herself up, her head throbbing. “How long did I sleep?”

“Maybe an hour. Are you hungry? Everyone else is finished eating, and if you miss a meal, you’re usually out of luck, but I know where the supplies are kept.”

“I’m fine.”

It was a lie. Avery’s stomach churned with hunger, but she couldn’t imagine keeping anything down.

“This is where you will sleep tonight,” Kate continued. “The girls occupy this room and another just like it, and the boys live in two down the hall.”

Kate held out her hand and uncurled her fingers to reveal Avery’s ruby flower necklace. Glancing both ways, she said quietly, “Keep this close to you. Things go missing here every day.

I'd hate for this to disappear.”

Avery lunged for it, yanking it out of Kate's hand and putting it back around her neck. Why Kate had taken it off in the first place Avery had no idea. This necklace was her only link to home and everything she held dear.

“One more thing,” Kate said, nodding toward the heavy velvet drapes that covered the windows, making the room darker than necessary. “We're not allowed to look outside.”

“Says who?”

“*They* are always watching,” Kate said, barely above a whisper. “They know when we break rules or when we try to escape. Terrible things happen, Avery. For Henry's sake, you must believe me.”

Avery wanted to ask more, but a shriek from the doorway prevented further discussion. Avery looked over to see a group of girls marching toward her, beautifully dressed, but with dirty faces and unkempt hair. The contrast between their fancy clothes and muddy skin confused her. One girl had enough dirt caked under her fingernails to plant a garden.

Their arms swung in unison, and they wore black ribbons on their right wrists.

“You're in my bed,” the leader said. She had straight, wheat-colored hair and a nose that turned up slightly. She also had the longest eyelashes Avery had ever seen, but they did nothing to improve her dull eyes.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know. I passed out and—”

“Now you do. So go.”

“Come on, Ilsa,” Kate said. “She needed a place to—”

“Well, she can’t use my bed. She smells like a horse.”

One of Ilsa’s friends laughed, which only seemed to encourage Ilsa.

“Look at her awful dress. For all I know, she has fleas.”

“She’s had a bad day,” Kate said. “Just let her go.”

“It would be a bad day for me, too, if I were forced to wear that silly necklace.” She reached out and flicked the ruby flower so that it swung behind Avery’s shoulder.

Again, Ilsa’s friend chortled behind her.

Avery felt something hot grow inside. This necklace was the last gift she had ever received from her mom, so it meant more than she could possibly explain to a stranger. Her mother had placed it around her neck and told her to wear it every day, and even though it was large and heavy, Avery had obeyed. To her, it was the most beautiful piece of jewelry in the world, even if it was a little gaudy.

She rose and came face-to-face with Ilsa.

“What is wrong with you? You don’t even know me.”

“I know more than you think I do,” Ilsa said. “I saw you acting like a lunatic out there. Stay away from me and stay away from Tuck.”

“Tuck?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know him. Twice in one night you needed his help. Really? You’re a good actress, Avery, but just so you know, he’ll help anyone. Don’t flatter yourself.”

The boy with the shaggy hair. This whole conversation is because of a boy?

“Don’t worry; I didn’t read into anything,” Avery promised.

“Keep it that way.”

“Let’s go, Avery,” Kate said.

But when Ilsa glanced down at the flower necklace and smirked, Avery shoved her with all her might, sending her flying back onto a nearby mattress.

Ilsa staggered to her feet and sauntered back, standing nose to nose with Avery. “You’ve just started something you won’t be able to finish. Watch your back,” Ilsa said, before heading toward the door with her flock of ladies in tow. “And don’t let that necklace out of your sight!”

“I’m not scared of you,” Avery called after her, but it sounded weak.

Kate smiled politely. “It would probably be a good idea for you to sleep in the other bunk room. Come with me.”



Avery sat on her new bed waiting for Kate to scold her for what she had done.

“You picked the right bed,” Kate said finally. “Right next to mine.”

“Why did those girls wear black ribbons on their wrists?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “It’s a silly little game they’ve created to occupy their time here. Once a group forms, they wear matching colors. If there’s a falling out, a girl can leave and wear a ribbon of a different color.”

Avery looked at Kate’s bare wrist.

“I try to be everyone’s friend,” Kate said.

“Then shouldn’t you be wearing everyone’s ribbon?”

Kate laughed until she fell back onto her mattress. Soon—despite her fear and dread—Avery was laughing, too. It had been the second most horrible day of her life, but she was laughing with a girl she had just met in a place she had never been.

When the laughter subsided, Kate said, “Believe it or not, you’ll see that it’s not too bad here, even if we *are* here against our will and there *are* guards at all the exit doors.”

“Then why won’t you tell me where we are?”

“I will, but you need to get your strength back first.”



Avery was relieved when Kate showed her the copper tub and the soap made of olive oil. Never in her life had a bath felt so good. She soaked her weary muscles, scrubbed the mud off her legs and arms, and washed her hair before returning to the bunk room, leaving a trail of watery footprints as she went.

As she wound through the rows of beds to find her own, she noticed dozens of girls were in theirs, whispering and giggling. It didn’t seem to Avery like they were as concerned about being kidnapped as she felt. This made no sense.

She was grateful to find a clean, white nightgown—floor-length with long sleeves—laid out on her bed. She had feared she would be stuck in her dirty white dress until she returned home. She changed quickly, the fabric softer than any she had ever felt, and slipped under the blankets.

She sank into the mattress, a welcome relief to her sore body, and waited until the candles were extinguished and the room settled under a haze of smoke. In the dark, she quietly ripped the seam at one end of her pillow and slipped off the ruby flower necklace. She tucked it into the feathers of the pillow, determined to keep it safe until she was able to head back home.

Losing that necklace would be like losing her mother all over again.

She couldn't handle losing anything else.

Avery glanced around the room to make sure no one saw.

Only Kate stared back, unblinking.

Avery lay on her back, eyes adjusting to the dark, staring at the intricate detail on a ceiling that belonged in a cathedral, not in a musty room where kids were being held against their will. Her eyes suddenly felt heavy, and sleep called to her.

"If you stay," Kate whispered, so faintly Avery could barely hear her, "I'll find a way to give you back your brother and your mother."

You're dreaming. You haven't even told Kate about your mother.

But Kate's wry smile was the last thing Avery saw before she surrendered to sleep.

About the Authors

Trisha White Priebe is a wife, mom, writer, and shameless water polo enthusiast. She advocates for orphans, speaks at retreats, and enjoys assisting her husband in youth ministry. She wrote *Trust, Hope, Pray: Encouragement for the Task of Waiting* and *A Sherlock Holmes Devotional: Uncovering the Mysteries of God*.

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