

## *I'm finally free*

The morning sun shines in through the little box-size window next to my makeshift bed. My eyes plaster open and I groan. Another day, another steal. Hopefully. There are good days and bad days. Sometimes for days at a time we are left starving but I try not to dwell on the bad. I know there is nothing I can do to fix the terrible life I endure.

I sit up in my so called bed to see my little sister Hazel and my mother still sleeping in the bed. A proper bed. The room is only big enough for one bed and a little seat which I sleep on. Hazel and mother deserve it more, mother is sick from an illness that is unknown and is slowly dying and little Hazel is only 11.

I stare at my mother. She is only 34, but already her hair is streaked with grey. My eyes move to Hazel, poor little Hazel. Her hair is thin and disheveled. Her face is so pale and her body is so thin. Life could be worse though, at least Hazel is not working in the mines or factories. My mother and I have lived our whole lives protecting Hazel from the terrible authorities. Everything comes with a price though, because of this Hazel is stuck in this so called 'house' but I shouldn't complain because some people don't even have that.

Perhaps today will be one of the good days. I hope to steal enough coins to buy my family a loaf of bread and hopefully some soup if I'm lucky. I get out of bed and put on the only outfit I own, a dress ripped in so many areas it's barely useful and boots I stole from a lady a long while ago.

Outside, the air is thick with smoke and stench. There are streams of sewage and waste on the sides of the road. Everything is muddy. Corpses that are days old litter the streets. A sea of faces, dull and lifeless, stalk all around me. This is how it always is. Sad and miserable. I smile at whom I pass, acting like the innocent girl I look. No one suspects a 16 year old girl with the face of a baby. No one suspects someone who looks ordinary. Pale skin, cloudy blue eyes, full chapped lips and sunken cheekbones. I'm nothing but a poor peasant, they say.

I walk through the streets, gliding through the alleyways and little corner shops for anything worth stealing. That is until I stop completely in awe. In front of my eyes lay a jewel shop. Through the window the crystals sparkle and shimmer. I stare in hunger, if I got my hands on one of those I could buy dinner for my family for months and pay for my mother to get treated. The chances of not getting caught are

slim, Jewel shops are protected by the Ol' wealthy men. The risks are high, but my brain is clouded by the thought of curing mother.

I know what I have to do.

I wait outside the shop for what seems like hours. The sun now shining through the dark grey clouds. The crystals sparkling even more when they catch onto the light. Once it reaches midday, the shop owner closes the shop for morning tea and I take this as my chance. In the hours I was waiting I checked for possible exits and entry ways, to find a backdoor at the back of the shop down an alleyway. I go to open the door and to my luck it clicks open with a squeak. I tiptoe through the back to find a storage room. The door seems to be stuck but it is wedged open enough to hopefully fit my frail body through. I slide through the open door and have to close my eyes because of the white blindness of colour. Slowly I let my eyes adjust to see boxes upon boxes filled to the rim with crystals. Just imagine how many of these I could steal. Beautiful thoughts of a happy life fill my brain. A life without starvation, a proper bed, maybe even a bigger house. I have to get going. I pick up as many crystals as I can and shove them in the pockets of my dress, in my boots, down my dress, anywhere I can fit them. I'm so busy concentrating on the task at hand I don't realise anything until the air is knocked from me and I'm falling.

"Dirty peasant, trying to steal my jewels. MY JEWELS!" A male voice booms in my ear. My eyes widen in fear realising I've been caught. Caught. I try and scramble onto my knees when I feel the blow to my stomach. I cry out, my hands going limp beneath me causing me to fall on my face. I'm breathing heavily trying to think of an escape route. The kicks to my stomach keep delivering and I know I can't escape this. My body curls into a fatal position. Tears sting my eyes and blood soaks my body, I don't even know from where. I've been caught. I've been caught. That one statement floods my brain until I feel dizzy but I'm not sure if it's from the beating that I'm enduring or from that one statement alone.

I can feel my body slowly withering in and out of consciousness and when I feel as if I can no longer stay awake, everything stops.

I open my soon to be bruised eyes with a whimper. When I don't see the man anywhere I feel a tiny ounce of hope but before I could even dream of running away, not like I'd be able to I can't seem to move, the man comes back but he is not alone. Standing next to him is the village's Sheriff. I stare in horror, could things get any worse? They walk towards me and I close my eyes in an attempt for them to think I'm unconscious if not dead.

"Perhaps you could help me lift her onto the horse." An unknown voice says, most likely the Sheriff.

"I better not see her around the village anytime soon."

Before I could even try and fight I feel myself being lifted up and not to long after I was sitting on a horse, riding away to my destiny.

Slowly I lose consciousness.

I wake up with a startle from the croaking voices around me. I look around to find myself in a cell. The cell is only box size and I can barely move. I need to escape. I need to escape. I was so caught up in my own head I didn't realise I spoke out loud.

"You can't escape this Ol' prison girl. No one ever has." A lady's voice says, from where I'm not sure. I look around and squint my eyes from the darkness trying to find the lady who replied but all I can see is an endless row of cells, whispers coming from my left, right, everywhere. The cell in front of me is occupied by a little girl who looks around seven or eight and a lady cradling her which must be her mother. Only as I continue to look do I realise the horror of the events taking place and that i have one of those as well, a family, waiting for me to come home. They'll die without me. How will they get food? Mother is dying and if she does what will happen to Hazel?

"I need to get out of here. My family, they need me. Please." I say to no one in particular just hoping someone, anyone will reply.

"Sorry girl, anyone that tries to escape is dead now. You're better just rotting away in these cells like the rest of us." The lady's voice comes again, it seems to be coming from one of the cells on my left.

"You don't understand my family will die without me. I don't care if this is a suicide plan, if there is a way to escape I need to at least try. I'm not going to sit here and rot while people need me." My voice is cold and firm, two things they never are.

"Fine i'll help you on one condition. I want you to help me escape with you."

I think about it for a while. She could ruin my plans of escaping but if there is any way I can get out I need to at least try.

"Deal."

Soon, more and more people were agreeing to help and a plan was taking action.

"There is a backdoor to your left at the end of the hallway. It's usually guarded by one of the authorities and they change shifts every three hours. There's about a 15 minute gap between the change where the door is not guarded. The problem is these cells, you can't get in or out without the key, the good thing is every authority has one. Get it off the authority and we have ourselves a breakout." We were discussing our plan, the lady which I learnt's name is Bertha seemed to know a lot about this prison, but she seemed old and could have been here for a long Ol' time. The plan was to be carried out in exactly 6 days. The plan was that I would get an authorities attention and Liam which is in the cell right next to mine will grab him and get the key. Once the authorities shift is over, we will start our escape. We'll pass the key from door to door unlocking any of us who want to be freed. We will break through the backdoor and then, freedom.

"It's a fairly easy plan except that we have to get it all done in 15 minutes." I say standing up in my cell looking over everyone. My body is protesting me to sit back down but I stand strong. These people need me. My family needs me.

"You needn't worry. There are many of us and so few authorities on Sunday." Bertha says with a smile on her face.

Days pass by in misery and distress. It's not all bad though, the escape is keeping many of us hopeful but there always is a background voice saying it will never work and we'll be dead before we can even try. Perhaps we will escape. I don't think I can go back to being a thief, not after this traumatising event but I don't know yet what my future holds and right now the only thing on my mind is this escape.

It's Sunday morning and everyone is in a frenzy. People shouting in hope and others in fear. The authorities tell us to shut up or else. Everyone's voice dims to a whisper. The day goes by just like the others. Breakfast, stale bread and a glass of brown, murky water. Lunch time comes and when Bertha gives the screeching bird noise I know it's time.

I start screaming hysterically, So loud the walls shudder. I scratch at the walls, saying words which can't be made out through the screaming fit. Tears are running down my face clouding my vision.

"Cut it out!" An authority booms walking down the aisle looking into each cell to see where the screaming victim is.

I do no such thing. My screams and cries get louder, horrible wicked sounds.

The authorities eyes come to rest on my cell. He looks as if he could murder someone with the stare he is giving me.

"I said. Cut. It. Out." he shouts pausing on each word.

Even through my screams I make out what he says but i do not stop or cower in fear.

And just like that he's gone, Liam is gripping onto his shirt banging his head endlessly into the iron bars of the cell. I stop screaming in time to see the authority fall to the ground with a bang and Liam squat and reach out and grab the keychain from the authorities belt.

"Oh what Bulllocks. There are at least 10 keys here. How are we gonna know which one?" Liam asks with a scowl.

"13 minutes left!" Screams Margaret, a girl a little older than me. She's our time keeper.

I snatch the keys out of Liam's hand and pause to try each key, and then we all hear the most amazing sound. The lock clicking open. I open Liam's cell and he gets to work opening Bertha's. Once she's out she starts opening everyone's cell. That's her job.

I rush to the end of the hallway with Liam in tow, the backdoor finally coming into view. I reach the door with a smile on my face, only for it to turn to a frown. The backdoor is locked. Locked.

"10 Minutes!" Margaret shouts.

Bertha finishes opening the cells and comes running towards Liam and I with the keys. We try every key but nothing seems to open this door. I knew all this was too good to be true. It was all too easy.

This is it. We're all stuck here and we're never going to get out. I don't know why I thought we could possibly escape. We will be whipped or even worse banished once the next authority comes for his shift in seven minutes, according to Margaret, and finds us all out of our cells and trying to escape.

"Wait, look up Adeline." William, a man in his early 20s shouts at me.

I look up to see an open window leading on to the roof. It's going to be tough but it's the only option we have. Perhaps we will break free, it feels like such an impossible thing to wish for. Liam gets down on his hands and knees and I stand on top of him, my fingers gripping the window seal. I barely make it up, my weak arms screaming in protest.

When I'm finally up onto the roof I stand up and look at my surroundings. From up here I can see the whole village, all the mines and factories in view. I help everyone up onto the roof and we all look around. Guards are shouting in the distance, but I am so overcome with happiness I don't even realise.

I jump off the roof rolling around in the gravel. My body screaming in agony but I still stand up.

I look to my left to see Liam and look to my right to see Bertha, I may have only known these two people and everyone else for a short amount of time but for some odd reason we all have become one big family.

"You ready?" Bertha shouts over the guards screaming.

"As ready as I'll ever be." I scream back with a smile on my face.

We all count to three and head to the gates like a herd of sheep. We run and run and never stop. Not for the gunshots flying past our heads, not for the authorities screaming at us to stop and definitely not for the fear of getting caught. I escaped.

I'm finally free.

By: Zara Bakkar 9B