A Place To Call Home

by Marebella

Summary

It has been a long time since Jane Eyre had a home. Orphaned, cast out and on the run, she finds safety and comfort within the mysterious walls of Thornfield Hall. An unlikely friendship is forged between herself and the enigmatic master of the house, Mr Edward Rochester. Rochester is a man, tortured by secrets, however, he is determined to protect the bewitching governess. As their relationship blossoms, Jane and Edward must both face the demons of their past.

A very AU retelling of Jane Eyre
North Yorkshire - December 1845

The woollen shawl did little to protect against the battering sea breeze as Jane stumbled along the cliffside path. With each gust, the chill settled deeper into her bones. Yet, she continued along the coastline, desperately putting more distance between herself and Scarborough. Though she was fairly certain she had made it through the seaside town without detection, the sense of panic pushed her forward. Since fleeing Lowood School and her Aunt Reid three months hence, she had learnt to avoid larger townships. Though they offered the chance to source food and water, agent’s of her aunt and her seedy acquaintances were never far behind.

Hours and miles past and Jane finally felt comfortable enough to decrease her relentless pace. Her stomach rolled painfully, protesting it’s lengthy emptiness. She had not been able to find anything to eat, while navigating the quiet side streets of Scarborough, making it nearly a week since her last morsel. The increasing weakness and bitter winter cold were wearing her thin, causing her to stumble with each stride.

A crushing weariness washed upon her, locking her in place. Jane stared out at the North Sea, with a sense of hopelessness. She was so tired. Three months of constant travel, little food and next to no sleep was certainly taking its toll. Knowing that she had another three years of uncertainty ahead of her until she reached her majority, was a truly bleak thought. Nevertheless, Jane was sure she had done the right thing. She had fled to protect her reputation, her dignity and her sole. The thought that she may not live much longer if she were to continue in this state was inconsequential. She would rather die here then suffer the fate her aunt would subject her to.

Consumed by weariness and dark thoughts, Jane failed to hear the sound of an oncoming horse. The thunderous beats grew louder and louder as she gazed out at the sea, transfixed by the swirling waves and threatening clouds of an oncoming storm. The rider rounded the corner and started at the bedraggled woman standing in the centre of the path. With a sharp jerk of the reins, the horse reared and protested loudly. The beast’s winny startled Jane out of her trance. With a shocked gasp, she turned just in time to see clamouring hooves and horrified dark eyes, as the horse knocked her off her feet and down into the freezing waves below.
Chapter One - Paying For The Sins Of Our Fathers

My memories of childhood were idyllic. I lived a simple, but very happy life with my mother and father. We did not have much, but we had each other. My mother was the daughter of a wealthy gentleman but had been disowned when she married my father. Uniting herself with an Irish tradesman was an unforgivable sin, thus she was cast out. Nevertheless, we were content with our little family and simple life. Our days were filled with laughter and companionship, fond memories which I will treasure until the day I die. Sadly this contentment was not to last. I was only eight years old when I lost my parents to typhus. Everything I knew and loved was lost.

Thankfully, my mother’s brother heard of their deaths. Uncle Reid had loved my mother a great deal and regretted the way she and my father had been treated. He insisted that I be bought into his home and raised as his own amongst my cousins: John, Georgiana and Eliza. My remarkable likeness to my mother caused him to dote on me. He would often comment that my dark brown eyes were so much like hers, he could almost pretend she was still there with him. We were often found reading together in his study or engaged in artful games of chess. He helped me overcome my grief, and for a time I found happiness in his Ramsgate home.

Sadly, this too was not to last. My Uncle followed my mother to her grave just two years later. His dying wish was for me to remain within the family home, and grow up amongst his children. Unfortunately, this was not to be. My uncle’s obvious preference for my company had taught my Aunt and cousins to despise me. Their bitter jealousy meant that I would never be treated as an equal. From the day of my Uncle’s passing, Ramsgate became a place of misery.

I was no longer accepted as a member of the family, but treated as a burden, belittled and taunted. For I was nothing but a poor relation. Each day I would endure their emotional torment and physical abuse, praying for a time where I would be free of that place. I remember one particular day I had found respite behind the curtains of the library. Hidden away, I found some escape in the pages of a novel and it's tales of faraway lands, that is until I was discovered. The curtain was ripped away, exposing my sanctuary. My three blond-haired, blue-eyed cousins stood over me.

“What do you think you are doing Miss Jane?” John demanded. “Who gave you permission to touch my books?”.

“They are my Uncle Reid’s books” I replied timidly.

“I think not!” John spat, snatching the large volume from my hand. With a sharp swing, he smashed the heavy book against my head, the impact propelling me against the wall and onto the floor. Blood ran from my nose as John began to pummel me with punches and kicks. His demonic sisters watched, giggling with glee. In an instant, the pain faded as my blood began to boil. This time I would not stand by and allow myself to be treated thus. I would fight back. With a rage-filled scream, I launched myself at him, forcing him to the ground. While John whaled like a babe I struck at him like a madman. Months of bottled up rage and despair erupting in a frantic retaliation. “Mama! Mama! Jane has attacked John!” Georgiana and Eliza squealed.

Suddenly I was seized by the hair. My aunts talon-like nails embedding into my scalp as I was hauled from my hateful cousin.

“Is this how you repay us for taking you in you wicked little thing!” she demanded, dragging me from the room. “You DARE lay a hand on my boy! I should throw you out with the dogs to rot like your filthy parents”. After a thorough beating, I was locked in my room for days on end.

Not long after this incident, I was sent away to Lowood Institution, a charity school a full 200 miles away from my family at Ramsgate. I arrived in the dead of night and remember gawking up at the terrible building, a feeling of dread settling upon me at the foreboding sight. Lowood was everything I feared it would be. A misuse of funding meant that the facilities were substandard, and the staff were cruel and strict. Even on a summers day, we would wake to an ice-cold, damp dormitory with frozen over water and mould covered walls. Meals consisted of revolting gruel which provided very little sustenance. The worst of it all was the school’s director, Mr
Brocklehurst. A personal friend of my Aunt Reid, he seemed to enjoy singling me out and making my life a misery. On one occasion he branded me a liar and made me stand upon a stool in the centre of the hall for a full day as punishment for breaking a slate. His marked dislike of me meant that my fellow pupils avoided and isolated me. All but one.
I met Helen Burns on my first full day at Lowood. I remember looking across the table and seeing her smiling green eyes and brilliant red hair escaping the confines of her bonnet. She had arrived several months before me and had gradually assimilated and learnt how to survive the trial of the harrowing school. As a poor farmers daughter, she had been sent to Lowood for an education. Helen knew that any opportunity to learn would drastically increase her chances of a better life, therefore she took all the struggles of living at Lowood in her stride. We were fast friends and learnt to depend on one another. She taught me to keep my head down and try to be grateful for everything we had. One day, when we had learned enough and were able to leave Lowood, we planned to advertise as skilled young women and find suitable positions as accomplished governesses. It was this dream that motivated us through the darkest of times.
Sadly, like all who I had loved before her, Helen also met her demise. Winter at Lowood did not just bring with it the bitter cold, but sickness and death as well. During the icy months epidemics of influenza and other illnesses would breakout within the dorms. I would lay awake each night listening to the ailing and dying, praying for salvation. Helen was struck down during our second winter at Lowood. I remember snuggling together for warmth, begging God to spare my first and only friend. I awoke in the morning to her freezing corpse being lifted away from me.
Life at Lowood was hard without Helen. With no companionship or allies, I learnt to only rely on myself, keeping in mind the goals we made. Though Helen would not be there with me, I was determined to acquire the best education Lowood would give me and use it to build a better life for myself.
Chapter Two - The Escape

Lowood Institution - September 1845

Life at Lowood was invariable and arduous. As a student I did as Helen taught me, keeping my head down, working hard and taking every opportunity to better myself. For the majority of my time at Lowood, I managed to avoid the scrutinising gaze of Mr Brocklehurst, who was often away rubbing elbows with his wealthy friends, frivolously spending money which could be better used to improve the impoverished school. Though the education we received was relatively basic, my dedication ensured that I had an advanced understanding of English, French, mathematics, religious studies and home economics. In my spare time, I would read whatever books I could get my hands on, improving my understanding of the world. I hoped that when I would eventually leave Lowood I would not be so unprepared. I also grew to love painting and the pianoforte, which served as an escape when life became too grim or monotonous.

After turning 16, my dedication to bettering myself was noted by the head teacher. Though Mr Brocklehurst had tainted my reputation upon my arrival at Lowood, most teachers gradually grew to see that I was a good and obedient student. Consequently, I was offered a position as a teacher when my studies were completed. The offered board and living meant that I could avoid returning to Gateshead and my Aunt, who would remain my legal guardian until I reached my majority.

So life at Lowood continued. My position allowed me to live in improved circumstances, if not in comfort. I shared a room with a fellow teacher who was stern but harmless. Staff were provided with better quality meals which I often shared with the more wane looking students. Lowood’s curriculum insisted that I be strict with the girls, though I defiantly promised to never administer beatings. My students grew to admire and trust me which gave me a small sense of fulfilment.

Though I was no longer desperately unhappy, the repetitive, grim Lowood routine still filled me with frustration. I longed for the day when I would walk out the gates and never return. Unfortunately, my life was not yet my own. As my legal guardian, my Aunt had her say on where I should be and what I am doing. She was only too happy to allow my time at Lowood to continue, so long as I was not living in her home. At 18, I had 3 more years before I would turn 21 and be allowed to go anywhere I please.

I had not seen or spoken to my Aunt since the day I left Gateshead. I received the occasional letter from Bessy, a maid I had befriended at the manner house, who informed me of my families good health. Aunt Reid would also correspond with the Matron at Lowood each year, informing them that she would prefer for me to remain at school over the holiday period. I had grown accustomed to the absence of a family in my life. Though I would despair when seeing other girls at Lowood lovingly greet family who would come to visit, I would far sooner have no family then suffer through the abuse of my own. Therefore I was quite surprised when after so many years I received a letter from Aunt. The letter read:

**Monday 3rd September 1845**

*Neice,*

I am writing to tell you of my intention to visit you within the coming days. I have become aware of a position which would suit you very well. You shall be leaving Lowood Institution with me, therefore I suggest you begin to make arrangements.

Mrs Sarah Reid

After 7 years of no communication, I received a short missive informing me of my inevitable removal from Lowood. To say I was confused would be a vast understatement, however, I had little say in the matter and began to pack my things and await her arrival.

On the day of my Aunt’s visit, I was surprised to find that she was accompanied by someone. I
watched her carriage enter the gates from my bedroom window in the early morning. A tall, slender man with dark features and a pallid complexion stepped out to assist Aunt Reid. They both appraised the dilapidated building with twisted bemusement before a servant girl led them inside to the tea room I had reserved for our meeting.

I was consumed by keen discomfort from the very moment I entered the room. Both my Aunt and her companion seemed to be looking over me with a critical lingering gaze. The man, in particular, seemed to take great pleasure in assessing my face, form and figure.

“Good morning Aunt,” I said. “How nice it is to see you again after so many years, I trust you are well?”

“My-my Jane, how you have grown” she spat, ignoring my question. “You are practically a woman now”.

“I suppose so, It has been a long time” I replied, my eyes timidly moving from her to the man beside her who was still leering at me, whilst twisting the end of his moustache. “This is Mr Grobey, a dear friend of mine who will be providing you with a new position”. Mr Grobey smirked up at me. The dead black of his eyes sending a shiver down my spine. I did not like this man.

“A pleasure to meet you, my dear”. He purred.

“Nice to meet you, sir. I am very keen to hear about the position” I replied, eyeing them both with trepidation.

“Yes Jane, you shall hear all about it, but not before we are served some tea. We have travelled far to be here and I am positively parched” Aunt Reid insisted.

“Of course Aunt, I will just be a moment,” I said, leaving the room to fetch their refreshment.

I pottered about the kitchen, placing cups and cakes onto a tray while I waited for the water to boil. Anxiety twisted in my belly as I contemplated the conversation that was to come. Something did not feel right. The way they have both looked at me made my skin crawl. With a shaky breath, I collected the tea tray and carried it back to the sitting room where they awaited me.

I placed the tray down on a side table and reached for the door handle. Just as my fingers touched the knob I heard voices from within.

“I must say, she certainly is a pretty little thing. She will more than make up for the debts you owe me” Grobey laughed, causing me to freeze.

“She is nothing to my girls, far too much of her Irish father in her, but I am sure she will be well suited to the work you have for her” My aunt replied in a disinterested tone.

“Mmm the pretty little innocent will earn me a pretty penny. I’m sure she hardly make it off her back for the first year at least”.

As comprehension washed over me I felt myself sway. My Aunt, who had always despised me had actually gone as fast as to sell me to a man of ill repute in order to settle her debts. A sickening feeling settled in my stomach as I stumbled back from the door. Tears pooled in my eyes as I realised that as my legal guardian she had the right to do with me as she wished. My breath came out in startled gasps as I felt the walls begin to fall in around me. I had to get away. Run as far as I could in order to save my virtue, my dignity and my soul. With no thought for the bags that sat already neatly packed in my room, I collected a warm shawl, a spencer and the little money I had put aside.

I ran out through the back of the school, into the small forest that lead away from the village. I thought that if I could get as far away as possible, I may soon be able to find employment in a small town, where I might live in anonymity until my majority. I walked and ran for days, sheltering in bushes to rest for a few hours before continuing on. My plans to settle were thwarted when I discovered that I was being hunted. Men, hired by Grobey and my aunt were not far behind, paying people for information. It soon became too difficult to stop to buy food in towns without throwing myself back in the path of my pursuers. Thus I continued on, with nowhere to go. Only a desperate need to get away.
Chapter Three - Unfamiliar Territory

North Yorkshire, December 1845

As I slowly drifted back to awareness I first detected the unnatural stillness. After months on the run, without proper rest, I was unaccustomed to stagnation. Even before I felt the ache of overexerted muscles or the sting of my fresh wounds, my mind was protesting the lack of urgency in getting up and moving on. Apart from the throb of my injuries I gradually became aware of something equally as unfamiliar. I felt extremely comfortable and deliciously warm. At Lowood, my teacher’s room had featured two small cots with lumpy hard mattresses. Cost cutting meant that out fire was very rarely lit, so the room was often filled with an awful damp chill. The room I was in now was a stark contrast. Before I even opened my eyes I could feel the plush softness of the mattress beneath me, hugging my aching bones. The thick counterpane enveloped me in warmth, combined with the pleasing cracking of a nearby fire. There was even the light tapping of drizzle against a window, which only increased the feeling of comforting cosiness. Where am I? I thought to myself. I finally coaxed my eyes open and was greeted by the fine dark wood panelling of the ceiling. Turning my aching head, I took in the beautifully decorated room. A combination of wooden furniture and feminine upholstery. I lay in the largest bed I had ever seen, a grand four-poster with a lavish woven counterpane. Before the bed was a large hearth which contained a well-lit fire. Its embers filled the room with a glowing warmth. The window was darkened by the dead of night, with just a faint hint of moonlight and silvery raindrops. I moved to sit up, but pain seared across my belly. Pulling back the covers I found myself in an unfamiliar and oversized nightdress which slipped off my bony shoulder. Underneath I could see a mass of gauze wrapped around me, a hint of blood slowly seeping through. Panicked, I wondered how I came to be here in this condition. I thought back to my long journey. I remembered travelling along the seaside, the overwhelming fatigue and the rearing horse. From there my memory became nothing more than a collection of flashes. Icy water filling my lungs, a warm embrace, panicked voices and gentle hands coaxing me to drink. Though I was entirely uncertain of where I was, who had brought me here and how long I had been asleep I was sure of one thing. I had to leave now. Though the idea of leaving the warm bed for the wet, cold night made my body tense in protest I knew that I had already stayed too long. Grobey’s men were never far behind. If they were to discover me here I would not be strong enough to fight and escape. I had to go now if it wasn't already too late. Glimpsing my shoes and dress folded neatly by the fire, I sat up slowly. A pathetic whimper escaped me as the movement pulled at the painful gash. I eased myself up, clinging to the bedpost for support. I felt heavy and hollow all at once. Each move was painful and laboured. I caught sight of myself in the polished mirror which hung above the fireplace. I was ghostly pale with scratches, bruises and sunken cheekbones. The spot of painful throbbing on my forehead was marked by a purple bruise. As I dressed I took note of my boney limbs and numerous injuries. I was truly in no state to continue on, but I had not come this far to be captured now. My dress and underclothes had been freshly washed. The smell of floral soaps lingered on them, rather than the horrid odour of months on the road. It was only then that I noticed that my spencer and shawl were missing. Going out into the rain seemed even less appealing after that revelation, but I strove on, determined to keep moving. Dressing took much longer then I would have liked. My debilitating weakness and numerous injuries caused a great deal of grief. By the time I was fully clothed my breath was coming in laboured pants. A sheen of sweat had broken out across my brow. I limped my way across the room to the door, I opened it slightly and peeked out into the corridor. Sconces lined the stone walls, illuminating my way. I listened carefully and heard no one lingering about, so I quietly entered the hall and closed the door behind me.
I leaned heavily against the wall as I hobbled along, praying I was going in the right direction. With each step, the pain increased and the shaking of my weakened legs became more pronounced. I was nearing the end of the corridor, creeping closer to a descending staircase when I heard a set of voices growing nearer. With all the delicacy I could muster I shrunk back into a shadowy alcove.

“I will need to wake Mrs Fairfax soon, so she can help change the poor girl’s bandages,” one of the voices said.

“Who do you suppose she is?” asked the other. A pair of maids appeared from the same direction I had come and began to descend the staircase.

“I haven’t a clue, but I do hope she recovers. She doesn’t look well at all, the poor thing”. With that their voices faded into the quiet night.

I moaned quietly as I pulled myself up from my crouched position. The pain was now unbearable, but still, I went onwards. If servants were aware of my presence here, that is all the more people who could easily report my whereabouts to Grobey’s men. Reaching the stairs I gripped the railing tightly and pulled my aching body along. I had forced myself all the way to the foot of the stairs when I could go no further. A pained cry escaped me and my legs gave out. The impact of the marble floor sent hot, searing pain across my wounded form. Through my blurred vision, I saw a large figure approaching through the darkness. Fear seized my throat as it grew nearer and I closed my eyes tightly, the last defence I had left.

“Good God! Whatever are you doing out of bed?” asked a smooth tender voice. Cool gentle hands touched my hot clammy skin, and I looked up into the most handsome face I had ever seen. Kind blue eyes looked at me in concern. His angular jaw was tense, shaped by light facial hair which blended into his beautiful dark curls. The man looked down, noting that blood was oozing through the thick material of my dress. “Miss you are badly hurt! You must return to bed so we can tend to you. MARY!” He called, moving to lift me from the ground.

“No! Leave me” I cried, struggling with what little energy I had left. “I have to go, they will find me”.

“Shhhhh, its alright” he soothed. His thumb gently stroking my cheek. “You are safe here”. A maid appeared over his shoulder and enquired as to how she can help. “Mary, please wake Mrs Fairfax, our guest needs urgent attention”.

“I have to go now” I whimpered. Exhausted tears trickled down my cheeks as my body grew weaker and weaker. The man lifted me from the floor and started back up the stairs towards the room I had abandoned.

“All will be well. You need to rest. You are safe with me” He said looking deeply into my eyes. I wanted so badly to believe him. As exhaustion claimed me I realised I had little choice. I drifted back into oblivion and dreamt of those kind blue eyes and comforting words.

“You are safe with me”. 
I awoke once again to the patter of rain against the window, snuggled within the lush confines of the comfiest bed I had ever known. Though the weather was stormy and grey, light filtered into the room, brightening the glossy red hues. Somewhere nearby, gulls whistled into the wind, their jovial song perfecting the peaceful scene. Laying perfectly still, I could not feel the ache of my injuries and a content sigh escaped my lips.

I jumped slightly at a noise directly to my left. At my bedside, enveloped in a luxurious velvet armchair sat a plump old woman, with silver hair and rosy cheeks. She squinted behind the copper frames of her spectacles, focusing on her intricate needlework. In her hands was my battered spencer which was marred with fraying tears at its seems. The woman hummed softly as she worked. The tune was a familiar hymn which I sang often throughout my time at Lowood. As if she could feel the weight of my gaze, she looked up and saw me staring.

“Oh goodness! Awake at last I see. How are you feeling my dear?” He voice was soft and bright. A cheerful smirk pulled at her lips as she spoke.

“Better” I rasped timidly, slowly attempting to sit upright against the pillows. Much to my consternation, I still felt extremely frail. The bedclothes slipped down, revealing the oversized nightgown which I must have been changed into one again after my ill-fated escape attempt.

“Well I am glad to hear it,” the woman said. “You still look mighty peaky, but I am sure it is nothing some hearty meals and rest won’t fix. I have some broth warming for you in the kitchens, just thought I would get a little mending done before you woke. Not much left of this to fix” she smirked, referring to my tattered coat. “Although it is a right sight better than the shawl, that was nought but scrap when you arrived. Your dress too had to be disposed of after last night. Far too many blood stains for my old bones to scrub out” she laughed.

My eyes widened. I was stuck in an unknown house with not a stitch to wear, but a ruined old Spencer. How was I to leave! I would not lower myself to thievery, but how could I ask any more of these people who had obviously been very dedicated to my care. “Oh, well thank you very much ah….” I hesitated.

“Where are my manners, I quite forgot to introduce myself. I’ve been watching over you for so many days It slipped my mind that we have not been introduced. I am Alice Fairfax, the housekeeper here at Thornfield Hall. What may I call you, my dear?”

I thought for a moment. Revealing my true name may not be the wises decision. “I am Lucy Burns, pleased to meet you”. I replied, using the family name of my most beloved friend.

Mrs Fairfax looked at me in confusion for a moment before smiling once again. “Likewise, Miss Burns. Now you rest here a while, and I will fetch you your breakfast”. The old woman was up and out of the room before I could utter the slightest protest.

Thornfield Hall? It was not an estate I had ever heard of before, though I could not own to knowing all that many. I knew from the rooms I had seen and the decadent furnishings that it must be quite a large and rich house. I hoped to god it was unremarkable and isolated, far away from anyone who could report back to those hunting me. My gut twisted painfully thinking about how reckless I was being, dallying in this place. However, I knew that I was in no fit state to travel and the comforting words of the unknown man made me feel obliged to stay, for a little while at least. You are safe with me.

The deep, husky voice repeated over and over again in my mind. A vision of the endless depths of his bright blue eyes filled me with questions. Who was he? Why do I trust him so much? I suddenly felt overly warm, abuzz with nervous energy that could not be squashed. Pushing back the counterpane I eased myself up and out of bed. Bruised bones and fragile wounds ached with each move, but I could no longer lay still.

The gloomy daylight gave a greater advantage for examining the room. All my things, which had previously lay by the fire were conspicuously missing. My boots and stockings nowhere to be seen.
This is in no doubt an attempt to prevent another miserable escape attempt. I could hardly go anywhere now with nothing but a ruined half coat and a nightgown that was not my own. Moving to look at the windows I saw the teeming rain. The sky was a sea of grey clouds, with very little sunlight peaking through. The window overlooked the coast, the waters raging in the winter storm. Waves violently throwing themselves down against the stony shore. At least I knew I was still on the coast.

My thoughts were interrupted by the bustling Mrs Fairfax breezing back into the room, a maid carrying a tray not far behind her.

“How you found the strength to rise is beyond me my dear!” the matron exclaimed. “No, that will not do at all. Come back to bed at once, you must have sustenance”.

I eyed both ladies gingerly, whilst slowly making my way back to bed. “I assure you this is not necessary. I’m sure its all a terrible imposition, I cannot thank you enough” I said with a wary smile.

“Pfff, none of that Miss Burns. It is the least we can do after the master knocked you from the cliffside” she said, piquing my curiosity. “Now here we are. Fresh bone broth, bread and cheese, just the thing to build your constitution”. The willowy maid lay the tray across my lap, giving me a kind smile which I returned. With a dainty curtsey, she left the room and closed the door behind her. Mrs Fairfax sat back down in the armchair, resuming her optimistic mending project.

My belly growled ravenously at the sight and smell of the meal. It had been many months since I had such a full meal. I began to eat with gusto.

“It does me good to see you eat so, my dear,” said Mrs Fairfax. “You are such a slight thing, no meat on your bones at all. And it was ever so difficult to get you to take broth while you were ailing”.

“Was I fevred?” I asked

“Why yes! For many days” she replied. “I am not convinced you were all that well before the accident. You came to us cut to ribbons, light as a feather and burning with a fever so dire we worried you may sustain damage from it”. I looked up at her in shock.

“How long have I been at … Thornfield Hall?”

“Yes, Thornfield that's right. Coming up to a fortnight now. Your injuries were so grave and you were so ill you’ll need plenty of time to recover”. A fortnight! How had I not been discovered? Surely Grobey and his men would have found me by now. And how exactly did I get these injuries? The flashes of memory were too confusing to be of any help at all.

“You said the master knocked me from a cliff?”

“Why yes! He showed up dripping wet, not 12 days ago with you. Said you had been on the coastal lane, very close to the edge. He was out riding Trojan, his great beast of a stallion when you appeared around a bend. He said he tried to pull the horse to a halt, but he bucked and caused quite a fuss and you, my dear, were knocked right off the edge. He had to jump in after you and rescue you from the swell and rocks, they’ve claimed many a life over the years. Its a miracle you both were not torn to shreds”.

The story explained my sliced skin and battered appearance. The vague memories of the cold water and strong hands suddenly made perfect sense. “Goodness me” I whispered shakily. “Well, please tell your master I am very grateful. I am sorry to have caused such a fuss”.

“You can tell him yourself my dear” she smiled. “The poor man has been in a right state since you arrived, storming about the house like a brooding, anxious bear. And even more so since he found you in such a state on the stairs last night. Keep eating dear”. She gestured to my neglected tray. I resumed my meal while my head spun with an overload of thoughts. The handsome man was the master of the house, who had also rescued me from certain death. How was I ever to repay such a debt. We sat in companionable silence while I finished my meal and attempted to steady my racing mind.

“I cannot express how truly grateful I am” I began, setting the tray aside, my breath escaping in a pained hiss as I twisted my delicate wounds. “But I cannot stay long there is… there are urgent matters which await me in London. I cannot delay, I fear I must be on my way as soon as can be”.
Mrs Fairfax looked at me in disbelief. “Surely nothing can be so urgent as to endanger your health. How could you travel in such a state? And what do you have to travel with? No! I dare say the master will not be letting you go anywhere”.

“I agree that it is not ideal, or even sensible. I am not sure how I will travel but I must stress that I must go. I cannot stay here”

“Now don’t go working yourself into a state. I am sure whatever your business is in London the master can help put it right” she said.

Tears pooled in my eyes as I wracked my brain for a way to explain. How could I convince her to let me go without telling her everything? “Though I am grateful for your advice I am sure there is nothing to be done. I simply must go”.

The matron rose from her chair and lay a gentle hand against my cheek, wiping at my traitorous tears. “Now dear, though I won’t pry and ask what these urgent matters are, I simply cannot see how you can be expected to travel at this time. I shall fetch the Master. He will know what is to be done”.

“No really! Please do not-” before I could object she was out of the room.

My breath began to rise, coming in panicked gasps. How was I to explain myself? In true, the ridiculousness of expecting to travel while weak, ill, injured, without a stick to wear or a penny to my name was not lost on me. However, revealing the truth of my circumstances would only expose me to further danger. I could not trust anyone. Not when they could so easily sell me out to Grobey and his men. I scrambled to pull a half decent explanation together but was having very little success. With each passing moment my anxiety rose acutely and suddenly my wayward thoughts were interrupted by a gentle knock at the door.

It opened to reveal the flawless face which had been etched in my mind since I had woken. My uneven breath caught as his anxious eyes studied me with concern. He entered the room ahead of Mrs Fairfax who expresses a satisfied “Here we are now” as she once again took her place in the bedside chair.

“Miss Burns, I am Mr Edward Rochester,” he said. The deep rumble of his voice sending tingles down my spine. “Mrs Fairfax tells me you are set on leaving in your current condition, whatever can you mean by this”.

His hypnotic eyes bore right into the centre of my soul. I swallowed loudly and prepared to tell my poorly constructed lies. “Yes sir, you see I have a position as a governess awaiting me in London. I have no family or anyone to support me so I have nowhere to convalesce. I must earn a living. I am afraid if I wait any longer they will not hold the position”. His gaze became even more intense as deep frown lines asserted themselves betwixt his heavy brows.

“This shall be easily overcome. I am well-known in London. Simply provide me with an address and I will write to your employers explaining the situation. I am sure they will be more than happy to hold the position should I ask. Who will you be working for?”.

His simple question was my undoing. “I… Well… I do not….” I stuttered, tears pooling in my eyes once again. I truly hated lying, and so it never came easily to me.

Mr Rochester gave a great sigh. “Now Miss, why do we not dispose of all the lies. We cannot help you if you are not truthful. Please begin by telling us your real name”. My face was overcome by stricken panic, while both Mr Rochester and Mrs Fairfax watched on with concern. “B-but my r-r-real name is L-lucy B-burns” I stuttered.

Mrs Fairfax lay a comforting hand on my arm. “All of your clothes were monogrammed with the initials J.E. my dear”.

“Yes,” said Mr Rochester, “So either you are a liar or a clothes thief”. Though his words were harsh, he looked at me with such tender, unjudging concern which only sought to twist the knife of guilt deeper.

Suddenly the increasing panic and stress shattered my already inadequate mask, and I erupted in uncontrollable sobs. Unable to face the good people who had shown me nothing but kindness, I hid my face in my hands while my resolve splintered. The bed shifted as Mrs Fairfax moved to sit next to me, laying a comforting arm across my shoulders. Mr Rochester too, sat before me, pulling my
hands from my face. His thumbs rubbing soothing circles across my tear soaked palms.

“As I said, If we are to help you we must know the truth. You can trust us” He said. As I hesitated further he continued to push. “Last night on the stairs you said that someone was going to find you. Are you in danger? Is there someone trying to hurt you? I swear to god I will keep you safe, but I must know who it is you are so afraid of, sweetheart”.

Again I marvelled at how 5 simple words could affect me so greatly. I will keep you safe. My heart also gave a dazzled squeeze at the pet name. Without any rhyme or reason I believed him, so I began to tell my story. “My n-name is Jane. Jane Eyre”. In an emotional flurry, I told them both my story. From my parent’s death to my hateful family, Lowood, my escape and my desperate travels. They listened patiently with solemn understanding, comforting me through the difficult moments. Once I had said my piece I sat there for a time and simply wept. Throughout my life, I had managed to swallow the pain and deny myself the luxury of wallowing in my misfortunes. For the first time, I allowed myself to feel the misery of my past. I cried for my parents, my uncle, my abuse, Helen and my aunt’s abominable treatment.

I learnt that nothing was more exhausting than a good and thorough cry. When the tears had reached their end I felt myself sagging against the pillows and Mrs Fairfax’s supportive frame. Still holding my hand, Mr Rochester gave it a comforting squeeze.

“Thank you for trusting us, Jane. I am so very sorry for all that has befallen you. I can only say that I believe it was God's plan for you to be here, in my home where you may find some safety and rest. I am privileged in that I have a very loyal household of staff. All of whom have been greatly concerned for you since the very moment you arrived, not one of them would betray you to these men. Besides, a storm has plagued the area for many days now, no one has been able to come or go from the hall. Your secret is safe with us”. I looked up at him in awe. How could a man with such beauty also have such a heart?

“Thank you so much. I am so grateful. God bless you” I cried.

“Nonsense! For now, all I ask of you is rest. Regain your health. I will think about your situation. I am sure there is something to be done”.

“Indeed” Interjected Mrs Fairfax. “Now, I dare say the poor dear is quite worn out. We will leave you to rest”. After I was thoroughly tucked into bed, and the fire was stoked they left the room. But not before Mr Rochester lingered in the doorway. His kind eyes and affectionate smile lulling me to sleep with a gentle whisper of “Sleep well, sweetheart”.
January 1846

As weeks passed I began to feel a strange sense of familiarity and kinship with Thornfield and its inhabitants. The hall was an isolated estate, five miles from the closest village and an even greater twelve miles to the city of Scarborough. The servants were impeccably loyal, most with families who worked within the house, or on the surrounding farms. They all knew very little about me but swore to hide my presents from anyone who came inquiring. Mr Rochester suggested they refer to me as Miss Elliot, a distant relation of Mrs Fairfax who had come to stay for a visit. I was finally able to relax a while, rest and recuperate while my injuries and illness improved. Gradually the foreign, dangerous feeling of staying in a single place began to fade, and a wistful longing to remain settled in.

In my first few weeks at Thornfield Hall, I experienced my first happy Christmas since my parents passed away. Though I was confined to bed, with orders not to overexert myself I received many visitors that day. Mary and Nan, two of the housemaids came and sat with me for a time. They brought with them fresh mince tarts, and beautiful holly, which brightened up the room. We sat for hours, laughing together, as they retold the infamous tales of the hall from above and below stairs. When they left I was joined by Mrs Fairfax and the master himself. Mr Rochester proposed to celebrate my first Christmas at Thornfield with a truly unconventional dinner party. As I was still too weak to leave the room, three trays of scrumptious turkey, Yorkshire pudding, cranberry sauce and new potatoes were brought up. We enjoyed our fest, huddled within my bedchamber, sharing fond Christmas memories and future aspirations. The evening ended with the kind pair offering me my first Christmas gift.

Mr Rochester left the room for a moment, returning with a large parcel, wrapped in crisp paper and twine. “This is for you, my dear, from all of us at Thornfield Hall” he smiled, offering me the large gift. My eyes widened, looking between him, Mrs Fairfax and the carefully wrapped present. “I could never accept a gift from you,” I said, “not when you have already shown me so much kindness. I will never be able to repay you all for what you have done”.

“Oh nonsense!” laughed Mrs Fairfax. “You have been a godsend, listening to all of our prattle. We are more than happy to give you a proper Christmas after so much hardship”.

“She is right, plus the gift is already here, it would be rude to not accept it now” the master joked. For a moment I was transfixed by his devilish smirk and laughing eyes. “Oh… well, thank you. Very much indeed” I whispered, tentatively taking the present. I slowly began to undo the wrappings and skillfully tied twine. I pulled away the paper to reveal a brand new day dress, coat and shawl. Wrapped up underneath there was also a warm scarf and cosy kid-gloves. Each item was made of sturdy, soft fabric and sewn by a truly talented hand. I had never owned items of such high quality.

“We thought you would need these for when you are stronger, able to explore more of the house and gardens”. The thoughtful gift brought tears to my eyes. I looked up at them, opened my mouth to speak and found myself lost for words. How could I ever explain how much this meant to me? With a small shake of the head, I steeled myself and tried again.

“Thank you so very very much,” I began. “For the longest time, I have lived a life without kindness and friendship. I could hardly remember what it is like to be treated as an equal. I can honestly say that I owe you both my life, but what's more is that I am endlessly grateful for your generosity and care. I-”. A sob escaped me and emotion thickened my voice. “I can say I do not think I have ever been happier. Even in the most miserable circumstances, you have brought such joy to my life and I am honoured to have you as friends”.

Mrs Fairfax soothed me with a gentle “There-there child”, wrapping me in her arms. Over her shoulder, my eyes met Mr Rochester’s. The intense emotion in his gaze captivated me, as did his
breathtaking smile.
That night was one of my happiest memories. One which I will cherish for years to come. My recovery was a long and arduous process. The first weeks I spent convalescing in bed. Months of lost sleep and years of malnutrition required weeks of painstaking rest. Gradually I began to feel stronger. My wounds healed and my limbs began to ache from inactivity rather than crippling weakness. Thankfully I often had pleasant company or an astounding reading collection to keep me entertained.

The doctor eventually deemed me recovered enough to leave my sick bed. My daily exploits began small, first just taking the occasional turn about the room or upper hallway. I was finally able to fully appreciate the stunning views the Hall had, overlooking the North Sea. The house was perched atop the cliffs, which lead down to the vast, cobblestone beaches. Gulls sailed across the vibrant vista, singing in the wind and hunting their next meal. I longed to escape the house and explore the picturesque coast, but for now, my body would simply not allow it. Instead, I would hide-away in Thornfield’s library, curling up with many enjoyable stories. Losing myself in their pages, I would travel the great wide world which I promised one day to experience first hand.

Each afternoon after leaving my bed, I would take tea with Mrs Fairfax in her personal sitting room. The cosy space had been perfectly adjusted to her tastes over her many decades of service. I developed a great fondness for the kindly old woman, and with each tet-a-tet we had, I would learn more about her. Mrs Fairfax had been the housekeeper at Thornfield for nearly thirty years. As the wife of the estate’s steward, Mr Fairfax, she had an excellent understanding of the house’s requirements and perfectly suited the role. She was particular but fair, ensuring she was well respected among the other household staff. Sadly, Mrs Fairfax had lost her husband nearly a decade ago after a sudden apoplexy. Though she had never had children herself, she often felt like an adoptive mother to the Rochester boys. Mr Rochester’s mother died in childbirth, leaving them without a mother figure. Over the years Mrs Fairfax began to love them as her own, a love the boys returned ardently. Even as grown men they would still come to her for comfort and counsel. I was extremely touched by the loving fondness Mrs Fairfax had for the master. It was a comfort to know that such a kind man had someone watching over him.

Mercifully, after many long, drawn-out weeks I was able to leave the house and take short walks around the garden. Though I was not yet able to descend to the shoreline I thoroughly enjoyed wondering about the pretty pathways of Thornfield's gardens swaddled in the cosy garments gifted to me at Christmastide. On each of these exhibitions, I was always accompanied by a steadfast companion. Pilot, Mr Rochester’s English Pointer was tenacious in his chaperoning duties. Whenever I felt inclined to take a walk the dog would appear, ready to escort me. On the rare occasion that the master would happen upon us, he would heartily comment on Pilot’s dedication, jokingly asking how I had elicited such benevolent loyalty from his faithful companion.

Though Mr Rochester was often busy with estate business each day we would often spend time together in the library each evening. We would spend hours in fascinating conversation, debating all manner of things. Over time he gradually began to reveal more about himself. Born the second son, he had never expected to inherit the estate. With his elder brother Arthur as the heir, he joined the military, intent on a glorious, respectable career fighting for his country. Sadly a tragic accident changed his life overnight. During a destructive storm, his father and brother were both travelling home to Thornfield. It is thought that the cliffside was struck by lightning, crumbling the fragile earth and sending their carriage down onto the jagged rocks below. The storm raged for many days and sadly their bodies were never recovered. Mr Rochester had to immediately resign from his position as colonel, to take his place as master of Thornfield Hall and the many other estates his father owned. Though his responsibilities weighed heavily upon him, Rochester was a man of honour and duty. He was determined to continue the legacy his forefathers had amassed. The look of naked despair which crossed his face each time he spoke of his lost family pulled at my heartstrings. After all he had done for me, I would have given anything to ease his pain. The man had given me a home when all I have ever known was struggle and sorrow. Thornfield was an idyllic paradise in all aspects. Well, all aspects but one. The north-tower seemed
to house a particularly mysterious servant who went by the name of Mr Coles. Mr Coles was an elderly gentleman, with thin bronze hair, age-weathered features and a terrifying leer. I would often catch him staring at me, looking back as he ascended to his drafty crownsnest. He isolated himself from the rest of the servants, choosing to live within the tower. At night I would hear him leave his room, roaming about the halls, cackling to himself. His presence was disconcerting. Why would he be kept on when he appeared to serve no real function. When I asked Mr Rochester about him he simply told me that Coles had been his father’s valet, the old man had served the family for many years so he allowed him to stay in lieu of a pension which he had apparently refused.

“I know he is a little eccentric, but I can assure you he is harmless” Mr Rochester said, smirking over his evening port.

“I will take your word for it, sir” I replied. “For I find I cannot account for his behaviour at all”.

“Let us forget about him for now, Jane. I have something I would like to discuss with you”. The master moved closer, taking a seat across from me, before the library fireplace. “I believe I have a solution to your dilemma”.

“A solution?” I asked.

“Yes, I have a position which I am hoping you will be able to fill”. At my confused look, he continued. “You see I have a young ward, a little French girl, currently living in Paris. I am of a mind to bring her to live here in England, but she is in desperate need of an education. I cannot think of anyone more suited to the position than you, my dear. You would be her governess and continue to live here, with us at Thornfield”.

For a moment I simply sat in stunned silence until I finally found my voice. “I am touched by your generous offer sir, but I am sure there would be far more qualified candidates than I”.

“I think not! Your french is unparalleled for someone who has never stepped foot in the country. You are the brightest young women I have had the pleasure of knowing and was it not your great aspiration to become a governess when you left Lowood?”

“Indeed it was sir, but I cannot accept yet another kind offer from you! I am already permanently in your debt”.

“Hardly!” he scoffed. “You would be doing me a great service, she will need a lot of work. Adele is a frivolous little thing, with no mind for education. She will need a firm hand and a talented teacher. Not to mention the position will allow you to remain here, out of harm's way”. Setting his drink aside, Mr Rochester reached across and grasped both my hands in his. “Please say you will accept my offer”.

I hesitated for a moment. The offer did sound perfect. Thornfield had come to feel like home for me. The very thought of leaving it and its people behind was painful indeed. The position would also fulfil Helen’s greatest wish for us. “Very well sir, I will gladly accept the position”.
March 1846

Life at Thornfield continued in an idyllic manner. After several arduous months, I was finally back to full health. I felt stronger then I could ever remember feeling. The hearty meals and cozy bed had worked wonders filling out my boney frame and adding a little colour to my pale complexion. Each afternoon, weather permitting, I would walk down to the seaside and traverse the wild shoreline. I found the exercise to be quite revitalising. Where I used to feel frail and worn out I now felt refreshed and invigorated. Pilot, my ever-present minder was always there for company. The audacious mutt would cheerfully trot alongside or race ahead in anticipation of any sticks I might throw. Mr Rochester would also join me on occasion. The walks provided a much-needed escape from the monotonous estate business. As we walked he would use me as a sounding board, sharing any issues he was having with the land and tenants and discussing what should be done. I found him to be the most empathetic man. I could see that the people were always his primary concern. He was very dedicated to providing stable livings for all who relied on him. He was everything that was kind and gentle, however, there was an element of sadness to him as well. Sometimes I would see a shadow cross his expression when he spoke of the mammoth responsibilities which lay at his feet. I knew it must have been very difficult to have been in the prime of his life, with such a heavy burden to bear. My heart ached for him.

In February the arrival of Miss Adele Varens gave me renewed purpose and focus. After months of convalescing it was refreshing to fill each day with tasks. I would wake early each day, taking my morning meal with the young child and Mrs Fairfax. We would then spend the morning ensconced in our studies. I found Adele to be an extremely bright pupil, though a little exasperating. She would be far happier discussing French fashion and the theatre, but with a little encouragement and the right motivation, she began to excel in all of our lessons. I met Adele upon her initial arrival at Thornfield. Before Mr Rochester sent for her she had been living in Paris, in a small household which he provided. We gathered in the courtyard when the carriage was spotted. Before the wheels had stopped the door had burst open. A blur of blond ringlets and pink ruffles flew across the courtyard and into Mr Rochester’s arms.

“Monsieur Rochester!” the little girl exclaimed. “Oh vous m’avez manqué”. With a small chuckle, Mr Rochester wrapped his arms around the girl, lifting and swinging her around, eliciting a delighted squeal from the girl.

“I have missed you as well, mon petit agneau. Have you been well behaved for Sophie?” A young woman climbed out of the carriage after Adele. She had dark hair and even darker eyes, with a fair, milky complexion. She would have been even younger than me, perhaps sixteen or so.

“Yes Monsieur, she has been very good indeed,” the woman said with a heavy French accent.

“You see Monsieur Rochester, I am always very good” giggled Adele. With an adoring smile, Mr Rochester placed the girl back on her feet and took her hand, leading her over to me.

“Come, mon petit. There is someone I would like you to meet”. The little girl looked up at me. She had an angelic heart-shaped face with cascading golden ringlets and glistening blue eyes, not unlike that of her benefactor. “This is Miss Eliot, your new governess. Miss Eliot, this is Adele and her nurse, Sophie”.

“How lovely it is to meet you Adele” I smiled, kneeling down to her level. “I am sure we will get on very well. That is a very pretty dress, is pink your favourite colour?”

“Oui, mademoiselle” smiled Adele. “I have many dresses in this colour”.

With a welcoming smile at Sophie, we all went inside to take tea. The afternoon was spent getting to know one another. It was also explained that I was sheltering from wicked people, and should not be exposed to anyone who may come looking for me. From that day on lessons had commenced. Though Adele took a little guidance to get through the
morning studies she thoroughly enjoyed our afternoons. After lunch, we would dedicate ourselves
to the advancement of a number of accomplishments. I taught her to paint, sketch, sew and play the
piano. We would also try to spend some time in the garden casing each other about or playing
badminton. We fell into an easy routine and continued on like a well-oiled machine. Thought it was
clear Adele lived without much discipline or structure in her life, she was flourishing each day. All
the girl needed was a little encouragement and a tiny bit of flattery. I did not think it would take
very long for her to become an accomplished young lady, ready to attend school, like other girls
from respectable families.

It was a cold and stormy afternoon in late February. The rain had been torrential for several days
now, leaving no possibility for a walk. Adele had been distracted due to the lack of exercise,
making each lesson a struggle. I felt worn-out as I pottered around our school room, tidying the
supplies from our afternoon sketching. I finished putting away the pencils and isles, looking down
at Adeles rather lopsided portrait of Sophie. My small smile did not meet my eyes. For the first
time since I arrived at Thornfield, I felt a twinge of melancholia.

Though the weather was unforgiving and gloomy it was not the sole reason for my woeful mood.
Mr Rochester had left yesterday afternoon on business. Though he was expected back in just a few
days I was sad to say that I missed him terribly. It had become our nightly ritual to take tea
together. Ensconced in the cosy study, he would look over ledgers while I wrote out lesson plans.
The comfort of his companionship and conversation were sorely missed the night before and the
thought of spending another evening without him made my heart ache in a way which I was too
afraid to contemplate. We had become very close over the last few months. I thought of him often
throughout the day and would find myself smiling to myself thinking of his amusing mannerisms
and charming smile. Sometimes, during our numerous debates, our gazes would catch. Lost in his
eyes I would sometimes see a note of tender regard. His gaze would soften and warm when it came
upon me, but I knew It could be nothing of the sort. He was a respectable gentleman. A very kind
one at that. I knew that I was mistaking his good nature for something more. But I could not help
the explosion of emotion I felt each time he spoke my name or smiled at me. I knew I must try
harder to remain detached. I was just a burdensome employee, I must not complicate things with
my unwanted feelings.

With a wistful sigh, I finished my task and went in search for Adele and Sophie. With the master
gone, we were planning to dine together before reading in the library. At least I would have them
and their amusing tales to distract me from my emotional turmoil. After a light supper, we
snuggled by the fire with tea and sweet biscuits. The storm had grown quite violent and the stone
walls of the hall creaked and groaned against the buffeting wind. Adele insisted it was the perfect
night to share ghost stories. Thus we blew out all the candles, but one and sat in a circle before the
fire.

I began with my own tale. It was the story of the haunted red room at my Aunt’s Ramsgate estate
where my uncle died in his bed. Naughty children were locked away in the room only to be taunted
by the grotesque figures of all who had died in the house. Sophie then told a story which she had
learnt from the sailors during their journey from France. The merpeople, with their beautiful faces
and razor-sharp teeth, would lure men in with their mesmerising song only to be ripped apart and
devoured in the dead of night. Last of all was Adele.

“Have you heard the tale of the ghost of Thornfield?” she asked. Sophie and I replied with a small
shake of the head and waited for her to continue. “Well, it is said that there was a man, one of
Monsuier Rochester’s great ancestors, who went quite mad. You see, a long, freezing winter swept
over the countryside, so his family and all the staff were unable to leave the house for a very long
time. After months of rationed food, little fresh air and the continuous thunder of the stormy waves,
the tormented man was overcome with murderous rage and killed each and every person in the
house with the axes which hang in the great hall. And now, on stormy nights such as this, the man
returns. He lurks in the shadows, cackles at the wind and searches for his next victim”. Adele
finishes with a wicked giggle as a crash of thunderstruck. We all jumped with fright. Though it was
only a story, it reminded me of the mysterious Mr Coles, whose strange behaviours continued to
baffle me.
“Where on earth did you hear such a story,” I asked.
“Mary and Nan told me. They said that it is true. Do you think the ghost will kill us all in our beds tonight?”
“Of course he won’t, my love. It is just a story. We have passed many a stormy night in this house, this one will be no exception”.

Not long after Adele grew sleepy, thus we said our goodnights and went to bed. Hours later I lay awake, struggling to find sleep. Though my day was productive, the lack of exercise left me feeling agitated. My thoughts also continued to stray to Mr Rochester. I wondered where he was, who he was with and when he would return. I knew I should not think such things but his friendship had grown to mean more to me than anything else in the world and I could not help the warmth in my chest each time I thought of him. I know he could never think of me as I did him, but for now, I was simply content being near him as his friend.

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud cackle in the hallway. I shot up in bed, clutching the counterpane close to me. Pilot, who had taken to curling up around my feet raised his head in drowsy curiosity. Sensing my anxiety he stood and came to sit next to me, nuzzling into my shoulder. I strained to hear over the pounding rain outside. Uneven footsteps echoed, as someone made their way down the hall, laughing to themselves. As the steps grew closer Pilot began to growl lightly, both of us staring at the closed door. I held my breath as the steps grew closer and closer, then stopped altogether right outside my room. The laughter also stopped and for a moment there was sickening silence. A ghastly scaping noise broke the silence as the intruder dragged their nails down the wood. My eyes widened in horror as I saw the door handle begin to turn. In a blink of the eye, Pilot launched off the bed, snarling and barking angrily. The handle stopped and the unknown person cackled again. Loud footsteps stormed away as they fled.

I jumped from the bed and locked the door soundly. Though I was certain that it was not Adele’s fabled ‘Ghost of Thornfield” attempting to enter my room in the dead of night, the peculiar Mr Coles was another matter altogether. Either way, I was careful to lock my door each night from then on.
Chapter Seven - Night Terror

The nights that followed the frightening attempt to enter my room were far from easy. Though I would fall into bed world-weary from my busy days I would still lay awake acutely aware of each and every noise within the large house. I took to walking longer, more strenuous routes in the hopes of exhausting myself, which only proved to enlarge the deep shadows under my tired eyes. I decided that I simply had to speak to Mr Rochester about it when he returned.

Due to the lingering storm, many of the roads had been washed out therefor it was not entirely unexpected that Mr Rochester’s trip was longer than first anticipated. What was first meant to be a three-day business trip had now extended to nearly two weeks. With each passing day, I grew more and more desperate to see him. It was not only my desire to speak to him about Mr Cole’s disconcerting nighttime activities, but I also yearned to simply be in his company once more. Adele and I were playing a very poor game of badminton on the twelfth day since he had left when Mrs Fairfax joined us in the gardens. She had a large grin on her face and a letter in her hand as she cheerfully bustled over the lawn towards us.

“Mr Rochester is home at last!” she exclaimed. Adele was overcome with joy, erupting in a delighted squeal as she made for the house in an instant. I too felt a surge of relief and happiness all at once. “No, no child, he is not here yet!” Mrs Fairfax cried, stopping Adele before she ran to find him. “He sent this on from the village, he had some business to conclude with some of the farmers but he tells me he will be with us this evening”. With that, she gave a gleeful little laugh and went back inside to make ready for his arrival.

“I am so excited to see Monsieur Rochester. Do you think be will have brought me a present?” Asked Adele eagerly.

“I am not sure, my love. You will have to wait and see. Now let’s finish our game”. In truth, I would have loved to have ended the game there and hiked the many miles between Thornfield and the village in a heartbeat but it was not to be borne. I had to be patient. I would see my master that evening, and I would remain dignified and detached. I repeated this mantra over and over in my head, trying as hard as I could to suppress the bursting excitement I felt. The sad reality was that the moment Mrs Fairfax shared her news I felt a huge weight lift from my shoulders. The gloom I had felt since his departure was blown away in that single instant.

We continued our game, laughing at each others uncoordinated attempts to volley the shuttlecock between us. With one large wack Adele sent feathered cork into a nearby tree. I ran to get it, and upon reaching up to pull it from the branches I caught sight of a figure standing at the window of the upper levels of the hall. Mr Cole stood menacingly glaring down at me. I turned away quickly, but I could feel the weight of his leer upon my back. A shiver went down my spine, only increasing my eagerness to see Mr Rochester and tell him of all that has happened. Mercifully the time did eventually come. After we concluded our game I took Adele back to Sophie to ready her for dinner. That evening I took my time dressing. I chose a light cream dress which I hoped would downplay the peaky look of my skin and my dark under eyes. I sat for a while combing out my wayward brunette curls, attempting to tame them into a becoming style, however one or two of them refused to be conquered and lay defiantly against the back of my neck. Though I was not a particularly vain person, I did want to look my best for Mr Rochester tonight, though I was still not ready to scrutinise as to why that was. I took supper with Mrs Fairfax while Adele and Sophie dined with the master. Once the girl was showered with presents from her beloved benefactors trip and promptly put to bed I was called to the library to see him.

Upon entering the room I paused. He looked breathtakingly handsome leaning against the fireplace, gazing into the blazing embers. The muted light glistened against his dark hair and bright eyes. He held a tumbler of amber liquid in his hand, lifting it to his smooth lips for a sip before noticing my presence.

“Ah, Jane. Come in” he smiled, gesturing to one of the armchairs set before the hearth. “Let us be
seated, it feels like a millennia since we have seen one another”. I quite agreed but did not dare say it. I was determined to be just as I said: dignified and detached.

“Thank you, sir. I trust your trip went well”.

“Why yes, very well in fact. Though many of the roads were washed out I found myself in rather fortuitous company while stranded at a roadside inn for several days”. He sat across from me with a refilled whiskey glass and continued his story, “I came across a group of shepherds who were extremely informative on what sheep would be best on the unused land. I have even organised for a new herd of Merino sheep to be settled this spring”.

“Well, that is quite the fortunate coincidence. I am glad it went so well”. My smile did not meet my eyes.

“Yes very well indeed. Now, how have you been since I have been away? Did you brave the storm well enough?”

“I have been very well sir, thank you” I replied, avoiding his searching eyes. “The storm was not so bad, but I am glad that it ended if only to get a little fresh air”. There was a long pause in which I could feel his gaze on me. I stared down at my fingers, anxiously pulling at a stray thread on my skirt. I had no idea how to explain all that had happened while he had been away, but the silence stretched on awkwardly, and I knew he had detected my apprehension.

“Come now, Jane. I feel I know you well enough by now to tell when something is wrong. Tell me what it is”. He leaned towards me in his chair in order to see me better. I looked up at him with startled eyes, unsure of how to begin.

“Well, for many weeks now I have heard strange noises in the night. Footsteps, loud banging, strange laughing. I had assumed it was just a servant playing a trick or even my imagination, but the other night something happened”. I told him all about my frightening encounter. As I spoke a darkness settled upon his features as if he was growing angrier with each word I spoke. By the end he was glaring so viciously into the fire I was afraid to say anymore, but I knew I must. “I… I think that it was Mr Coles, sir. I have always found him to be a strange, antisocial man. He is always leering at me so, but I feel he has gone much too far this time”. With that, Mr Rochester’s gaze snapped back to mine. Seeing the timid anxiety in my face his gaze immediately softened.

“Yes, of course. I am sure it was him. As I have told you, he is a very old but loyal servant. I think we may have overindulged his eccentricity for too long. I will speak to him first thing in the morning, I give you my word”. He reached across and took hold of my hand, his thumb stroking comforting circles against my skin. “I am very sorry I was not here, you look exhausted. No doubt you have not been sleeping well. I am glad you have had Pilot to keep you safe”.

“I am well, sir. Pilot has been a very dedicated protector these last few nights”. Mr Rochester sat back in his chair, letting out a long wistful sigh.

“I have missed you very much, Jane” he said, causing my heart to skip a beat. “Evenings without your company are far less satisfying. It had put me in quite the sour mood for most of my trip”. I looked down at my hands once again, attempting to hide the deep blush which heated my cheeks. “I missed you too, sir”.

With that, we spent the remainder of our evening in quiet contemplation and light conversation. In the days that followed, we resumed our usual routine. I would teach Adele for most of the day before going on my daily walk. Since his return, Mr Rochester had joined me each day. I relished the time in his company. We spoke about everything and anything, from politics to the most mundane homemaker's tasks. Our evenings were spent in a similar fashion, only in front of a roaring fire rather than the North Sea. After speaking to Mr Rochester, my anxiety over Mr Coles eased. I felt much safer with him at home, and no longer lost any sleep. That is until one very dramatic evening.

I woke in the middle of the night to a loud noise which echoed through the stone walls of the house. I believe somewhere in the distance something had shattered and I shot upright in bed. The noise was followed by the familiar haunting cackle and loud footsteps running down the hallway to the stairs. After a long day of running about the estate with his master, Pilot was thoroughly worn out, barely opening an eye at my agitation. Regardless, I had had enough. I climbed out of
bed, unbolted the locked door and peered tentatively out into the corridor. Though many of the sconces had gone out I could see the hallway was empty, yet an unnerving feeling pushed me to investigate further.

Fetching a candle from my bedside, I entered the corridor and began to make my way down, in the opposite direction to where the steps had run. I turned a corner and was startled by the accumulation of smoke in the hallway. Running forward, I burst into the room from which it came. The sight I came across would haunt me for years to come.

Mr Rochester lay asleep in his bed while the hangings of his four-poster burned furiously. Casting my candle aside I was spurred into immediate action. Grabbing the basin from a nearby table I threw its contents across the bed.

“Wake up, Sir!” I urged. Throwing the basin down to shake the sleeping man. My frantic yelling and the icy water of the basin was thankfully enough to rouse the poor man who after but a moment of startled shock joined me in fighting the blaze.

“Quick! Pull them down!” he yelled, yanking the engulfed hangings and throwing them to the floor. I joined him in his efforts, heaving at the heavy linen curtains till they fell. One piece, thoroughly ablaze struck my arm on its decent, singeing through my nightgown and eliciting a sharp hiss of pain from my lips, though I hardly had a second to think about it. While Mr Rochester began to stomp out the flames I reached for the basin again, splashing the last of the water on the pile of smouldering ruins. After a few minutes of determined stomping, the last of the embers were out, leaving nought but a sodden smokey mess. All was silent apart from our laboured breathing. As the smoke and ash began to settle I looked across at Mr Rochester. Our eyes lock in shocked exhaustion before I noticed that he stood before me in just his trousers. His chest was bare, the defined lines of his well-muscled form covered in dust and ash. He was truly a sight to behold. The impropriety of the situation finally dawned on me, and I turned away in embarrassment. He too turned away in search of a shirt.

“I woke to a great crash and the laughter again” I began. “I waited till they were gone, and then left me room to see what had happened and found the smoke. You could have been killed”. As I spoke Mr Rochester dressed and opened the doors of his veranda, hoping to disperse some of the smoke. The cold sea breeze filled the room, permeating through my thin nightgown which had been quite soaked during the frenzy. I wrapped my arms around myself but soon felt Mr Rochester place something warm around me. I looked up as he wrapped his thick winter coat around my shoulders.

“Come” he whispered. With a strong hand across the small of my back, he began to guide me towards the door to his adjoining sitting room. Opening the door we saw that the room had also filled with smoke. He assisted me into an armchair before moving to open the doors and windows. He returned a few seconds later with a blanket which he lay across my lap. Kneeling before me he took my hands and looked deep into my eyes. “I am going to go and investigate what has happened here, I need you to stay here and be very quiet for me”. Lost in a shock-induced trance I could do nought by nod numbly. “I will lock the door behind me, I swear to god you will be safe, my dear”. Grasping my hands tightly in his, Mr Rochester lifted them to his lips. He left a lingering kiss against my cold fingers before taking his leave. I heard both the sitting room and bedroom doors lock, leaving me sitting alone in the darkness.
Mr Rochester’s Footsteps faded, receding in the direction the assailant went. Moonlight filtered through the smokey room, casting dim shadows in the darkness. I sat nervously playing with my fingers, still feeling the light brush of his lips. My mind was racing. In the aftermath of blind terror and sheer panic, I couldn’t stop picturing the blazing inferno or the gruesome end which could have been. If I had stayed in bed tonight would have ended tragically. When I had arrived, the room had been filled with thick black smoke - which could have so easily choked the very life from him before the fire had consumed the room. Flashes of Mr Rochester screaming in terror, burning to death echoed in my mind and tears pooled in my eyes. My breath caught in my throat as I whispered to myself over and over.

“He could have died”.

Even the thought of what could have happened triggered agonising pain in my chest. It took the fear of the worst to realise the blatantly obvious truth. I was in love with Mr Rochester. If he had died tonight my life would no longer be worth living. The thought of him being in pain twisted in my guts, filling me with dread and terror. Somehow, over the last four months, he had become the very centre of my life, the missing piece which made me whole. It was not just a girlish attraction that made me think of him first thing in the morning and the last thing at night, it was an ardent love which had become entwined with my very being without me even realising. The thought that I might have lost him was too much to bear. My breath began to tighten, coming in short, shallow pants as the shock squeezed my chest. I felt as if I had been standing on the edge of the world, and narrowly missed falling into oblivion.

I pushed myself back in the chair, attempting to get a hold of my racing mind. I covered my face with my hands, my fingers rubbing at my temples where a persistent ache had settled in. My skin was hot and grimy, covered in soot and ash. My arm, just below the elbow chaffed against the chair. My breath caught in a painful hiss and looked down to see a painful burn peaking through a singed hole in my sleeve. The skin was pink, bloody and blistered. The trauma was keeping the pain at bay, my body still torn between fight or flight. At least it meant I could ignore the injury for the time being.

Time passed slowly, minutes dragged on like hours while I sat in the shadows of the sitting room. As the panic slowly began to subside I felt a bone shattering exhaustion overwhelm me. With the balcony doors still wide open the ocean breeze filled the room with an icy chill.

Pulling Mr Rochester’s coat tighter around my narrow shoulders I tucked myself further into the chair. Enveloped by his scent I began to drift to sleep, lost in the smell of smoke, spice and raw masculinity.

After such a tide of tumultuous emotion, I slept like the dead. Hours passed before I was drawn from my deep slumber by the warmth of a gentle hand stroking my cheek and hair. Before my eyes had opened I knew it was him. I had grown acutely aware of his presence. I could hear the light gruff of his breath and smell the fragrance of his cologne. I opened my heavy eyes to see him kneeling before me once again. His concerned blue eyes appraising me as he coaxed me from my sleep with a gentle touch. For a moment we just stared at one another, appreciating the peaceful silence after such distressing excitement.

“What happened?” my voice had grown rough from sleep and smoke, breaking into a husky whisper. Mr Rochester ceased his actions, moving to stand and turning his back to me.

“It is as I thought. The culprit has been found and dealt with. You have nothing to fear. Say nothing of your involvement tonight, I shall account for the state of affairs”.

“Delt with how sir? It was Coles, wasn't it? He set fire to your bed!” I did not understand how he could be so calm. Not when there was a would-be murderer under his roof.

“It does not matter. What does is that you and everyone else are safe. Now you must swear you will say nothing. You are no talking fool”. His voice was cold and harsh, but he turned towards
me, his eyes pleading with a desperation I did not understand. 
“But you could have been killed,” I said in a choked whisper. Tears began to trickle down my cheeks. In a second he was before me again, clutching my hands in his. 
“No, do not cry” He said, his voice now soft as velvet. “I am here now because you saved me. Fire is a terrible death, Jane. I have the pleasure of owing you my life”. He leaned forward and placed a kiss to my brow, causing my heart to leap in my chest. He pulled away only slightly, our faces dangerously close. “How am I to repay such a debt”. He leaned closer still, closing his eyes and resting his face against mine so our noses brushed against each other. I could feel his uneven breath wash over my face and neck, a trail of goosebumps followed.

“There is no debt. You have given me more then you could ever know” I whispered. The intimacy of the moment was almost too much to bear. I sat here, in the arms of the man I loved while my emotions fought in turmoil within me. I loved him so much it hurt, and I wanted nothing more than to sink into his tender embrace, but I could not ignore the nagging warning in the back of my mind. After all that had happened, the essential things were still the same. He was a respectable, wealthy gentleman, and I was his paid subordinate. His actions now were that of a grateful man, who nearly lost his life, not of one consumed by the same passion as I. He did not feel the same, so to give into my emotions would only cause pain and awkwardness later on. Thus I hardened my heart, pushing gently against him and escaped from the circle of his arms.

I stood from the chair, untangling myself from his coat and blanket. I turned towards him, avoiding his eyes to hide the traitorous emotions that would be clearly seen on my face. Laying the blanket aside I handed him his coat.

“It is nearly dawn, I must return to my room, Sir,” I said. The first stings of daylight were beginning to paint the horizon. I needed to separate myself from him and get ahold of myself. That and the burn on my arm was beginning to smart painfully, I knew I needed to tend to it at once. “You would leave me so coldly after so much has occurred this night? After saving my life?” he asked in disbelief, taking a step towards me. I took a step back, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

“I am tired and cold Sir. It will be morning soon. We must both get some rest”. His eyes softened. He stepped forward still, placing his coat back around my shoulders and laid his hand against my back.

“Of course, my dear. Come, let me walk you back to your room”. After such a night I felt weak and boneless as we made the small journey to my room. Arriving at the door I once again pulled the coat from my body, pressing it into Mr Rochester's arms.

“Goodnight, Sir” I whispered timidly. I turned to enter the room but was stopped by his warm hand against my shoulder. He leaned in close again and placed another kiss to my brow.

“Goodnight, my dear. Thank you” he spoke against my skin. He pulled away and turned back in the direction of his own quarters without a backwards glance. I stared after him for a moment, suddenly feeling numb and empty.

Entering the room I was overcome with exhaustion. My painful wound was forgotten and I fell into bed and was asleep in seconds. That proved to be a foolish mistake. I woke up late the next morning feeling groggy and confused. The burn, still dirty and untended stung, causing my whole arm to throb. Climbing out of bed I washed the wound and dressed it in clean linen rags. Even the slightest contact caused tears to pool in my eyes and my breath to hitch. After that I bathed my face and body, wiping away the ashy dust and readying myself for the day ahead. I dressed in a dark grey dress with loose fitting sleeves, hoping to reduce the chafing against my arm.

I left my room and found all the servants tending to the dusty rooms and damage caused by last nights fire. Remembering Mr Rochester’s request, I approached Mrs Fairfax with feigned ignorance.

“What on earth happened,” I asked. The old woman huffed in indignation.

“For years I have warned the fool about falling asleep with candles burning. The master went to bed reading last night. The wind must have knocked his candle over and his bed hangings caught ablaze. It is a god given miracle he woke up in time, or he might have been killed!” I stared at her
in confusion. Why would he not tell her the truth?
“Is the master well?”
“Oh yes, he came to see me this morning before he left. He was quite well. Mary, please have the
tapestries aired as well” she said, coordinating the clean up efforts.
“He has left? Where ever has he gone?” I asked, trying to hide my surprised sadness.
“A house party in London I believe. He may be gone for some time though. I hear he will be in the
presence of Miss Blanche Ingrim. They were very close as children. God knows its about time he
settles down and it would be a very advantageous match”. She continued on with her tasks while I
extracted myself from the room, attempting to hide the fact that my heart was breaking. I knew a
man as handsome and kind as he would not remain a bachelor forever, but I had not expected to
lose him so soon after discovering my own feelings. As I tried to steel myself for a day of physical
and emotional pain, I made my way to the schoolroom. In my wallowing, I failed to watch where I
was going and collided with a looming figure.
“Oh, forgive me-”. My words failed me as I looked up to see I had walked into nonother than Mr
Coles. How on earth could he still be here after attempting to burn the master to death! I am sure
the confusion and horror were clear in my expression. However, the singular old man simply gave
a brief nod of acknowledgement.
“Pardon me Miss” he smirked, making his way towards the stairs.
In Mr Rochester’s absence, life continued on at Thornfield Hall. Shaken by the fire and Mr Coles continuous presence, I found settling into sleep at night troublesome for a time. After a week with no unusual happenings and the companionship of Pilot, I finally began to relax and get some much-needed rest. If I happened upon Mr Coles during the day I tried my best to ignore him. Though I did not understand why he was allowed to remain here, I came to believe that there must be more to the story then I knew. Mr Rochester was a good and kind man who was always very dedicated to the wellbeing of those in his care. I had to believe that he would not willfully endanger us.

We all went about our duties, falling into a peaceful routine. Between lessons with Adele, my walks and taking tea with Mrs Fairfax, days began to blend into one another. The monotony of life at Thornfield was actually very pleasant. I was able to work for a living in comfort, surrounded by those I considered good friends. But I could not deny that I had been cast down since Mr Rochester left. Though I knew I had no right to feel disappointed, my heart still ached in the evenings when I thought about where he was and who he was with. Rather than mulling over his nightcap before the fire with me, he was attending dinner parties and balls with the fashionable and glamorous women of the ton. I missed him desperately, but I knew he was not mine to miss. However, I was not entirely convinced my disposition was solely a result of heartache. As the days past, I began to feel fatigued, vague and disorientated at times. The burn on my arm was not healing well at all. It had been over two weeks since the fire and it continued to pain me greatly. Where cuts and scrapes would usually scab over and heal this continued to fester and sting. I had taken to changing the bandage morning and night but so far it was making no difference.

It concerned me that as time went on my whole arm began to ache more and more. At night I lay awake feeling feverish and flustered. My apatite dwindled and my dresses began to hang on my delicate frame like before. Mrs Fairfax had voiced her concerns a number of times, telling me I was as pale as a ghost. I assured her I was fine but I could feel her watching me sometimes, agonising as I changed before her very eyes. I knew it was not healthy, that I needed to seek treatment, but I had no way to account for the injury without revealing my part in the fire. I wondered if I might say it occurred in a separate incident but the coincidence would be too great to believe. Mrs Fairfax was an astute woman, she would see right through any story I fabricated. The last thing I wanted to do was betray Mr Rochester’s trust, so I decided I would simply make do for the time being. I rested more, trading in my afternoon walks for restorative naps, attempted to stomach as much sustenance as possible and even concocted a salve from a recipe in a book I found in the library. I was determined to nurse myself back to full health before the master returned.

On a late April morning, several weeks after Mr Rochester’s departure, I woke to hear activity in the room next to mine. I knew that the only other rooms in use on this floor were that of Mrs Fairfax who was across the corridor and Mr Rochester whose room was around the corner. Therefore, I was puzzled as to what could be happening. I had slept ill again that night and woken with a blistering headache. However, I wished to begin the day and satisfy my curiosity so dragged myself out of bed. I began by cleansing the wound, washing it first with warm water and fresh rags. Even the slightest pressure was agony, but I knew it had to be done. Next, I applied the salve, a concoction of herbs and oils designed to prevent irritation and infection. It smelled truly horrid but it did ease the pain somewhat. I then wrapped it tightly in gauze and rags, setting out clean ones to change it with later that day. I had told Mrs Fairfax I required linens to sew new undergarments from in order to obtain the fabric needed for the large number of bandages I was using. Lastly, I pulled on a day dress. I had altered many of my clothes to accommodate my injury with lose fitting sleeves. Thankfully these were the usual fashion in the warmer months so the choice was not noted with any suspicion. After styling my hair as well as could be with my painful arm, I left my room to find the maids diligently cleaning all the guest quarters.
“Good morning, Mary” I smiled. Mary had become a close friend of mine during my time at Thornfield. She and Nan were excellent company, kind and witty. “What is going on?”.

“Good morning to you, Jane. Mrs Fairfax received word from the master early this morning. He's coming home tomorrow so we are readying the house”. This still did not explain why they were thoroughly cleaning the spare rooms.

“Is he bringing people with him?” I asked.

“Aye, he is. Nearly thirty people in all. The house will be full to bursting” she laughed. “The whole place is a madhouse! With such short notice, we've had to call in for extra help from the village”. I was immediately filled with both joy and trepidation. I was eager to see Mr Rochester again, but I was also wary of the people he would bring with him. I had not forgotten Gorbey and my aunt. My time on the run had taught me that people were not to be trusted. One word to the wrong person could see me caught within their grasp, doomed to a lifetime of black misery. I must be sure to blend in and be as discrete as possible.

“Goodness! No wonder we are in such an uproar. I will see what I can do to help once I have tended to Adele today”.

“Aye, I'm sure Mrs Fairfax would be glad for the help, but do not trouble yourself. You are looking awfully pale, Jane. Are you feeling alright?” She reached out to place a comforting hand on my arm. I jerked away in fear that she touch the painful wound.

“Oh, I am fine. I did not sleep well is all”. She gave me a quizzical look, tilting her head to the side in suspicion.

“Alright then, well I best carry on with this”. She picked up a large sack on cleaning sheets and set about her task while I turned to find my pupil for breakfast and lessons.

The day was long and hard. Between lessons, Adele, Sophie and I helped make beds and dust cabinets. The headache I had woken with grew more burdensome by the end of the day. By dinner, I was struggling to compose myself. My arm and head throbbed mercilessly and the food on my plate held no appeal what so ever.

“Did I mention the Ingrams are coming?” Mrs Fairfax said from the opposite side of the table, pulling me from a daze.

“Pardon me?” I replied. So lost in my exhaustion I had failed to hear her.

“Goodness me dear, you look positively worn out. I said, that the Ingrams are coming. All of them in fact”.

“All?”.

“Why yes. Lord Ingram died years ago but Lady Ingram, her two daughters and her son will all accompany Mr Rochester tomorrow. Blanch Ingram is such a fine young woman, I wonder if they have already come to an understanding. She might be coming to see all that she will be mistress to”. I tried to smile, but I had little energy to express joy I did not feel. Thornfield had become my home, a place of happiness and sanctuary, but the thought of staying here and being forced to watch as the man I loved married another was horribly distressing.

“How charming,” I said with little enthusiasm.

After twenty minutes of pushing my meal around the porcelain plate, I laid my fork down.

“I am afraid I quite tired, please excuse me, I think I shall go to bed early tonight”. I retreated to my own room, desperate for a moment of solitude. Despite my fatigue, I still slept very badly. I woke often in the night, dripping in sweat, my head and arm throbbing. Even in rest, I was plagued by horrid dreams. Dreams of abandonment. Mr Rochester leaving me alone, turning his back on me with a beautiful woman at his side while I fell into the clutches of Aunt Reid and Mr Grobey.

I rose the next morning feeling even more dreadful then I had when I went to bed. I felt so cripplingly fragile that I wondered at how I would make it through the day. However, It was a very important day for the house and I was determined to try my hardest.

The eagerly anticipated party arrived during morning lessons with Adele. Excited as she was to see the glamorous women of the ton and their pretty dresses, it was a challenge to get her to focus. Eventually, when the clatter of carriages arriving was herd I gave up and joined her at the window watching the spectacle of them all arrive. Luxurious barouche carriages entered the courtyard filled
with finely dressed dandies and flawlessly outfitted ladies. Swaddled in brilliantly coloured silks and expertly fashioned gowns each woman was more beautiful than the last. They giggled and laughed together as they descended into the house with a welcome from Mrs Fairfax. Finally, I saw Mr Rochester, as handsome as ever climb from the final carriage. Dressed in a fine navy coat, black trousers and polished tall boots he looked like the epitome of British class and fashion. I had not seen him since he wished me goodnight at my bedroom door. The night I saved him. The night he wrapped his arms around me and laid gentle kisses against my brow. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to run to him and throw myself into his embrace. To my distress, he turned and handed down a breathtaking young woman. With a luxurious head of perfectly formed blond curls and a tall curvacious figure, she was the most elegant woman I had ever seen. Even from a distance, I could see her angular features and large blue eyes were stunning, a far cry from my dark, unconventional looks. She smiled up at Mr Rochester, wrapping her slender arm in his.

“How charming! It is a beautiful house, Edward. It almost makes up for the truly ghastly ride here” she giggled. Her voice was soft and light as she flirted with the man I loved. Mr Rochester laughed heartily at her teasing.

With little hope of regaining Adele’s attention, I ended our lessons for the day. I was feeling positively wretched and wanted nothing more than to hide myself away and wallow for a time. After escorting young Adele back to Sophie’s care I made my way back to my room, encountering Mrs Fairfax on the way.

“There you are! I have been looking for you” she said, bustling towards me. “I have just spoken to the master. He insists that you join the party in the drawing room after dinner tonight”. I looked at her in sheer horror.

“Surely not” I cried. “He can’t possibly mean for me to be there, I am just the governess”.

“I assure you, my dear. He was quite insistent. He would like you and Sophie there to escort Miss Adele and take part in their festivities”.

“But… But what if one of them knows my aunt? What if I am recognised?” Not only that but I could not bear to watch as Miss Ingram and Mr Rochester doted upon one another.

“Now I am sure none of Mr Rochester’s fine friends would be connected to such despicable people. The master said to tell you that if you were not present he would come to get you himself”. With that, she carried on her way, coordinating the footmen in their efforts to place the correct luggage in the right room. I retreated to my chamber feeling hopeless. I threw myself down intent on having a good sulk. I curled up, cried a little and tried to prepare myself for the trials of the evening ahead.

My headache had returned to full force, bringing with it a disgusting sense of vertigo. I prayed it would diminish by dinner time.

Sadly my prayers were not answered. Feeling pitifully unwell, I decided to forgo supper that evening. Instead, Mrs Fairfax had a tray sent up which I had left untouched. I readied myself by bandaging my arm, which had become concerningly inflamed, and dressing in my best gown. Though nothing could be done for my ghostly complexion I managed to tame my hair into an elegant bun which framed my face well. With the same enthusiasm of one walking to the gallows, I went to find Adele and Sophie.

We arrived at the drawing-room before the party were finished dinner. Feeling dizzy and feverish I selected a secluded seat in the corner, far from the fireplace, out of the way, where I would not be noticed. Sophie and Adele chatted animatedly about the beautiful ladies while I readied myself by bandaging my arm, which had become concerningly inflamed, and dressing in my best gown. Though nothing could be done for my ghostly complexion I managed to tame my hair into an elegant bun which framed my face well. With the same enthusiasm of one walking to the gallows, I went to find Adele and Sophie.

We arrived at the drawing-room before the party were finished dinner. Feeling dizzy and feverish I selected a secluded seat in the corner, far from the fireplace, out of the way, where I would not be noticed. Sophie and Adele chatted animatedly about the beautiful ladies while I picked up a book and pretended to read. The stress and fatigue were wearing me thin and the words danced about the page before my tired, unfocused eyes. Eventually, the doors opened and the guests filtered in, followed by Mr Rochester with his beautiful companion who clung to his arm like a limpet.

Without a glance my way, he seated himself next to Miss Ingram casually laying his arm across the back of the sofa behind her.

The large party talked and laughed and sung. Adele was in her element, dancing and singing for their entertainment, enjoying their compliments and flattery. The sheer noise of the loud party was knowling at my resolve. My grip on my book would tighten each time the young ladies would break out in a fit ok coquettish laughter. Luckily I had managed to go unnoticed. That is until I caught the
“My Lord, Edward, who on earth is that ghostly little thing in the corner?” she laughed, making no attempt to quieten her voice to prevent me hearing. I kept my eyes on my book, pretending to be oblivious.

“Ah, that is my ward’s governess. Miss Elliot”.

“Oh a governess, well, of course, she is” she tittered. “I think all governesses are such horrid little creatures. Lucy and I had at least six of them before we went to school. Oh, how we used to torment them!” Her sister joined her in laughing heartily at my expense.

“Yes indeed,” said an older woman, who I later learned to be Lady Ingram. “I am not convinced there is any value in having a governess. If they are not inattentive and shallow they are making eyes at the master of the house”. Her words struck deeply, as I felt the weight of her glare. “You should send the girl to school and save yourself the trouble, Rochester. I would be more than happy to recommend a suitable establishment”.

Mr Rochester hummed in lieu of a reply, neither agreeing with them nor standing up for me. I knew that they were his friends and he would not wish to offend anyone, but his lack of care wounded my pride and nearly brought tears to my eyes. My emotional turmoil was only made worse when he turned to Miss Ingram, asking her to play a duet with him. He stood over her shoulder, turning the pages and singing beautifully with her as her fingers flowed effortlessly across the piano keys. I stole a glance or two and noted that they did make a very fine couple. Such a well suited, beautiful couple. I knew that if they were to marry, it would be excruciating to watch. I had never assumed that he would be free to make an offer to me, but I had not anticipated the difficulty of witnessing him give his heart and soul to another. Nevertheless, I had a duty to him and Adele. After all, he had done for me, I could not abandon my post. I would have to be strong and support him as his employee and his friend. However, tonight, feeling as unwell as I did, I was not sure I had the strength.

It had been a long day and I once again felt my composure slipping. The censure of the guests and my own condition were becoming too much to bear. When the room began to spin I knew I had to take my leave. While the was still so engrossed by the charming duet I crossed the room and quietly spoke to Sophie, asking her to look after Adele while I went to bed. Creeping from the room, I made it safely into the corridor where I grasped the staircase bannister for support. I realised in that moment I was truly unwell.

I had managed the first flight of stairs, resting heavily on the rail for support when I heard the Drawing room door open and close behind me.

“Why did you leave the room?”. It was him. Mr Rochester’s presence would usually soothe me, but now in this condition - a fevered sweat breaking on my brow, emotional tears unshed in my eyes, I simply wanted to get away. I turned slowly and saw him standing defiantly at the bottom of the stairs.

“I am tired, Sir. I am going to bed” I said. He seemed to scrutinise me for a few seconds. Deep frown lines creasing between in brows.

“You do not look well, Jane. Have you been ill in my absence?” he questioned, taking a step up the staircase towards me.

“No, Sir. I am fine” I said, feeling the very opposite. I prayed he would not detain me much longer. Black spots began to cloud my vision as I felt my grip on reality begin to slip. He seemed unconvinced by my answer and continued taking small steps towards me as if he were approaching a wild animal that may scurry away in fear.

“It has been a while since we have seen another. What have you been doing while I was away?”

“T-t-teaching Ad-dele, Sir” I stuttered.

“But of course,” he said, drawing closer. “Why did you not come and greet me before?”

“You… you seemed engaged, S-sir”. By then he had reached the top of the stairs and my knees were beginning to sag. I stumbled back to clutch the wall for support but it was too late.

“What is the matter, Jane? Jane!” I heard him yell as I crumpled to the floor, landing painfully on my injured arm. I felt him kneel next to me, but with a small whisper, everything faded to back.
“I’m sorry”.
Chapter Ten - Dearest Friend

I had never been afraid of the dark. During the hardship of my life, I often found it to be a place of safety and comfort. As a child I would recede into the shadows, cloaking myself in darkness to hide from my hateful cousins. My fondest moments of Lowood took place in the dead of night where Helen and I would lay awake talking into the small hours of the morning. Even as an adult I found myself fleeing to darkness in times of fear or anxiety. There was something about the dark that soothed me. However, the blackness of my disembodied mind was far from a serene safe haven. For a time there was only nothingness. Trapped in a void, I felt nothing but my own terror. I began to wonder if I was dead. Was it was purgatory I was trapped in? The silence inside my own mind was deafening, stretching on beyond the limits of my own sanity.

At last, I found salvation in the distorted voiced which filtered into my awareness. As sensation returned I began to hear concerned murmurs, gentle voices at my bedside. Mrs Fairfax, the doctor, Nan, Mary and Mr Rochester all came and went, I could feel them bathing my brow, stroking my hair and holding my fevered hand. I even felt the occasional nuzzle of my ever trusted protector, Pilot, who I often felt curled up at my feet. Every so often, when I found the strength to open my eyes I would see their blurred figures sitting with me, moving about the room or coming near to help me to drink. Their presence was an invaluable source of comfort. It gave me something to focus on while I fought back against the looming blackness. However, there were times of crisis when my fever would peak and I would lose myself to nightmares. Their calming voices and reassuring figures would morph before my clouded eyes into grotesque creatures. As the fever raged for hours on end dreams bled into hallucinations, tormenting my frayed mind. During one particularly vivid episode, I woke to the comforting scene of my Thornfield bedroom, but a dark sweltering hot dungeon. My Aunt stood over me in bed, laughing in glee while I wasted and writhed in pain. The chaotic, hysterical laughter shook her entire being as her featured began to melt away into that of a much younger woman. Suddenly it was the beautiful Blanche Ingram who stood before me. Her usually flawless visage twisted into a horrifying grin with wicked black eyes and sharp vampiric teeth. In her hand lay a beating heart, dripping with blood, its vessels torn as if it had been ripped from a chest. Her smile deepened as I looked down. My nightgown was shredded with a large hole. Blood poured from a gaping wound in my chest pooling on the bedding around me.

“He is mine” she hissed, stepping towards me. Her long claw-like nails began to piece my heart and she squeezed it mercilessly. I let out a blood-curdling scream and moved to run, but I was held down. I thrashed and fought against the bindings holding me captive but it was no use, the iron grip was far too strong for my feeble efforts. Miss Ingram advanced, her face still contorted with a haunting smile. She stopped right at my bedside and cackled menacingly before tossing my lifeless withered heart into my lap. Deep gouges covered the poor deformed organ and I watched in horror as it began to rot before my very eyes. In a blind panic, I scooped it up and pressed into my chest. Blanche continued to laugh as I realised the gaping wound in my chest had closed. I whaled frantically while clawing at the skin, desperate to return my heart to its rightful place.

Suddenly my wrists were seized, the bindings holding me tighter to the point where I could hardly move. This spurred me on all the more as I fought against them. With a surge of energy, I could not account for I threw myself off the bed, kicking and scratching, shrieking like a thing possessed. Breaking free, I landed heavily on the floor beside the bed. Delirious, I began searching for my heart which I had lost track of during the scuffle, but it was nowhere to be found. Looking around the room I noticed the Blanch had also vanished, my skin and gown were no longer stained with blood and the familiar confines of my bedroom had reappeared. I was then wrapped in strong warm arms and lifted from the floor. Exhausted and confused I continued to fight against them, but my
outburst left me feeling drained and boneless. I was placed back in bed while the person holding me sat behind me, their arms folded across my shoulders and waist, trapping my arms while I whimpered and weakly struggled against them. As my nightmare faded I found that though their hold was firm, my captor cradled me gently, protecting me from myself more than anything else.

“Shhh, sweetheart” my captor soothed. “Be still”. His arms tightened slightly as his thumbed stroked soothing circles against my skin. Worn out from my exertion I felt myself begin to slip back into oblivion. As I hovered on the edge between sleep and wakefulness, My captor lay his head against mine, his soft hair tickled my ear as he nuzzled against my neck. “I am so sorry, sweetheart” he whispered.

This was one of many occasions where fever drove me to near madness. Caught between dreams and reality I would wake up screaming and fighting against assailants who were not there. Each time I had to be firmly but kindly brought back to bed and restrained until I was calm once more. On one instance I was said to have made it all the way into the corridor and was hovering perilously at the top of the stairs before I was taken in hand by those watching over me.

Finally, after days of struggle, my fever broke and I felt my mind begin to clear. I woke naturally, not at the behest of nightmarish creatures or insistent hands urging me to drink. For the first time in many days, I felt comfortable. Though my arm still throbbed and my head and shoulders ached from illness, I no longer felt discombobulated and dizzy. Opening my eyes, I squinted as the early morning sun shone through my window. Pilot was curled up at my side so I stretched out to reward him with a thorough head scratch. He melted into my pats but did not stir.

A light snore at my bedside drew my attention. Looking up I was surprised to see Mr Rochester asleep. His tall, broad body was squished into an armchair with his head lolled to the side and his long legs stretched out before him. He looked more unkempt them I had ever seen him, with at least a few days worth of stubble decorating his chiselled jaw and a head of unruly curls. His coat and cravat had been put aside, leaving him in only shirt sleeves and a thoroughly creases waistcoat with many buttons left undone. He looked charming, if not a little exhausted. The dark rings which encircled his fine eyes left me wondering if it had been him who had been tending to me to diligently. In my feverish delirium, I had memories of strong arms and a soothing masculine voice pulling me from my nightmares. I could vividly remember his voice hushing me gently, calling me his sweetheart, but I dismissed it immediately. He was as good as engaged. I was sure he would not be wasting his time caring for a servant so intimately.

I continued to watch him sleep for a time, admiring the adorable way his mouth would fall open, releasing a gentle sigh or delightful little snore. He would them purse his lips lightly and return to a peaceful slumber. He looked much younger in sleep - a far cry from the fastidious man, plagued by responsibility and duty. I felt my heart squeeze in sheer love for him. He was so handsome. But beyond that, he was kind and sensitive and passionate. I then became briefly transfixed by the taut lines of this throat and chest, visible through the gaping neckline of his shirt. Though it was never left exposed his skin was lightly bronzed and speckled with a light dusting of dark hair.

So absorbed in my in-depth study of his form, I failed to see his eyes open and begin their own examination of me.

“How do you do, Jane?” he asked, startling me from my fascination. My cheeks flushed when I looked at him. The sly smirk he worse showed he had been awake for a while and had been aware of my thorough study of him.

“Much better, Sir,” I said with a hoarse voice, attempting to push myself upright. Mr Rochester immediately moved to help, adjusting the pillows against the headboard, even positioning one for
me to lay my injured arm upon. It was still a little swollen, but far less painful then what I could remember. A dressing covered me from wrist to shoulder, limiting most of the movement of the limb.

“Good”. He said, sitting back into the chair. “You gave us all quite a fright. Your arm sustained a terrible infection. I cannot tell you how startled we were to discover such a large wound. But the doctor has been treating it and it is healing well. Your fever too, broke last night. I have been waiting for you to wake for many hours” he brooded, glaring down and my arm. I was a little taken aback by his ill-disguised anger.

“I am very sorry to have caused such trouble, especially while you have a household of guests” I murmured, looking down at the woollen counterpane.

“Yes, well as you should” he snapped. I glanced up in surprise at his sharp tone. I had never heard him speak thus. His glare was cold and harsh for a second before softening at the startled look in my eyes. He looked away for a second, running a shaking hand through his dishevelled hair. “How could you be so reckless Jane?” he asked. His voice breaking at the end as he looked up in anguish. “There were many times, where I thought I would lose you. You were so ill I was afraid to even touch you!”.

“I am sorry!” I cried. “I did not know what to do. You asked me not to say anything about the fire, but the burn would not heal” I gestured down to my arm, carefully propped on the pillow. Mr Rochester looked pained by my words. “I tried my best to tend to it. I thought I had it in hand”. There was silence for a time. Getting up from his chair, Mr Rochester began to pace angrily from one side of the room to the other. His dark expression burned into the dark wood floor he glared at so violently. In a moment of anger, he kicked the kindling box, the noise causing me to startle and gasp. Pilot too, who had up until this point been soundly asleep, shot up, growling defensively at the noise. Mr Rochester turned to me but I shied away in apprehension, scared of what he may say next. Seeing my discomfort he was at my side in an instant, seating himself on the bed beside me. Seeing only his master, Pilot slouched back against my leg, casting an uninterested glance in our direction.

“I am so sorry, Jane. It is not you I am angry at” he soothed, grasping my hand. “I worried that may have been your reason for not seeking aid. I put you at risk and left you alone in your suffering. I am so sorry, My L-... Friend”. Water pooled in his eyes for a moment, his distress evident.

“It is alright, Sir. I am alright” I said. Bringing my hand to his lips he placed a lingering kiss on each of my fingers before looking deep into my eyes. The action left me a little breathless.

“You are so very dear to me, Jane. My dearest friend. I don’t know what I would have done if you had-” he choked. “I am going to have to ask you not to take any more risks with yourself, for my sake” he smiled halfheartedly.

“I would do anything for you, Sir” I replied, transfixed by the sheer emotion in his beautiful eyes. He smiled tenderly at me, before kissing my hand once more. He removed himself from the bed, settling back into the armchair. “So, what has gone on since I fell ill? How has your house party gone? I hope Adele has not been too much under their feet”.

“To be perfectly honest, I have spent very little time with them,” he said. “With you so ill I found I could hardly tolerate their idle chit-chat. I have tried to dine with them each evening, but I have spent most of the week here, nursing you”.

“Nursing me?! I gasped in surprise. “I am so sorry to have been such a burden. I am sure your guests are most put out”. I could not believe it was actually him who had sat with me through the
tormenting fever.

“Oh, nonsense! The men have access to my cellar of fine port and the ladies have enough gossip to prattle over till the cows come home. I am hardly missed at all. Besides I could hardly leave you. At times it was as if you were possessed, ranting and raving in such a fever. It lasted so long we thought you might sustain damage from it. I found I had to hold you down lest you hurt yourself in the throws of it all”. I could not help but blush, thinking that he had sat in my bed with me in his arms.

“I am sure Mrs Fairfax or the maids could have seen to me while you entertained your guests,” I said.

“Indeed, but I found it too hard to leave your side” he replied. His gaze was so direct I found myself speaking without thought. “I am sure M-” I began, stopping before I made a fool of myself. I looked away, my cheeks heating in shame.

“What is it?” Mr Rochester asked. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing, it is not important” I replied, unable to meet his eyes.

“Tell me” he insisted, reaching across to my hand once more. I looked up at him, my love for him giving me courage.

“I am sure Miss Ingram is not happy with your absence” I whispered, looking away quickly. To my surprise, Mr Rochester laughed lightly.

“There is very little that Blanche is ever happy with” he smiled, squeezing my hand. “But now that you have met her, what do you think of her Jane?” I was momentarily startled by his question. I am sure he would not be altogether too thrilled to hear exactly what I thought of the young lady who was expected to soon be his bride.

“Well, she is very beautiful, Sir” I replied hesitantly.

“Yes indeed,” he said. “But what do you think of her character? Do you think she will make me a perfectly charming wife?” My stomach dropped at such questions. I had a sudden flashback to the disturbing Miss Ingram of my nightmares, crushing my heart in her bare fist.

“I cannot own to knowing her well enough to make such a deduction, Sir” I began. “But I am sure anyone who can own to being an intimate friend of yours must be perfectly lovely”. He laughed once again, whether it was at my expense or not, I did not know. With a forlorn sigh, I rested my head back against the pillows, gazing out the window at the morning sky.

“You look tired, Jane” Mr Rochester said.

“Mmm” was all the reply I could manage. Our conversation had tired me considerably. I already felt my eyes begin to droop. Getting up once more, Mr Rochester once again re-organised the pillows, assisted me to lay back, and pulling the covers up around me.

“Sleep a while, I will be here should you need anything,” he said, caressing my cheek lightly. I believe I was asleep in mere seconds.

I spent many days confined to my bed and room once again. After spending so much time similarly occupied upon my arrival at Thornfield, I was often agitated and bored. Fortunately, Mr Rochester spent an alarming amount of time away from his guests, neglecting his hosting duties in order to
keep me entertained. We passed many hours in our usual amiable conversation, laughing with one another. Mrs Fairfax, Sophie, Adele, Mary and Nan visited often as well, providing amusing commentary on the daily activities of the Halls prestigious guests.

The doctor also returned every second day to see to my arm. After removing the old dressing he would go about cleaning the wound. This involved scraping off the putrefied flesh that prevented the burn from healing. Though this was incredibly effective it was excruciatingly painful. Apparently, when I was fevered I had struck the good doctor while he went about his task, therefore he asked Mr Rochester to sit behind me, against the headboard during the procedure. While the flesh was removed he held me firmly, whispering to me soothingly. I found myself biting my tongue in a desperate attempt to stop myself crying out and alarming the rest of the house. On one instance I was fortunate enough to pass out from the pain, which gave Mr Rochester quite the fright but saved me from minutes of endless torture. Luckily the effects of these procedures were fairly instantaneous. Once it was complete my arm felt far less painful and seemed to improve more and more with each treatment.

One afternoon, Mr Rochester and I were laughing away at my recent visit from young Adele. The charming little girl had prepared an intricate puppet show for me, with plenty of characters and plot twists. After the dancer had stolen away the queen's husband and eloped we could hardly contain our giggles. The child was never short on imagination. After she had left we enjoyed some tea, still uplifted from Adele’s exploits.

“She is such an imaginative little thing” I laughed, laying down my teacup.

“Indeed” Mr Rochester agreed. “Though, I did not think her to be a particularly bright child until you arrived. You have taken great pains with her, she seems to be flourishing”. I smiled at the praise.

“She is a very intelligent little girl, Sir. She will be a credit to you when she is older”.

“Hmm, and so very much like her father” he sighed. A sad shadow crossed his featured as he stared sadly into his tea. Looking up at me he gave me a very half-hearted smile. “I know I have never told you much about where she came from. I promise one day I will. It is still very painful-.” He was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door, followed by it swiftly opening to reveal the beautiful Miss Ingram.

Stepping into the room with a beguiling smile, she looked between me and the master.

“Ah, here you are Edward. I thought I might find you in here. I just popped in to see how the little governess was fairing” she smiled sweetly with false concern.

“I am much better, thank you Miss Ingram” I replied with a respectful nod.

“I am glad to hear it. You must be a special little thing indeed to cause such a stir”

“She is invaluable” Mr Rochester interjected, giving me a charming grin.

“I am sure she is,” Miss Ingram said snidely, but with a serene smile. “I wonder since Miss Elliot is feeling so much better, might I steal you away for an afternoon ride Edward? You did promise” She pouted.

“Of course, my dear” he replied. Placing his cup down on the tray. “I shall fetch Mrs Fairfax to sit with you while I am away,” he said rising from his chair.

“Oh no do not trouble yourself. I am feeling a little tired anyway, I think I shall have a nap” I said,
trying to hide my sadness. Seeing them together in such an intimate setting only emphasized what a charming couple they made. With her flawless fair looks, she was the perfect juxtaposition to his handsome dark features. I could not help the miserable ache in my chest.

“Alright,” he said, casting me a wary look. “Only if you are sure?” he seemed to feel a little uneasy about leaving me.

“Perfectly sure, Sir” I replied, smiling as convincingly as I could at the beautiful pair. With that, Miss Ingram wrapped her arm around his, leading him from the room. Just as the door began to shut behind them, she turned and bestowed me with the coldest glare I had ever seen.
I felt a great sense of relief upon my return to work. I had spent far too much time at Thornfield convalescing. For one such as I, who felt the ache of inactivity so keenly, the time spent idle was unbearably tedious. Though I would gladly pass my life by, buried in Mr Rochester’s extensive collection of books, I hated being limited by my own ailing form. Luckily, the doctor’s treatments and diligent care meant the I recovered quickly. The burn on my arm was nought by a scab by now, I knew that I would be forever marked with a sizeable scar, but it was a fair exchange for my life, which I could so easily have lost. I also knew that my time at Thornfield was finite. Once the master married, it would not do to have a mousey little governess underfoot. Though the thought pained me, I comforted myself with the thought that my time at Thornfield had left a physical mark upon me which would always remind me of my time here, the good and the bad.

For the time being, I had returned to my lessons with Adele. Thankfully, Mr Rochester had excused me from attending the house party gatherings. We resumed our usual routine of morning lessons and afternoon excursions. Sophie would accompany Adele into the drawing room in the evening to sit with the ladies, while I was left to my own devices. Before I knew it, a week had passed and I had not seen Mr Rochester apart from a casual how do you do, as we passed in the hall. I missed him terribly, but rejoiced in the separation, only because it was becoming much harder to repress my feelings. I had no doubt that my soul was permanently bound to his. Even when I was not with him, his witty musings and charming smile were never far from my mind. Sometimes I would see him wandering about the grounds during my lessons and completely lose my train of thought. I certainly did not love him any less, but I feared that if I were to spend more time with him, as I had during my recuperation, I would not be able to contain myself. He was as good as married by now, and I felt terribly guilty for thinking of him in such a way.

For this reason, our friendship is bittersweet. I am honoured that he considers me a friend. A man who is so much more than a distinguished gentleman, but a true, pious, kindhearted man, valued me, more then anyone had in my entire life. I was amazed that he clearly derived such joy from our friendship, but it pained me because I felt so much more. I loved him, desired him, I could not help the sinful thoughts I had about him. At night I would lay awake thinking of him, his strong, muscled form and gentle hands. It killed me to think that he would never be mine to love, and that very soon he would share his life and his bed with someone who had so much more to give then I.

No official announcement had been made between Mr Rochester and Miss Ingram, but It was expected any day now. Mrs Fairfax reported that he had sent for jewels from his London vault and was preparing for travel to the highlands, Ireland and Europe. I had seen Blanche Ingram wandering about the Hall like the cat with the cream, gleefully inspecting the marvellous estate which would soon be hers to oversee. I had even overheard a conversation between her and her mother. I had been tidying away a collection of insect specimens from Adele’s science lessons in Mr Rochester’s study when the ladies entered the adjoining library. They laughed together while they scrutinised the dated fashion of furniture and draperies. Blanche cheerfully outlined her plans for the house and Adele who was to be sent to school without delay. I found that the ugly and unforgiving side of both the women was revealed as they discussed how unacceptable it would be to have such an uncouth and unrespectable bastard in their household. In the moment I was filled with rage. I did not understand how someone could be so hateful towards a child. I had to chastise myself for judging them thus. It was soon to be her home and it would be here decision on who would remain.

I tried not to mourn pre-maturely, but Mr Rochester was not the only thing I would be heartbroken to lose when the time came. Within Thornfield's walls, I had found safety and family. I was surrounded by friends each day and protected from those who would do me harm. The wedding would take both of those things from me. I decided that I would simply have to face it when it came about. Though the future was uncertain, I was glad to have happy memories to look back on.
The clock in the hall struck ten in the evening as I snuggled into the pillows of my bed. After a long day of teaching Adele, I had chosen to take a long walk to ease the growing angst I was feeling that afternoon. I had returned to the Hall feeling thoroughly worn out and had retired very early after dinner. While Sophie tended to Adele, I was able to relax and lose myself in a collection of fine novels. Shamefully, my preferences had changed over the last few weeks. My suspenseful adventures had been replaced with a number of romantic works. Within their pages, I found a perfect summary of my hopeless fantasies of Mr Rochester. I was totally engrossed by the depictions of forbidden loves overcoming the odds and the lovers finding happiness forever after. As my tired eyes moved along the blurring words I began to feel myself slipping into an easy slumber. With a wistful sigh, I closed the book and lay back against the pillows only to be startled back up by an all too familiar sound. Booming laughter shook the hall, followed by a blood-curdling shriek. From a distance, I could hear a great commotion, a struggle of sorts, and then silence. Throwing back the covers, I picked up my dressing gown and ran into the corridor. By now I could hear others within the house stirring, coming to investigate. I headed in the direction which I believed the noise to have come from, down the hall to the stairs leading to the landing. Peering around the corner I was shocked by what I found. “Good God!” I gasped, running down the stairs to where Mr Charles Hastings lay. Mr Hastings was a guest of Mr Rochester and one of his closest friends. Unlike many of the other guests, throughout his time at Thornfield, Mr Hastings had been nothing by kind and courteous to me. I would often exchange pleasant smiles with him throughout the day as we both went about our business. Now he lay, bleeding profusely from a large gash on his brow at the foot of the stairs. His shirt was torn, long claw-like wounds staining the white linen scarfette. He whimpered lightly as I reached him and began to tend to him, adjusting his position slightly and holding my handkerchief to his wound. Other guests had begun to convene around us, dressed in their night attire, appearing shaken by the scene. The men began to murmur between themselves while the delicate ladies appeared repelled by the blood, wailing and weeping in excessive alarm. Luckily, Mr Rochester appeared with John and Mrs Fairfax at his side. He was also dressed in just his shirtsleeves and trousers and I was briefly taken aback by how handsome he was. He surveyed the scene for a moment before kneeling down next to me to speak to his friend. “My God, Charles. What has happened here, man?” He gently lifted my hands to examine the wounds beneath, his brow creasing in concern. Mr Hastings grimaced and whimpered. “I do not know” he whispered weakly. “It was dark and I never saw their face. It was a man, he was hidden in the shadows. He laughed while he-while he…” Mr Hastings stuttered weakly before slipping into unconsciousness. My mind immediately went to the only man who was conveniently missing from the frightful scene. Mr Coles was surely that assailant here and I prayed to god that this time Mr Rochester would not let him get away with it. As if he could read my thoughts, Mr Rochester looked at me. Seeing the question in my eyes he gave me a meaningful glance, shaking his head slightly. No words passed between us but I somehow understood him. Trust me. Say nothing. With that, he rose to his feet and addressed his frightened guests. “It appears we must have an intruder in the house. A vagrant perhaps. John, please go for the doctor right away. We shall move Mr Hastings to the drawing room, where I ask that you all convene while the male servants and I do a thorough search of the house. You will all be safe if you are together. Jane would you please tend to his injuries until the doctor arrives?” “Of course sir” I answered obediently.

Mr Rochester and his fellow guests took Mr Hastings in hand, carrying his prone body into the drawing room. Before leaving he turned to me. “Jane, I know this does not make sense” he whispered. “There are things I cannot tell you, not yet at least. Please tend to Hastings as best you can. All will be well again soon”. He squeezed my hands comfortingly and gave me another meaningful look before turning to leave, flanked by a
number of male servants. The gesture was not missed by a number of guests, including the stony gaze of Miss Blanch Ingram.

Fires were set and candles were lit as I began my task, gently tending to my charge. I was provided with rags and fresh water to sponge away the blood from the terrible wounds. Mr Hastings writhed painfully in his fitful sleep with each gentle application. Though I was diligent in my efforts to cleanse the wound and stop the bleeding, my mind strayed to Mr Rochester and what he could be doing at this moment. I looked around the room at all the frightened faces. The guests sat, attempting to look as dignified as possible in the rather extreme circumstances. Even Miss Ingram looked perturbed, despite the icy glare which she fixated upon me. The servants huddled together around the outskirts of the room, comforting one another. Adele lay on a sofa, clinging to Sophie who whispered soothingly into her hair to calm the shaken child. Everyone was pale-faced and shocked by the night's events. So I could not help but wonder why the master would continue this farce, and frighten the entire household if he knew very well who had committed such an act. There was no violent intruder. But there was clearly a deranged manservant who Mr Rochester felt some kind of misguided loyalty to. I did not understand it at all.

Eventually, the wounds were calmed somewhat. The bleeding had stopped and I had packed them gently with clean gauze, soothing Hastings further with a handsome dose of laudanum. He then slept peacefully for a time. With an exhausted sigh, I sat back in my chair, tiredly pushing back my wayward locks which had escaped my plaited hair. My eyes had settled on the door, hoping that any moment Mr Rochester would return, unharmed and ready to shed some light on the all too confusing situation. So transfixed was I in the midst of my pining, I did not notice Blanche saunter over from across the room.

“It is quite pathetic you know” she spat, startling me from my preoccupation. Her venomous tone had also caught the attention of the entire room, who had been sitting in relative silence in the wake of such traumatic events. I looked up at the young woman and saw nothing by pure hatred in her eyes. My stomach sank.

“I beg your pardon, miss”. I replied timidly.

“Your feelings for him. They are quite pathetic” She glared me down. Even without her fine gowns and luxurious adornments, she was still a terribly intimidating sight to behold.

“I am afraid I do not understand your meaning, Miss” I whispered politely, silently begging her to say no more in front of everyone. Sadly she took no mercy on me.

“Oh I think you know exactly what I mean” she smirked, aware she was about to thoroughly humiliate me before the entire household of guests and servants. “You are in love with the man, or his wealth and power at least”

“Mr Rochester has been very kind to me, I consider him a friend and a very generous employer but-”

“Ha! Do not pretend” She laughed, interrupting my weak attempt to defend myself. “It is plain as day each time you look at him. Do you think you can moon over him and tempt him away from me with your coy little smiles and innocent touches? You are nothing but a conniving little slut, Miss Eliot - If that even is your real name”. My eyes widened and a shaken gasp was torn from my lips.

“Oh have I hit my mark?” she taunted. “You see, I was riding by the village the other day when I overheard something very interesting. You see a friend of my dear mother was robbed most viciously by a woman of ill-repute. There are men across the country hunting high and low for the little minx. And would you like to hear the most delicious part? This young woman appears to bear a strong resemblance to you. In fact, the rendering I was shown had an extraordinary likeness to yourself. This woman also goes by the name of Miss Jane Eyre. It is all a rather startling coincidence is it not?”

Tears were pouring down my cheeks as I stared at her in horror. She smiled in glee as she went in for the kill.

“So tell me, Miss Elliot. Are you either a desperate little slut, without enough sense to keep her eyes off her master, or a grubby little thief with a price on her head?”. At that precise moment, the door burst open revealing Mr Rochester and the doctor.
“Not to worry everyone! The house has been searched and it is safe to—” they paused at the palpable tension in the room, looking around at the chaotic scene. The guests and servants sat in shocked silence, staring at me as I sat in panicked tears, gasping for breath with a vindictive Miss Ingram standing over me with a triumphant grin. “What is going on?” Mr Rochester asked. “Jane?”.

Unable to bear the panic any more I sprung from my seat and ran for the door, weaving through the people to make it into the corridor with a speed I had no thought of possessing. I was vaguely aware of voices calling after me and the vindictive laughter of Miss Ingram, but my mind was set on one thing and one thing only. Getting away. With no thought for any belongings, I ran through the hall, to the closest door. Before I knew it I was sprinting through the moonlit gardens, navigating the hedges and paths, heading towards the coastal path. As I ran, the weight of what had just occurred began to bear down on me. Grobey’s men were close by and had renderings of me. Miss Ingram had both humiliated me and shattered the anonymity I had found at Thornfield. Though the servants had a small understanding of my circumstances, everyone in that room now knew that I was a hunted woman. They also knew of my hopeless attachment to Mr Rochester. It was as if my very worst nightmare had come to life. I knew that in just a few short minutes I had lost my safety, and all the respect of those I cherished within the hall.

I began to sob pathetically as I ran. The panic induced surge of adrenaline had carried me some distance from the hall, but now as the lights from the house faded into the darkness I began to feel the burn in my lungs and muscles. My breath continued to catch as I choked on my endless tears while gasping for breath from the exertion. Nevertheless, I forced myself to keep running. Even though I was only fresh from my sickbed and my pathetic weakness was beginning to build, the fact that my identity had been revealed and my perusers could be upon me at any moment was enough to force me to keep going. Dajavu struck as I was once again, stumbling down the coastal path in panicked exhaustion. But unlike then, I did not fail to hear the heavy thunder of hooves chasing me.

Lost in my insurmountable terror I did not consider it could be anyone other then Grobey, thus I sprinted on, with renewed vigour. Though it is a ridiculous impossibility to outrun a cantering horse, my panicked brain refused to relinquish control of my raging body. Even as a familiar voice called out to me, I continued my desperate attempt to flee, with the fear that my worst enemies were just a step behind me. Suddenly I was seized in strong arms, that lifted me right off my feet, abruptly stopping my escape. Still, I fought, wailing loudly as I raged against the arms that restrained me. I kicked and screamed manically until finally, the familiar voice broke through. “Jane! Please Jane, sweetheart. You must stop. You are going to hurt yourself. Please, my darling” Mr Rochester begged. He held me from behind. My back was firmly against his chest, as he lifted me completely off the ground to prevent me from running any further. With a mixture of crushing sadness, desperation and the profound relief of finding comfort in his arms, my enraged shrieks turned to gut-wrenching sobs as I sagged within against him. “Shhhh, sweetheart. It is alright. You are alright” he whispered to me.

“No!” I cried. “It is not alright. Miss Ingram knows. Everyone knows. They are coming for me! They are going to find me!” I began to fight against his arms, pushing against him in an attempt to continue fleeing, but he held me firmly.

“No Jane, do not struggle so!” he said, turning me to face him. I could see his genuine concern and fear in the shadowy darkness. “I am sorry, sweetheart. Blanche was only being cruel. I will speak to her, she will not say anything, I promise you, Jane. I will keep you safe! But you must come back now. You are not long out of your sick bed. It will not do to have you running through the night dressed as you are!” I looked down and realised I had left Thornfield in nought but my shift and dressing gown. Even my feet were bare, now cold and bruised from my attempt to abscond into the night. Regardless, I could not forget my reasons for trying to leave. All the events of the evening were still vividly provoking an endless panic in my belly. “How can I be sure of that??” I cried. “How can I be sure of anything in that house now? Between Miss Ingram and Mr Coles, Thornfield feels less safe than anywhere else” though my strength to
fight had failed me, I was still shaking with violent sobs and Mr Rochester held me in his arms. “I know you are scared” He spoke, his warm fingers stroking my back soothingly through the thin fabric of my night attire. “And I know nothing makes sense, but I only ask for you to have faith in me. Please, Jane, you must trust me”.

There we stood in the dead of night, far from the gates of the Hall. He held me firmly, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, as I gripped at his waistcoat for comfort. With my teary face tucked against his chest and neck, I was overcome with the scent of him. Despite the terror and panic, I felt myself begin to calm. It was a rare occurrence in my life to have been calmed in the arms of someone I loved. He asked me to trust him, and I hopelessly found that I did. I trusted him completely.
The journey back to the hall was slow and arduous. In my frantic panic, I had not realised the extensive distance I had covered as I ran several miles down the coast in nought but my nightwear. It was not until I had calmed myself somewhat, did I feel the bone crippling weariness overcome me. Mr Rochester and I were both mentally and physically exhausted from the tryalling evening. We had not spoken for some time as we both sat, perched on his mighty stallion's back. Swaddled in his warm, woollen coat I attempted to order the turmoil of thoughts and emotions which plagued me. Regardless of the blind trust I had in my master, uncertainty and fear were still ripe within me. As we drew nearer to Thornfield, I was unable to predict what future waited for me. I had no idea what events Miss Ingram’s outburst might catalyse, nor did I foresee any solution to the mysterious Mr Coles or his violent nocturnal activities. All I knew was that the very idea of separating from Mr Rochester was agonising. I did not have the strength to do it.

Lost in a trance of anxious exhaustion, I was startled when Mr Rochester swung himself from the horse. Looking around, I saw we were finally home. As much as my heart ached at the acknowledgement, I would always think of Thornfield as my home, even if I would be forced to leave. We had entered the cobblestone courtyard and a tired looking stablehand appeared from the shadows to tend to the stallion. Rochester turned to me. I could see his eyes were shadowed with dark circles. Clearly, he was just as taxed as I was. With gentle hands he grasped me around the waist, lifting me down. The warmth of his strong hands seeped through the delicate linen, sending a shiver across my skin. With my feet planted on the ground, I swayed slightly, clutching the horse's saddle for support. My late night adventure had left me feeling oddly boneless and it was now apparent that the walk to my room would be a difficult task. Noticing my weakness, the master promptly swept me off my feet and into his arms. Without another word, he carried me into the quiet house.

The pandemonium from earlier seemed like a distant memory as he strode through the peaceful hallways. The candles had all long-since been snuffed and the only thing breaking the silence was the distant rumble of ocean waves. As we passed the sight of Mr Hasting’s attack I noted that all evidence of the shocking affair had been cleaned away, not a single crimson stain marked the impeccable stone floor. I noticed my master's eyes also lingered on the area before he ascended the staircase. His gaze clouded momentarily before he shook off the inner conflict and looked down to catch me staring at him. His expression softened into a reassuring smile and his arms tightened around me.

“Do not fear” he whispered. “All will be well in the morning”. Arriving at my room he nudged the door open and settled me on the bed. Reaching for the tinderbox on the mantle, he lit the kindling at the hearth. Soon the room was lit by a warming blaze. Casting the flint aside Mr Rochester stood and gazed broodingly into the fire. I took the time to lay his coat aside and shuffle back up the bed, sliding between the cosy sheets which had been abandoned all those hours ago. I lay back against the plush pillows, feeling the fatigue of the nightmarish evening wash over me. Though Mr Rochester’s presence was so often a comfort to me, at that moment his despondence only increased the tension nagging behind my tired eyes. I wanted nothing more than to curl up and put the hellish night behind me, but I sensed he was not yet ready to part with me. I could feel him forming words in his mind as he continued his vigil at the mantle, thus I waited, fighting sleep so that I might hear him.

At last, he turned. His expression was full of raw emotion as he slowly approached the bed. Ignoring the bedside armchair, he lowered himself to sit beside my outstretched legs. For a moment, the silence between us continued as he fussed over me, pulling the counterpane up around my shoulders and arranging my pillows tenderly. Then his hand found mine and our gazes locked. “Jane, I will speak to the guest's first thing in the morning. I hope you believe me when I tell you that I will not allow Blanche’s selfishness to destroy your safety. Thornfield will always be a place
of safety for you, Jane. I promise you”. The profound sincerity in his voice brought tears to my eyes and I nodded weakly in reply. “Please do not try to leave me, us, again. I could not bear if any harm came to you”. For the first time, I saw a glimmer of vulnerability in him. His gentle fingers stroked the tears from my cheeks while I struggled to comprehend the intensity of his expression. The moment was strange, dangerous, fueled by emotions I did not understand. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around him and tell him I would never leave him again. That I loved him. But I managed to suppress myself and answer meekly.

“Yes sir” I replied, breaking away from his powerful gaze. “I am very tired” I sighed. “Of course, my dear. You must rest” He rose from the bed, before leaning over me, planting a soft kiss on my brow, eliciting a startled gasp from my lips. Our eyes meet once again and I was shocked at the tenderness I found in his gaze. “Sleep as long as you like tomorrow. I am sure Adele will also require a break. I will hopefully have this mess resolved before you wake”.

With that, he took his coat which lay at the foot of the bed and left me with a meaningful backwards glance. Within minutes I was fast asleep.

I have no idea what transpired between the guests, Blanche Ingram and Mr Rochester the next morning, but as I awoke to find the day far advanced I could hear a great commotion in the courtyard below. Freeing myself from the warm covers, I moved to look down from my window. It was a circus of activity. The yard was full of gigs and carriages, loaded with trunks and cases. The guests and servants bustled about, preparing for their journeys. All were laughing and smiling together as if the horrors of the night before were long forgotten. I even spied Mr Rochester, arm and arm with the spiteful Miss Ingram. They were laughing charmingly together as she gazed flirtatiously up at him. With a gentlemanly kiss on the hand, he escorted her to the care of her family as they climbed into their luxurious barouche. Flanked by Mrs Fairfax and the other servants, Mr Rochester looked the perfect host as he waved off his guests.

All of Mr Rochester’s friends left that day and not a single reference to them or the dreadful events was made after that. A week passed without any repercussions arising, and so I began to relax. We once again fell into our regular routine and a sense of peace blossomed for all within the Hall. Even Mr Cole’s was subdued - I had not heard even the slightest peep from him since that night. The only evidence that he still remained was the footman who was sent to fetch his meals and supplies. Despite the return of normality at Thornfield, I could not deny that something had changed. Even though all was as it was before there was something different between the master and I. Our casual greetings throughout the day and ritual discussions in the evening were permeated with an increasing tension. Though I still found solace and joy in our candid conversation, there were times where I could hardly meet his eyes in fear of my feelings and desires bursting from me in an uncontrollable tide. I became acutely aware of him, his handsome baritone voice, his casual touches, his masculine scent. I could even feel his eyes on me throughout the day. As I played with Adele in the garden, as we sipped tea together in the evening, as I played the pianoforte in the drawing-room, I was supremely conscious of the weight of his stare. I could not account for his actions at all, I began to worry that my feelings for him had become too obvious and that he may be looking at me in pity or disgust. Thus I was determined to double my efforts in playing the dedicated, yet indifferent friend and governess.

One morning, not long after the guests had departed, Mrs Fairfax bustled into our breakfast room. Her cheerful face was alight with a smug grin.

“You are looking awfully pleased this morning” I laughed as she went about fixing her morning meal.

“Oh I have some very exciting news,” she said, sitting down to eat.

“Oh? What news is this?” I inquired curiously.

“The jewels the master had sent for have finally arrived! I expect that he will be taking a trip in the coming days to see his bride and make it official. Oh, won't it be lovely to have Miss Ingram's refined touch to brighten up the house?” My heart sank.

For some reason, I had thought that Miss Ingram’s jealous outburst had revealed the spiteful nature of her character and taken her out of contention to be the master’s wife. Though she was a stunning
beauty, with a rich dowery, powerful connections and refined tastes, I could no longer imagine her to be a compatible match for the chivalrous and kind Mr Rochester. It was a tremendous oversight on my part and one which shook me to the very core. With no idea how to reply I simply smiled as convincingly as I could and tried to ignore the pain rippling through my chest. The torment continued though as the buoyant Mrs Fairfax began to speculate on wedding details and honeymoon plans.

“I have also heard that he has organised his estate in Scotland to be readied. No doubt he will wish to show off all his assets before they tour the continent”. I nodded numbly while pushing my food around my plate. Unfortunately, her enthusiasm for the union appeared to be endless. I tried my very best to not be offended, as she had also been present during Miss Ingram's vicious attack. I would have hoped that the spectacle would have lessened the respect she seemed to carry for the woman, but it appeared it had not. Eventually, I could take no more. While the oblivious woman mused over which wedding dress style might suit the charming debutant best I rose to leave without another word.

As a turmoil of emotion stirred within me, I decided a walk would be best. I had to get out of the house, and away from those who might see me fall apart. Making my way to the closest retreat, I could already feel my eyes pooling with tears. In a desperate attempt to hold myself together I was smothering my traitorous sobs with my hands when I ran headfirst into the last person I wished to see. Rounding a corner I barreled straight into Mr Rochester’s warm chest, his strong arms catching me before I could hit the ground.

“Good God, Jane, what a hurry you are in this morning!” he laughed, releasing me once I was stable again. I stared at my feet in a gutless effort to hide my tear streaked face.

“Good morning, Sir” I replied quietly, trying to bustle around him. Unfortunately, the words were strained, betraying my anguish. Therefore I was unsurprised when my arm was caught and my master detained me.

“Jane? Whatever is the matter?” He asked in shock, turning me in order to see my face. In defeat, I took a second to square my shoulders, readying myself for the most painful words I had ever spoken.

“I am fine, Sir”. I said, looking up and revealing my distraught expression. There was no mistaking my bloodshot eyes, tear-stained cheeks and pallid complexion. “I just wanted to wish you joy. I hope you and Miss Ingram are very happy together”.

I could hardly get the words out. My voice grew tighter with emotion until I could hardly speak. I turned away quickly, not seeing his startled expression or hearing his baffled reply. Pulling away from him I made a fast retreat for the shoreline. I fought for composure until I reached the relative safety of the sand. My entire frame shook as I erupted into desperate sobs. I had spent a long time trying to prepare myself for this day. For this news. But it appeared my preparations had fallen frightfully short. I was thankful for the sea breeze and torrid waves which drowned out the pathetic sounds of my despair. I did not think the moment could get any worse until I heard his voice.

“Jane wait!”

I looked up to see Mr Rochester running after me. I turned away to try and vanquish my grief, but it was hopeless.

“Tell me what is troubling you” he demanded, trailing after me. I strove on, desperate not to look at him.

“It is nothing” I replied with as much strength as I could muster.

“I say it is not nothing! My god, you are crying Jane. Tell me at once!”

“There is nothing to tell, Sir” I declared defiantly.

Suddenly I was seized around the waist and pulled back towards him. I was so shocked I did not even struggle as he forced me to look his way.

“Though I hate to contradict you, my dear, I fear our souls are to entwined for you to have much chance in deceiving me”. His voice was silky smooth, a gentle caress against my skin as he pulled me close to him. The intimacy of the words and gesture was so profound it shocked me into silence. I helplessly stared up at him as the wind tore around us.
“Jane, the very sight of you in distress is almost too much for me to bear. I beg you, please tell me what troubles you. I would walk to the ends of the earth and give my very last breath if it would ease your suffering”. As he spoke our faces drew closer. I was utterly transfixed by the tenderness in his eyes. I could feel his gentle breath against my lips as his nose ran softly against mine. He leaned in closer, my eyes drifted shut and then it happened. His satin smooth lips brushed against mine in the sweetest of kisses, a faint whisper before he dove in for another. With a sigh of surrender, his hands moved to grasp my neck, his fingers wrapping into my hair as our lips melted together. I gasped at the feel of his tongue tracing the contour of my lips. Our kiss deepened as we tasted each other for the very first time. All of my worries seemed to fade away as I found myself hypnotised by his passionate lips. My fingers clung to the fine fabric on his back as I pulled him in closer to me. I could feel every line, every contour of his hard, dominating frame as it pressed against me. Our lips continued to unite as our hands began to explore one another. In a gentle caress, his fingers stroked down my spine and shaped around the feminine curves of my body. I had never felt such violent emotions. With just one simple action he made me feel more womanly then I had in my entire life. The realisation was a heady rush which only stoked the flame of my desire.

It was only the necessity of oxygen which brought our heated exchange to an end. Our lips tore away from one another and gave way to unsteady, laboured breaths. My eyes opened to find him gazing at me. A storm of hunger raged within his eyes as we continued to hold each other tightly. Goosebumps broke across my skin at the realisation that the passion he felt so keenly was for me. Jane Eyre. This beautiful, kind, intelligent enigma of a man who I loved so completely, desired me. It should have been a perfect moment, but it was with crushing despair and disappointment that I realised that it was not.

I felt the colour drain from my face and I pushed against him, but he fought to keep his hold on me. “No, let me go! You mustn't touch me!” I cried. “What is it, Jane? What is the matter” he replied in confusion. “Your wife is the matter!” I whaled. The desperation and sadness began to flood back like the heavy waves at high tide. “Wife? I have no wife!”

“Miss Ingram, Sir! She is as good as your wife. I know you mean to make her an offer if you have not already. She is your equal. Your perfect bride. I am nothing. A paid subordinate! This should never have happened”. Still, I tried to pull away, place some distance between us, so I might not get drawn into him once more. Yet he fought me. Holding my arms firmly, trying his best to meet my eyes, to see the raw emotion flowing from them. “What can you mean, Jane? Did you not enjoy what we just did? I did not scare you did I?”

“It matters not what I think or feel!” I cried. “I have fought so hard, for so long to suppress what I feel for you. It is not fair to tempt me so when I am already certain to be left broken by it!” Tears of frustration and sorrow now ran unchecked down my cheeks. “And does it not matter how I feel?” he demanded. “You love miss Ingram!”

“I do not!” he raged. His hands tightened around me with the intensity of his words. His voice was laced with anger, frustration and above all else, burning passion. “I would appreciate if you did not force such notions upon me because they are most certainly not true. My only confession in regard to Miss Ingram is that she proved most useful in drawing out your true feelings for me, Jane”. His speech ended and I was struck dumb. My mouth fell open in shock at his ardent declaration. “I do not understand” I whispered. “Jane, I love you. More then I have ever loved in my entire life. You absconded with my heart the moment I laid eyes on you. When I pulled you from the frigid waters and saw your bewitching face I was lost. Your smile, your laugh, your beguiling mind. You brighten my days more then you could ever know and I refuse to live another day without telling you how dear you are to me”.

“You cannot be in earnest” I replied in shock. “I am nothing. I am no more than a burden to you. You must be mistaken in your feelings, sir. Please, I beg you not to trifle with me. It is too painful”.
“No, My love. It is you who is mistaken. You are the most beautiful, courageous, generous creature I have ever beheld. I wake each day with thoughts of you and fall asleep with dreams of loving you, providing for you, cherishing you. These past months have been a torment, fighting as hard as I could to remain detached, trying to provoke some reaction from you, any indication that you might return my regard, my feelings for you, Jane”. Rochester spoke his love so decidedly, Jane’s tears turned to joy. His comforting arms wound around her as he continued. “And then that night I heard her say that you loved me. I was so overjoyed at the very idea that I failed to see you escape into the night! I died a thousand deaths, thinking that my own selfishness could have caused me to lose our chance at happiness. I am so sorry, Jane. Please say you forgive me. Say you love me. Say you will be my wife. Let me give you a home, a family. Let me protect you with all I have, my name, my body. Please, Jane. Will you marry me?”

My heart stopped for a second.

“How can this be real?” I asked. “This must be a dream”.

“It is no dream, my love” Rochester replied, taking my hand and laying tender kisses against my fingers. “It is simply a desperate man, begging his beautiful lady to end his agony”.

“And you truly do not feel anything for Miss Ingram?”

“The only thing I feel for Blanche is anger, in her upsetting you!”

“But what of your fortune? Your position? I am no one, I have nothing. I bring only my own misfortunes into this union” I asked desperately. I felt like I was on the precipice of my greatest joy, but could not let myself fall until I was certain he would not regret me.

“You are all I have ever wanted in a wife, Jane. Our souls call to one another as they do in the oldest Greek tragedies. I would give every last shilling to have you. To love you. Please, Jane. What is your answer?”

“Oh, Sir!” I cried.

“Call me by my name. Call me Edward”.

“Edward…” I whispered. “I love you more than any words could say. I.. I will marry you”. I was swept up in his arms and caught once again in a long passionate kiss. As our mouths meet, so did our tears, as we cried in joy together. Nothing had ever felt so right. Our lives were falling into place.

“Jane, I know my life is full of secrets” he began after pulling away slightly. He clearly referred to Mr Coles and the mystery of why he resided at Thornfield. “I know there is still so much you do not understand. I only ask that you give me time and trust. Promise me I will not lose you”. I nodded lightly, leaning in for more amorous kisses. As we stood on the seashore, we lost ourselves in each other. Edward’s lips pulled away from mine, only to trail warm kisses down my neck. The sensation bloomed in my lower belly, and heat began to burn between my thighs. I found myself tangling my fingers into his dark curls, pulling firmly and eliciting a deep moan from his beloved lips.

“We must marry soon, my love” he sighed. “I am far too impatient to make you mine”. His words were a gentle caress against my neck. As we continued to explore our newfound intimacy I was suddenly struck by a dreadful thought.

“But Edward!” I cried, pulling away slightly. “I am not of age. Without my aunt’s consent, we cannot marry!”

“Shhhh, my love. Do not worry so” he soothed. “I have an estate in Scotland. I have already arranged for us to travel to the highlands. I believe a stop at Gretna Green will solve all of our problems”.
The days following our engagement were some of the happiest and most blissful times of my life. I was a passionate soul at heart but had always been persecuted for letting my feeling guide me. For the first time, I was able to express my love, my gratitude, my happiness freely and bask in it. The family I had found within the walls of Thornfield were all so thrilled for us. Adele erupted in glee when Edward and I sat her down to tell her our news.

“Merveilleux! I just knew it would be so!” she proclaimed, throwing herself into my arms. “Now you will never have to leave and we can live as a family forever!” Her childish joy was made only greater with the added excitement of the impending shopping trips necessary for the wedding and our journey to Scotland.

Surprisingly, Mary and Nan also declared that they believed it was only a matter of time before Mr Rochester made me an offer. After all the months of despairing over my feelings of unrequited love, they were shocked to hear I had not realised he returned my regard.

“How could you not see it, Jane?” Nan laughed as we sat together in the servants sitting room. “He has scarcely left you alone since he first laid eyes on you!”

“Yes indeed” Mary concurred. “He spent nearly all his time with you, sat beside you every day you were poorly. Goodness, only a blind man would have missed the way he moons over you”.

I suppose I never believed that Mr Rochester would ever see more in me than a platonic friendship - an outlook that only Mrs Fairfax shared. Out of everyone at Thornfield, it was only she who appeared less than ecstatic about our engagement. From the moment we returned to the house on that blustery morning, Edward and I were both excited to share our news with the matron of Thornfield. She had been like a mother to both of us and had known Edward since he was born. Therefore, it had been hard to digest the hesitant scepticism in her reaction. We had gone to her right away, excited to share our joy with her. But upon hearing it her face had gone blank. She observed us both with apprehension before answering with an emotionless congratulations. In an effort to not appear too let down by her lack of enthusiasm, Edward suggested that she may just be a little out of sorts. I smiled in answer but thought back to earlier that morning where she had been cheerfully conspiring over his predicted nuptials to Miss Ingram.

For days she remained distant and noticeably cooler towards me. It was not until I cornered her days later over breakfast, determined to understand her reaction, that we finally spoke candidly on the matter. I asked her if she was disappointed over my choice and her reaction astounded me.

“Goodness no, my dear!” she replied in a fluster. She was silent for some time, appearing to think on how to answer before she finally spoke. “I am happy for you. For both of you. I suppose I was so caught up in imagining both of your futures that I did not foresee the connection developing between you. You see, you are so young, Jane, you have so little experience in life and have lived through so much hardship. I had hoped you would live here for some time, and allow me to mother you a little, before finding your own way. There is so much out there in the world for you to see and experience. But, I see now that you are both very much in love. I just want to be sure you are confident in your feelings. I want to be sure you truly know yourself”. Her explanation brought tears to my eyes. I had been worried that she did not think I was good enough for the master. In fairness, she would have been quite right. Instead, she was simply worried that I might have rushed into a relationship with Mr Rochester, without first considering the permanency of the choices I was making. In this, I was able to reassure her.

“Thank you, Mrs Fairfax, for caring for me as kindly as you have. I am truly touched by your concern. I do not have much experience with maternal figures whom I could confide in. But, I can assure you that though I may be young and inexperienced I am certain of my feelings. Mr Rochester and I are like two parts of the same soul. When I am with him I feel complete. I feel more like myself then I do when we are apart. I could never see our union as a chapter of my life ending, but of a whole new story beginning. What I have not experienced in life, I will now get to
experience with him, and that very thought fills me with such joy”.

Both of our eyes were filled with tears as we spoke. Our hands clutched one another's while we tried our best to articulate our feelings.

“Well, my dear. If you and that dear boy are happy then so am I” she declared. From that moment on, she was just as excited as the rest of us - perhaps even more so.

The days which followed were filled with extensive planning. We intended to begin our journey in just four weeks - at the beginning of July. Before then, travel plans had to be finalised, a wedding license had to be obtained, my trousseau had to be bought and Edward and I had to begin our search for a suitable school for Adele. There was so much to be done, but life continued blissfully in the lead up.

Though we had spent countless hours alone together prior to our engagement, convention dictated that Edward and I be chaperoned at all times. Regardless, this did not inhibit our joy. We continued our nightly discussions in the presence of Mrs Fairfax or one of the maids, laughing together while fantasising over what our future may be like. When we could escape the prying eyes we could often be found stealing kisses in Thornfield’s shadowy alcoves. We had been caught a number of times but as the days passed, our ardent affection only increased. I loved him so much. Each day he made it abundantly clear that my happiness was his priority. We could hardly keep away from each other during the day - which did prove somewhat disruptive to the wedding planning and lessons with Adele.

On the 7th of June, I woke to the sensation of gentle kisses being placed across my face and neck. My sleep addled mind struggled to comprehend the sensation, instead, I assuming my regular bed companion had woken up feeling more affectionate than usual.

“No Pilot” I grumbled huskily, attempting to pull the sheets over my head. “Get off me you silly mutt”. Though I knew Pilot to be an amusingly expressive dog, I was not expecting a reply.

“I must say I am a little offended, my love,” My master said, startling me from my drowsiness. My eyes shot open to see my handsome fiance, leaning over me in nought but his trousers and shirt sleeves.

“Sir! What are you doing?” I demanded, bursting upright in bed.

“I wanted to wish my beautiful future wife a happy birthday” he laughed, sitting down beside me. “You cannot be here, Edward. What if someone sees you?”

“I have been in here many times before, and most of it was spent quite alone” he replied, seeming completely unconcerned.

“Yes, but we were not engaged then, and I was ill!”

“Are you sure you are not ill now?” he asked with a devilish smirk. “Perhaps I should kiss your brow and see if you are feverish”. With that he grasped my neck gently, moving in to lay soft kisses across my forehead. “Mmm,” he sighed as his lips crept lower towards mine. “You do feel quite warm, my love. I think this requires further examination”. After trailing in a smooth caress down my face our lips meet. What began as a sweet, innocent kiss quickly deepened into something entirely new. The rhythmic dance of our lips and tongues ignited a fire between us.

Moments passed and we found ourselves laying back against the pillows, our hands exploring one another’s bodies with wild abandon. Slipping beneath the hem of his soft linen shirt, my fingers encountered the smooth, warm skin of Edwards back. His hands had begun an exploration of their own, tracing the curve of my rounded hip, running across my waist so settle beneath the softness of my breast. In a passionate frenzy, I found myself pulling him tighter to me, my nails clawing at his naked skin, drawing from him a carnal moan. The sound only fueled the fire, awakening a surge of liquid heat which blazed between my thighs. I was lost to a plethora of new sensation which I did not understand. All I knew was that I did not want it to end. I wanted his hands all over me, particularly there, where the centre of my desire seemed to emanate. Our lips broke away in a desperate search for oxygen. I found my breath burst from me in heavy pants as Edward’s lips continued their onslaught, bestowing heavy kisses against my throat. My fingers settled in his dark curls, while his grew more daring, brushing gently against my hardened nipples. A cry of debauched pleasure escaped my lips and I clutched him closer to me. It was then I realised that in
our wicked delirium, Edward had somehow ended up poised between my thighs. With one last groan, he pulled away slightly, lifting himself onto his elbows in order to look down at me. His eyes were dark with unchecked desire.

“We should stop now, or I will not be able to hold myself back for much longer” he whispered, one hand lightly brushing my wayward curls away from my face. I could feel the heavy weight of his ardent arousal, pressing into my belly and saw he was struggling to maintain control. “I will see you later,” he said, bestowing one final kiss to my swollen lips before climbing off me and straightening his clothes. “I love you” he spoke, before moving to sneak quietly from the room.

“I love you” I replied, laying back to bask in the afterglow of our passionate encounter. So far it had been the most wonderful birthday.

It took longer than usual to joint Mrs Fairfax for breakfast that morning. Edward’s masculine scent had lingered on my skin, ensuring I had to spend more time washing and dressing in order to hide our early morning rendezvous. Even then, I could not wash away the intense blush which seemed to have settled on my cheeks. Finally, I was able to enter the breakfast room, where Mrs Fairfax waited for me.

“Good Morning, my dear. How does it feel to wake to the ripe old age of nineteen?”

“Good Morning” I replied. “It is lovely to finally be able to spend a birthday in the company of loved ones”. I sat myself down and looked around at the glorious spread the wonderful woman had provided. There were eggs prepared just the way I preferred, hams, cheeses, toast, hollandaise, preserves, sliced oranges and of course a steaming pot of tea.

“I am sure it will be such a happy day. I know Mr Rochester has requested quite the affair for dinner tonight, but I could not help being a little indulgent with our breakfast this morning” she laughed, reaching to pour the tea. “I have also prepared a little something for our afternoon tea,” she said, gesturing to the side table which sported the most charming pound cake. Topped with cream and strawberries, the cake looked absolutely mouthwatering. It was to be my first birthday cake. I was so touched that she had gone to such efforts I felt my eyes begin to water.

“Mrs Fairfax, I really do not know what to say,” I said emotionally. “It is all so lovely. Thank you very much”.

“Oh no, none of that, my dear. It is nothing. Dry those eyes and tuck into your breakfast” she smiled.

And so like many mornings before, we sat and enjoyed each others company while we devoured our morning meal.

The day continued into lessons with Adele. Though Edward was insistent they were no longer necessary, I was determined to give Adele the best education, and ensure she was as accomplished as she could be before she went to school. This had proved challenging since our announcement as the whimsical little girl was much more inclined to while away the hours asking about the cut of my wedding dress or our intended honeymoon locations rather than solving mathematical equations. Nevertheless, I strove on, gently encouraging her back to her studies each time her mind began to wonder. Today we sat in the schoolroom, reading aloud in order to improve her confidence in English. She had made great strides over the last few months, but still struggled when she came across words she had not heard before. We were thoroughly engrossed in a passage from A Vindication of the Rights of Women when Edward burst into the room.

His eyes were wide with alarm as he looked at me. I immediately knew something was wrong.

“What is it?” I asked tentatively.

“There is a carriage at the gates requesting entrance. One of the inhabitants identified herself as a Mrs Reid of Gateshead”. His words hit me like a blade of ice to the heart. I gasped in horror and the large volume that I held, slipped from my grasp and hit the ground with a thump. In a second Edward was before me, grasping my shaking hands. “Do not panic. I will not let them hurt you. Go to my chamber and lock yourself in”.

“And what is to stop them from searching the entire hall!” I cried. “They are dangerous, Edward. If you try to intimidate them, you will only make it worse”. Adele who had been sitting quietly at the desk came running into my arms, burying her face in my neck.
“I will not let them take you, Miss Eyre!” she said shakily. I comforted the frightened child as best I could while Edward stood silently for a moment, trying to work out a course of action.

“Come, sweetheart,” I said to Adele. “Let us go and find Sophie”. As soon as the words had passed my lips, Edward’s head shot up.

“Sophie!” he said turning to us. His eyes were now set with a dark look of determination. He had a plan. “Adele, run and find Sophie and bring her to the drawing room. Jane, bring some of Adele’s reading things and follow me”. Collecting our morning’s work I quickly followed him out of the room and into the drawing room. Pulling one of the luxurious tapestries back, he revealed a hidden alcove, just big enough for my small frame. “Jane, do you think you could hide in here?” he asked. Giving it a dubious appraisal, I walked towards the space and climbed in with his assistance. It was tight but big enough to conceal me. Placing the tapestry back, I saw that the material was not quite opaque from this side, granting me a view of the entire room.

“Good”. He said. “You must stay very quiet. No matter what happens, do not come out, Jane. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I replied nervously. At that moment, the door opened, revealing Adele, Sophie and Mrs Fairfax.

“Allright, Jane’s wicked family are here to try and take her from us, but we must not let this happen” Edward announced. “They have probably been informed that she has been seen here, that is why we must convince them that the person who has seen her was mistaken. Sophie, you are similar to Jane in colouring. We must convince them that you are Adele’s governess. Your name is Jane Elliot - A French woman of English descent. Do you think you can do that, Sophie?”

The young girl looked terrified but answered with a shaky “Oui- I mean yes, Mr Rochester”.

“Good, sit yourselves down over here and pretend to read as you were before Adele. Mrs Fairfax, please inform the other servants. No one is to mention Miss Eyre or our engagement”.

“Of course, Sir,” she said, before bustling out of the room.

With a steadying breath, Edward went to stand at the window, no doubt watching the carriage as it made its way down the drive. As the minutes stretched onwards I could feel my body tremor with fear more and more. Sophie and Adele sat whispering to one another, coordinating their act in preparation. It was only when the sounds of the carriage’s approach could be heard throughout the room did Mr Rochester withdraw, seating himself in an armchair, closest to my hiding space.

“Don’t be afraid, my love” he said. “I won’t let them touch you”.

And then we waited. Minutes passed like hours, draggin in painful silence, as I strained to hear the distant sounds of their arrival. Finally, numerous footsteps approached, as did the quieted voices that were all to familiar. There was a sharp double knock to which Mr Rochester replied “Come in” with false nonchalance. The door opened lightly, to reveal Mrs Fairfax who had also adopted a strained mask of normalcy.

“A Ms Reid of Gateshead, and her associate to see you, Sir” she said, trying to sound as charming as she could. “I am dreadfully sorry to come without an introduction or an invitation. I am Ms Reid. This is my dear friend Mr Grobey”.

“Good afternoon” Edward greeted but did not rise from his chair. “Do be seated” he gestured to the sofa across from him, which just so happened to be the furthest
from me, and Sophie and Adele who sat quietly in the corner and had yet to be noticed.
“Ahh, how kind you are” Ms Reid replied, sitting down primly. Her companion remained standing,
his eyes drifting about the room, no doubt appraising the valuable collection of art and trinkets he
would so love to steal. My skin crawled at the memory of those devious eyes looking at me in that
way. “I am afraid I am here on some unpleasant business, but I have also always longed to see
Thornfield Hall. You see I knew your father. It was a long time ago, but he always took so much
pride in his charming home on the seaside. I was terribly sad to hear what befell him, and your dear
brother. A most unfortunate accident”.
Rochester shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He detested speaking about his family.
“I am grateful for your sympathies, and pleased for the compliment you pay my home. But let us
discuss this unpleasant business you have” he said, shutting down Ms Reid’s attempts to pry.
“Of course. A few days ago I received an alarming report from a family friend who had been
staying with you as a guest” she began. We all knew who she referred to. It appeared Blanche had
not been deterred from her threats to ruin me. “She told me that you had recently acquired a new
governess, who goes by the name of Jane Elliot. This was most alarming to me as you see I have
been looking for a young woman by the name of Jane Eyre. Jane is my niece, you see. A few
months ago she stole something very precious from me and fled from my care. The girl is
unfortunately of a far lesser quality, and has an exceptional talent for deceit. I would hate to find
her taking advantage of such fine people in a home like yours.” Reid concluded her saudid tale, and
gestured to Grobey who procured a folded parchment. Opening the paper, Ms Reid revealed a
terrifyingly accurate rendering of me. “This is she” my aunt said. “I was told she had a strong
resemblance to your governess - so in order to unburden you from her wicked ways, we dropped
everything and came straight here”.
Rochester reached out and took the image, taking his time to inspect it thoroughly before finally
speaking.
“I am touched that you would go so far out of your way to ensure the respectability of my home,
Ms Reid. But, unfortunately I think your efforts have been wasted. You see my ward’s governess is
just there,” he said gesturing to Sophie, who sat, pretending to read with Adele. “Though her
features are similar to that of this young women I do not believe it is she. Tell me, Mrs Reid, does
Miss Elliot resemble your niece?”
Ms Reid’s mouth dropped open in shock. Her and Grobey’s eyes flicking nervously between
Rochester, Sophie and the rendering which Edward placed on the table separating them.
“You are the governess?” Grobey demanded, glaring menacingly at poor Sophie.
“Yes, sir”. Sophie replied timidly in her thick french accent. This was meet with a smirk of
suspicion.
“Jane Elliot is hardly a fitting name for a frenchwoman” Ms Reid spat.
“Oui, I agree, madam”, replied Sophie. “But it was the name my parents choose for me. You see
my father was an Englishman, but I was born and raised in Paris”. Though the pair still seemed
dubious of her explanation, there was little they could do to refrut it, thus they said nothing. Sophie
had done beautifully.
“Well… that is a relife” my aunt said unconvincingly. Seeing the thinly veiled anger in both of
their eyes I knew that both Ms Reid and Grobey were still confident on my presence here. “I shall
be pleased to leave here knowing that you are safe from someone as temperamental as my Jane.
Before we go, perhaps we could have a tour of the house. As I said, I have always desired to see
it”. Though she was nearly out of moves, Aunt Reid was far from admitting defeat.
“Certainly” Edward replied. “I will call for my housekeeper, Mrs Fairfax. She is by far, the most
knowledgeable on the history of the hall. Though I do ask that you avoid the upper-most level. The
rooms are reserved for serants and storage so I am afraid it is quite dangerous”. With that Mrs
Fairfax was summoned and the pair followed her out of the room.
Mr Rochester sat back in the chair and picked up a book. For nearly an hour we waited in tense
silence. I caught myself many times holding my breath from my hidden space behind the tapestry.
Finally Mrs Fairfax lead them back into the room.
“Why it is about the most charming house I have ever seen” my aunt gushed charmingly. “You are most spoilt with such views, Mr Rochester”. Edward rose from his chair, no doubt in an attempt to imply the conclusion of their meeting.

“I would most heartily agree with you, Ms Reid” he replied.

“Now we must of course be on our way. Thank you for seeing us. You must promise me you will write if you see or hear anything of my niece, we are confident she is in the area”.

“I certainly will. I hope you have a pleasant journey”.

“Thank you. And if you happen to find yourself in London or Gateshead, do come and see me. I have two charming daughters who I am sure you will find very diverting” she laughed suggestively. I nearly scoffed at her obvious attempt to interest Mr Rochester in her spiteful children. Thankfully she received no reply from him, besides a polite nod.

After lingering over their goodbyes for an unnecessarily long time the couple finally departed. Groby gave the room one last sweep of his wicked eyes before tilting his hat and disappearing behind the door. We once again waited quietly, first hearing the couple quit the house, before listening to their carriage slowly make its way out of the courtyard and down the drive. When the noise had finally faded from our hearing, Edward turned to me, pulling the tapastry back and dragging me into his warm embrace.

“Are you alright, my love?” he asked as his strong arms held me tight. Burying my face in his chest I nodded weakly, breathing his masculine scent in an attempt to calm myself.

“Do you think they believed us? Do you think they will come back?” I wanted nothing more then to never see either of their faces again.

“I do not know. I hope not” he said, releasing me slightly in order to allow Adele and Sophie to comfort me as well.

“Oh what terrible people” Adele exclaimed, throwing herself into Edward and I’s embrace.

“Oui!” Sophie concurred. “I have never felt so scared then when that man looked at me. I hope we never see them again”.

It was then that Mrs Fairfax entered the room once more. She was noticeably paler, with her usually bright and cheerful eyes, remaining downcast.

“What is it?” I asked her, breaking away from the others. I took her shaking hands in mine, encouraging her to meet my eyes. When she did I saw she looked terrified.

“When I was leading them through the dining room, I am afraid your aunt noticed the cake I had made you. I tried to cover it up, telling her it was made for Miss Adele, but I do not think she believed me. She mentioned that It would have been your birthday. I think they will not be kept away for very long”. As she spoke I felt my hands begin to shake with her. The feeling of fight or flight I knew to well began to stir in my chest. I suddenly felt like a caged bird - desperate to escape the walls closing in around me.

“What do we do?” I asked, turning to cast me teary gaze at my fiance. He thought from but a second.

“We will simply have to leave for Scotland sooner. I will speak to the servant’s tonight and see if we will be able to leave before the week is out. Jane, I beg you not to worry. I will not let any harm come to you”, he said, pulling me into his arms once again. “In a little while, we will be married and they will not be able to come between us”. He spoke with such determination, that I found myself nodding in agreement. Though I feared my aunt and her dreadful companion, I loved and trusted Edward. I knew there was nothing he would not do protect me.
Chapter Fourteen - Family Ties

Our lives seemed to drastically accelerate after that disturbing afternoon. By the birthday dinner that evening, Edward had confirmed that we would be leaving before the end of the week. In just a few short hours he had dispatched servants to Scotland to ready the estate and the wedding arrangements. They would also be picking up the necessary documents and supplies on their way. He had also sent an express, summoning his lawyer in order to formalise our wedding settlement, and Edward’s new will and testament. I remember laying in bed that evening reeling at the sheer velocity of the changes that were occurring. The thought that in just a short week I could be a married woman, filled me with a sense of nervous anticipation.

Our decision to bring the wedding forward was only reinforced when we received alarming reports that my aunt and Grobey had not left the area. According to servants who had been into the village, the pair, and several of Grobey’s associates were staying at a local inn and had been canvassing the area for information on my whereabouts. We hoped they would not be bold enough to return before the week was out, but their presence so close to home was still unnerving. When Edward found out, he was positively livid. It took a great deal of reasoning and begging to prevent him from riding down to the village and calling them out. Grobey was dangerous. I knew deep down that he was an exceptionally violent man. I hoped to spare Edward from harm by ensuring they never fought. Regardless, in a few days, we would be gone, and I would be safe from their control. In the meantime Edward had forbidden me from leaving the house, he even grew nervous when I lingered too long at the windows. He feared that Grobey’s men were spying on the Hall, and might see me, so I stayed hidden behind Thornfield's great stone walls.

It was difficult for me to be kept away from nature. I was so used to escaping my troubles with a long, calming walk when I felt overwhelmed or stressed. With the weight of our tenuous circumstances and my lack of freedom, I felt like a tightly wound spring, ready to burst without warning. Everyone was extremely kind and reassuring, but the anxiety was taking its toll. As a result, peaceful sleep was simply not possible. I would toss and turn for hours, too wound up to rest comfortably. When I did eventually find sleep I was plagued by vivid nightmares. Disturbing flashes of Aunt Reid and Grobey laughing spitefully over Edwards mutilated corpse were some of many terrors I encountered in my dreams. I would wake feeling emotional and physically drained.

On one particularly bad evening, I dosed for hours without fully submitting to sleep. After tossing and turning, even the ever faithful, Pilot, had abandoned my bed in search of a more peaceful resting place. A storm brewing outside merged with my nightmares and I found myself waking well before dawn, feeling my heart hammering in my chest. Before my eyes even opened I knew it was still very early. Besides the occasional flash of lightning, thick darkness waited behind my eyelids. With a sigh I gave up on sleep, opening my eyes to stare at the canopy above me. In the darkness, I could only just make out the familiar, woven patterns in the fabric. A roll of thunder and flash of lightning lit up the room for a moment. I gasped as it revealed a dark figure at the foot of my bed. With the fire long burnt out, and the storm clouded the moonlight, I could only see the shadowy outline. Fear prickled at the back of my neck as I held my breath. “Edward?” I whispered wearily. “Is that you?”. Silence. Tears pooled as a feeling of dread pooled in my stomach. The only sounds were the distant waves, the building storm and the faint breath of the unknown intruder. I wondered for a second if it was Mr Coles. Though every joint in my body was stiff with terror I sat up slowly, squinting into the darkness, but still saw nothing but a faceless shadow. And then it happened.

The lightning flashed once more, illuminating the room. There at the end of my bed, was a man. I had never seen his face before, but I knew I would never forget it. Long, matted hair, hung around his gaunt, pale face. Crazed, angry eyes glared right into my soul as he bared his teeth in an animalistic growl. He stood before me in torn and tattered clothes, soiled with stains. He loomed over me, trembling with rage. I could not help the blood-curdling scream of terror that passed my
lips. With superhuman speed, the man dove at me, cackling menacingly. It was a cackle I was all too familiar with.

Pinning me to the bed, the crazed lunatic snarled and laughed in my face, their foul breath overwhelming my senses. I screamed for help while using all my strength to push him away. Sadly his strong frame overpowered me easily as he scratched and tore at my feeble body.

“Jane!” yelled Edward, bursting through the door. He was promptly followed by another man and together they tore the struggling maniac off of me. As they skirmished in an attempt to control the man, shock settled in. My breath came in startles gasps as my chest tightened. My mind ran at a thousand miles a minute and it was with some relief that I saw Mrs Fairfax arrive through the door. The lamp she carried lit up the whole room, and for the first time, I was able to get a good look at the dramatic scene. Mr Rochester and Mr Coles held the man back as he continued to fight against them. He laughed and whaled nonsense into the night, throwing his weight against them, in an effort to break free and launch himself back at me. His eyes remained alight with psychopathic indignation, staring right into my soul.

Mrs Fairfax ran to me, wrapping me in her arms, and speaking to me softly but I could not look away. Though this man was wholly unknown to me, there was something about his form and features which seemed familiar. I knew it was he who had been roaming the halls at night, but I also realised that the enigmatic blue of his eyes and dark shade of his unkempt hair was very much like Edwards. I was confused, terrified and intrigued all at once.

With one final schriek, his energy failed him. The man appeared to have tired himself out. His disturbing laughter died down to delirious moans and he sagged back into the arms of Mr Coles. “I will take him, Sir” Coles said, immediately dragging the assailant from the room. With the sound of their retreat, it was just Edwards heavy breathing, Mrs Fairfax’s soothing coos and my gentle sobs echoing into the night.

I tried so hard to calm myself. To breath steadily and slow the frantic beating in my breast, but my mind whirled with shock. Mrs Fairfax held me close, rocking me softly, clearly more concerned by us than the dramatic scene we had just witnessed. I realised that I was the only one present who had no idea what had just happened. Edward, who had watched the men leave, stared at the door for some time before finally turning and eyeing me wearily. He looked at me in concern before beginning the task of lighting the lamps and candles around the room. Soon the room was enveloped in a warm orange glow. Not a single shadow remained.

“Leave us”, Rochester said sternly. I felt Mrs Fairfax jump slightly at his harsh tone. She turned to speak with my fiancé alone”. Mrs Fairfax looked from him to me, curled up among my blankets. She gave me a reassuring smile, stroking my cheek lightly.

“I will be in my room should you need me, my dear”. With one last comforting squeeze, she collected her lamp and left, closing the door behind her.

For a few minutes, we both stared after her, gazing at the fine oak door, trying to digest what had occurred. I expected Edward to begin to speak, to provide some explanation for what I had just seen. But the silence stretched on, far beyond the limits of comfort. He continued to stare into space, his expression blank, his eyes haunted. Eventually, the inactivity began to wear on my already fatigued mind. I needed answers.

“Edward, what just happened? Who was that man? It is he who has been roaming the house at night, isn it? It is he who has been trying to get into my room, who tried to burn you in your bed, who attacked Mr Hastings. You let me believe it was Mr Coles, but it was not. Please! I deserve to know the truth”. My voice had grown more hysterical as I went on, the panic squeezing my chest once more. Still, he did not turn to face me.

“He is my brother” he replied weakly. I looked up at him in shock. How could this be? “Your brother? I do not understand”. Finally, he turned at met my eyes. He looked as if he had aged a decade in just a few short minutes. His handsome features marred by weariness. He sat down at the foot of the bed, breathing a loud sigh of resignation before beginning his tale.
“I wanted to protect you from this, Jane. I wanted to hide my families shame. I was so afraid that if I told you the truth you would not stay. I am still afraid”. The vulnerability in his voice tore at my heart. Though I was angry with him, I could not help reaching for his hand, and squeezing it gently.

“Tell me” I urged.

“I know you were told that my father and brother died together in a terrible carriage accident and both of their bodies were lost to the sea. By now you will have realised that this is a falsehood, for my brother currently rages and raves above us, while my father’s body festers in the ground below”. I went to voice the many questions streaming through my mind but he stopped me. “No, please. I have never spoken of this in full to anyone. Please let me speak it all and then you may ask anything you like”. I nodded numbly and allowed him to continue. “Arthur and I were close in age. He was only two years older than me, so we were the best of friends growing up. Some of my fondest memories are those we spent together, here as children. But as we got older, we grew apart somewhat. As the heir, he was expected to be brilliant, respectable, the golden boy of the family. He had the best masters, went to the best schools and for a time was everything my father wished him to be. But as time passed he began to change. His temper grew short, he drank, and gambled and chased women to excess. He became violent and hardly slept at all. After months of incidents of him abusing servants and raving into the night, I went to my father but he refused to see that Arthur was unwell. On our grand tour, I spent most of the trip cleaning up his messes and paying people off, the most notable of which occurred in France. The house we were staying had a maid. She was very pretty but so young and terribly shy. I could tell that she feared him, but I was stupid enough to leave him at home alone one night. I came back to find he had raped her. And then we discovered he had got her with child. Adele was born nine months later and has been in my care ever since”. My mind reeled at this. For months I had wondered on the little girl’s origins and now I had my answer. “Upon our return, I left to enlist and perform my military training. In my absence, Arthur’s condition only grew worse. I returned home to find that my beloved brother was now nothing more then a violent lunatic. I begged my father to have him institutionalised but he refused. He loved Arthur and refused to see that his son was damaged beyond repair. He was also too afraid of losing face before the other prominent families in the area. Instead, he hired Mr Coles to oversee Arthur’s care and installed them in the upper level of the house. Coles is an old military man, who does well in controlling him but he is not always so diligent in his care. The man has a propensity for drink, which Arthur has learnt to manipulate over time. He is a master at escaping. He used to do so very often and caused all sorts of trouble. On one such escape, my brother went into my father’s chamber while he was sleeping. He attacked him, beating him savagely within an inch of his life. When I found them my father was close to death. With his dying wish, he demanded that I conceal the scandal and ensure the truth of his death and my brother’s illness never get out. So the servants and I buried my father beneath the Hall and pushed his barouche from the cliffs. I became the heir and Thornfield became my brother’s prison. The servants are loyal and have done well to help me conceal our shame but it takes a toll. And so now you know. Arthur is the ghost of Thornfield and my darkest secret. I am sorry I did not tell you. It is a hard secret to bare and I wanted to spare you the worry. I wanted you to feel safe here”. “I wish you had told me. You have always had a share in my burdens, I would have been glad to share in yours” I said, kissing his palm reassuringly. “I do wonder though, how is he still able to escape if he is known to do such terrible things? Surely it puts everyone at risk, you saw what he did not hastings, what he tried to do to you”.

“You are right, it is a risk. One I detest taking. Coles is getting older and less reliable but it is hard to find people who are trustworthy and able to meet the demands of the task. We have tried many things, and are usually able to keep him restrained. But I am afraid though he is a mad man, he is still as cunning as he ever was. He learns out patterns and routines and finds ways to counteract them. I admit it is getting harder and harder to keep the promise I made to my father”. I thought on this for a moment, a possible solution forming in my mind.

“Perhaps you should consider relocating Arthur to another of your estates. If the house in Scotland
is as you say it is, and even more secluded then Thornfield, then maybe it would be a suitable home for him”. My suggestion was meet with a thoughtful nod. “Just think, you might be able to procure carers for him from the highland locals. They would know very little of your family and would be far less likely to stir gossip. The seclusion might also mean he could be taken out for exercise. He might be a more pliable charge if he were allowed to wear himself out in the gardens occasionally”. Edward considered the idea silently for some time, his brow knitting together in contemplation.

“I had thought about relocating him, but you pose an interesting solution. Trenich House could be perfect for him. The only difficulty would be the long journey. We would need to drug him, but in my experience, laudinum makes him even more erratic”.

“Well, we need not know all the details now, we have time to think on the idea,” I said, suppressing a yawn. Now the excitement was over, I suddenly found myself bone crippingly tired.

“Indeed we do, my love,” Edward said. “Now, you look exhausted. It is nearly dawn. I should leave you to sleep”.

“No” I sighed. “Stay. After all that has happened, I will sleep better knowing you are near me”. He smirked at that.

“Are you sure? You know Mrs Fairfax will berate us for it come morning”.

“I am completely sure. Now come here” I demanded, laying back against the pillows. Walking around the bed, Edward climbed in next to me, pulling me into his arms. Despite the trauma of the last few days, a deep feeling of comfort and safety washed over me as I lay my head on his chest, his arms wrapping around my small frame.

“Mmm,” Edwards sighed. “This feels perfect. Sleep well, sweetheart. I love you”.

“I love you” I replied, feeling myself drift into the abyss.
The next day, the mood within the house had shifted completely. For months, Edward and the servants had been carrying Thornfield Hall’s great secret. The relief of having it finally unveiled took a weight from their shoulders. It was as if a shadow, I had not even realised was there, had finally lifted, filling the house with light.

While the final wedding preparations were coming together I took the time to get better acquainted with Mr Coles and his troublesome charge. Believing he was an anti-social psychopath had done little to endear the old man to me, but as I got to know him, I bitterly regretted the time I spent judging and avoiding him. Though he was not quick to trust, Coles was a warm and friendly character once well acquainted. His advanced years had made him wise, and witty - though the latter trait was certainly magnified by his profound love for whiskey. Despite his fondness for drink, I could tell he truly cared for his charge and only wished the best for him.

Arthur himself was a much greater puzzle. The morning after revealing the truth to me, Edward accompanied me to the upper level where his brother resided. After passing through layer after layer of locked doors I marvelled at Arthur’s ability to escape capture on such a regular basis. Finally arriving at the last door, Edward turned to give me a reassuring smile before we entered the room. I was told that Arthur was generally quite docile during the day. He had never been known to be violent or aggressive while the sun was up. It was only in the dead of night, that his behaviour took a darker turn. We arrived to find him sitting peacefully at the open window. He appeared almost childlike in his preoccupation with the birds that flew by. He gazed at them in wonder, mimicking their song with a skilled whistle. Edward and Coles informed me that he had not spoken properly in years. His ravings were generally formed by his enthusiastic laughter and rambled gibberish.

“Sometimes he looks at me though” Edward explained, watching his poor brother with dejected affection, “And when our eyes meet I almost believe that there is still a part of him that recognises me. He will smirk in a way which he used too when we shared our private jokes and I wonder for a second if he is returning to me. But, then he will have an episode and all of my faith will be lost once more”. The derision in his voice broke my heart. No matter how many times he was told that the condition would only worsen, Edward could not help but hope for the brother he had loved and looked up to.

After some observation and discussion, I was fairly certain that Arthur would be far better suited to a life in Scotland. Coles revealed that his behaviour grew far worse if he was allowed to sleep during the day. Aggravated by the overload of unused energy, he becomes unruly and difficult to contain. If he were able to live far from anyone he could hurt, where the knowledge of his presence could be contained he could have free reign of the house. Being allowed to exercise freely, in a safe, controlled environment would doubtlessly cause less aggressive episodes. Edward and I agreed that after the wedding, we would begin a search for qualified candidates within the area of the Scottish estate.

The sun had set on the eve of our departure. I had just finished packing my things, shutting the trunk with a happy sigh. Looking around at the bare room which had become my own little sanctuary, I felt a great bubble of joy rise in my belly. I would be returning to Thornfield very soon but as a married woman. This would no longer be my room, for I would be sharing a chamber with my beloved husband. The items I was not taking with me had already been moved to his quarters so everything would be ready for our return. The very idea of sharing such an intimate space with him filled me with eager anticipation. I had never imagined such a future for myself but I could not wait to spend each day in his pleasant company and every night in his warm embrace. The night we spent together, wrapped in each other's arms, was one of the most peaceful slumbers I had ever had. If every night were even half as soothing I would be a very content woman.

Though the hour was not overly late I was eager to get to bed early in preparation for the arduous
journey that was to come. Nevertheless, I could not end the evening without first bidding my fiancée goodnight. It was clear that we would become a couple of habitual routines for I knew exactly where he would be at this time of night, therefore I wrapped myself in a shawl and headed for his study. Thornfield’s artfully decorated corridors were hidden by the shades of a particularly dark night. After the sun had set, a torrential and blustery storm had moved in. While the glass windows and stone walls creaked in protest against the wind and rain, the dark clouds smothered the moonlight. Looking out into the night, I saw nought but an indistinct blur of dark shapes. However, there was something in the way those shapes moved that caused me to stop. While I knew nights such as these had a terrible habit of tricking the eye, I could have sworn I had seen a dark figure moving about the courtyard. Pressing my face to the glass, I squinted out at the scene, scrutinising each shape but found nothing out of the ordinary. Thus I was fairly certain I had been mistaken.

Arriving at the study, I found Mr Rochester exactly where I pictured him to be. He sat back in his usual chair before the fire, happily ensconced in a hefty volume. So engrossed in the books aged pages, he did not notice my presence for some time, proving the perfect opportunity to admire him. My heart swelled as I watched the charming way in which his brow drew together as he read. His tempting lips pulled up into a thoughtful smirk as his eyes danced across the words. All too soon those ocean eyes glanced up from the page, finding me lingering happily in the doorway. “Good evening my love” he smiled, gesturing for me to come to him. I moved towards him, into his outstretched arms and allowed him to pull me on to his lap. Tucking my head beneath his chin I settled into his arms with a contented sigh. “Do you have everything ready for tomorrow?” he asked. “Yes, I am all packed. Everything else has already been moved as well. My room is quite empty now”. He chuckled lightly. “It will not be your room for much longer. And I dare say I will enjoy spending my last night here amongst your things”.

We sat quietly for some time, listening to the storm brewing outside and absent-mindedly skimming through the pages of the book he held. The work was a collection of sonnets, musing on the mysteries of life and the value of love. I could not help but smile as each poem quite aptly summarised my devotion to the beloved man holding me. Eventually, his husky baritone voice broke the easy silence. “Mrs Jane Rochester, how well the name will suit you” he whispered against my ear, as his lips made a leisurely path long my face in search of my lips. Lost in sensation I could do nought but reply shakily. “I quite agree,” I said, moving to meet him in a slow but passionate kiss. As our lips meet, the love between us surged in my chest. The joy of being so cherished nearly brought tears to my eyes. I pulled away lightly, pressing a final sweet kiss to his nose before looking into his handsome face. One of my hands had found its way to his cheek, my thumb lovingly stroking the dark stubble. “I love you so much,” I told him gently. “And I love you” he replied. He leaned in again with the intention of restarting our fervent lip lock but was interrupted by a loud clatter in the hall. We started, both of our eyes jumping in the direction of the noise. We sat for a moment, holding each other tightly, straining to hear over the blustering wind and rain. “I think it was just the storm” I said, settling back into the cradle of his arms. “I hope the roads will still be passable come morning”.

“It will be a long journey regardless” he began. “I am sure that-”. He was cut off by an even louder crash - this time followed by the shattering of glass and groans of nearby voices. “I do not think it is just the storm, sweetheart. Stay behind me”. He got up from his seat, pulling me behind him as he crept closer to the door. Despite the ferocity of the weather outside, we could now clearly hear approaching footsteps and unfamiliar voices. With a reassuring glance at me, Edward grasped the door handle, taking a deep breath before throwing it open only to be met with the barrel of a gun. I gasped in pure horror at the sight of Mr Grobey, flanked by two of his henchmen and my hateful
aunt. All were heavily armed with guns and knives and brandishing smug smirks.

“Good evening, Mr Rochester” Grobey said. “Miss Eyre. It has been quite a while, my dear. Why
don't we have a little chat”. He raised the gun further, pressing it into Edward’s chest, forcing us to
step back into the room.

“How did you get in here!” Rochester demanded, still attempting to act as a wall between me and
our assailants. Fear radiated off me in waves. Right before I was set to be free from this nightmare
forever, here I was in the presence of the two people I feared most. I silently prayed that whatever
happened next would only affect me and not Edward.

“Well, clearly we broke in” one of the henchmen laughed, surveying the room with his greedy
eyes.

“Indeed,” Mrs Reid said. “No one came out to tend to our carriage in the storm. It was most
uncivilised”.

“Some people have no right to civility” Edward spat, glaring at her with pure disdain. The motley
crew only laughed.

“Too right, my boy” Grobey chuckled. “But it is not civility we require. Just her”. He nodded to
me menacingly and his henchmen stepped forward. One lunged at me, while the other moved to
restrain Edward.

“Let her go!” he yelled. I struggled against the tall brute with all I had but was easily overcome by
his strength. With one thick arm wrapped around my chest and the other around my waist, he
pinned me against his foul smelling body. Edward continued to bellow obscenities but was kept at
bay with a gun which was held against his sharp jaw.

“Now I do hope you’ve not broken her in, my dear boy,” Grobey said, strutting over to inspect me
thoroughly. His clammy, disgusting hand stroked down my face and neck, before lingeringly
against my breast. A shiver of nausea shook me, and I struggled to contain the bile which settled in
my throat. “She won’t be worth as much if she is used and all… but no matter, if that is the case we
will happily settle the debt with the addition of another pretty little minx. Perhaps the one you tried
to dupe us with?” Edward riled against his filthy mouth and wayward hands.

“If you lay a single finger on either of them I swear I will-”

“You will what? Throw us from the cliff? Or have us imprisoned in the attic?” The colour drained
from both of our faces simultaneously. My aunt cackled dramatically at our shocked silence and
wondered further into the room, settling herself down in Edward's armchair.

“Yes, you see we have learnt a great deal about you and your family Mr Rochester, haven’t we
Grobey” She laughed. “To be sure, the villagers are all very loyal - They are all so keen to sing your
praises - but one or two were also very forthcoming when it came to the local gossip”. Grobey
smiled darkly at me, before turning to taunt Edward further.

“Is it true what they say?” he asked with sarcastic concern. “Did you really fake the accident on the
cliff? Do you keep your own brother under lock and key in this very house so you can claim his
inheritance? Shall we go and visit him now?” Filled with rage, Edward surged against the arms
restraining him, rushing at Grobey. I shrieked in horror as he was easily brought down with a single
strike of the gun, whipping against his face.

“No!” I cried as a light splatter of crimson blood soiled the wall behind him. The strike had been
hard and his face was already beginning to swell and bruise. Blood poured from Edwards nose and
lip, as he swayed unsteadily. “You came here for me! I will give you whatever you want but please
do not hurt him”.

“Jane, don’t!” Edward argued weakly. The henchman took hold of him again, returning his gun to
its spot at his neck.

“Oh! Jane is it?” My aunt smirked. “Well, we had heard that you had lured him in, but I hardly
entertained the thought that it could be true. Well done, my dear. What a fine catch he would have
been”. I could not help the hateful glare I cast in her direction. How dear she mock and taunt us
when she would not know how to love someone to save her life. She met my glare with a cold
smirk and continued. “Now let me make this very clear, niece. You will be leaving with us this
very night. And should you fight or struggle, I will have these men beat your beloved little
Rochester within an inch of his life. I will also not hesitate to write to my friends in London and ensure his grubby family secrets are splashed over the cover of every newspaper before the week is out. Do you understand me?”

“Don’t listen to her, Jane!” Edward yelled before he was struck once again. His pained groan tore at my heart more than anything else ever could. I would not have him hurt because of me. As Grobey raised his fist to hit him again, surrender poured out of me.

“Yes! Yes, I will go with you. Please do not hurt him. I beg you!” I cried desperately.

“Wonderful” Mrs Reid said in satisfaction. Grobey too turned to me with a menacing grin.

“Grobey, if you would”. He stepped forward, pulling a heavy pair of iron manacles from his pocket. As he advanced towards me, I cowered back. It took everything in me not to fight and scream against him as he took each of my hands, and chained me. But it was the only way to keep Edward safe. With that, I was pulled sharply by the chains and dragged from the room. With a backwards glance, I saw Edward being thrown to the floor and kicked while he screamed and begged for me.

“No!” I cried. “You said you wouldn't! Please don't hurt him”.

“I said nothing of the sort” My aunt replied smugly.

Leading me back the way they came, Mrs Reid threw open the door to the courtyard. In their absence, the storm had grown increasingly tumultuous. The wind was now dangerously strong, blowing the pelting rain sideways. Thunder and lightning bellowed and the parties carriage had been rolled over by the perilous gusts. It was evident we would be going nowhere fast.

With a groan of frustration, the door was slammed shut. Mrs Reid turned to me, her vicious eyes alight with anger.

“Well, it appears our journey will have to wait till morning. No matter, we will simply have you Mr Rochester prepare us some rooms. And you, my dear, will be staying right at our sides. I will not have my investment slip away from me a second time”.

Chapter Sixteen - Burning Rage

I was hauled back into the study, where tears immediately filled my eyes. Edward lay, half-conscious on the floor, beaten and bloodied. As he moaned incoherently, I wanted nothing more than to go to him, tend to him and tell him how sorry I was. I was ashamed that my troubled past had brought such pain to the one I loved most of all. Unfortunately, I was pulled in the opposite direction and thrown to the floor, next to the chair Mrs Reid placed herself in. I was to lay at her feet like a subservient dog. I had learnt that my aunt had come with more men then I thought. During our earlier confrontation, several other men, loyal to Grobey had been terrorising the rest of the household and ensuring no one came to our aid. The group now had the entire Hall well in hand. I looked up sadly to see another brute pushing poor Mrs Fairfax into the room. I could tell she was as frightened as I was by the fearful way she eyed Edward and I and our lowly positions on the floor. Regardless she kept her back straight and refused to shy away from our attackers.

“This one is the housekeeper, Mam,” the ruffian said, dragging Mrs Fairfax deeper into the room by the scruff of her neck.

“Wonderful” Mrs Reid replied. “Grobey, why don’t you get Rochester out of our way, I am sure the Housekeeper can see to our needs quite nicely”. With an obedient nod, Grobey strode across the room to stand over Edward’s prone form. Disorientated and confused, Rochester squinted up at the shadowy figure looming above him.

“Jane?” he whispered weakly. My heart ached for him.

“Not today sunshine” Grobey chucked. He pulled him to sit up and backhanded him hard across the face. Harsh as the strike may have been, Edward instantly became more aware of his surroundings. I saw his eyes quickly survey the room, before settling on me. He gave me an intense look and a reassuring smile before he was heaved to his feet. “Why don’t you go spend a little time with your dear old brother. I am sure he will love the company”. Rochester struggled weakly but was no match for Grobey in his current state. Tisking at him lightly Grobye warned him: “Best not try anything, my boy. You wouldn't want the little french poppet to get hurt would you”. With that, they left for the upper floors - but the threat lingered. I had not yet thought of Adele. I prayed that she would be left untouched.

“Now,” my aunt began with a sharp clap of her hands. “We will be requiring your best rooms for the night. My niece will be leaving with us when the storm has passed, but until then we demand the full co-operation of you and your staff. Our men will not hesitate to use violence when need be. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Madam” Answered Mrs Fairfax.

“Lovely. As I said we require your best rooms and of course some food and drink for the men. Best keep them well fed. They are not the type to behave when idle” she said menacingly. With a sad cutesy, Mrs Fairfax cast me a woeful look before leaving to attend to my aunt's request. The door shut behind her, leaving just me, my aunt and a single henchman guarding the door.

“Well well Jane, what an adventure you have had. We will not go into the amount of trouble you have caused, but I will say that you will repay both Grobey and I quite thoroughly. You will do your duty as recompense. I dare say a little time spent on your back will teach you a lesson or two. You have been a thorn in my side for a long time, and I will not deny that seeing you broken will satisfy me greatly”.

I had no energy left to reply as she taunted me. The emotional turmoil of the evening and the deep hopelessness of my days to come left me feeling bone tired and empty.

“I am pleased though, that you had this chance to get away and build a little life for yourself. It makes it all the more rewarding to take it all away from you” she laughed vindictively. Numbing tears trickled down my cheeks, but I said nothing. Feeling very pleased with herself, my aunt sat back before the fire with a content sigh and all was silent for a time. Eventually, Mary entered the room. Eyeing the strange man and Mrs Reid nervously, she informed
them that rooms had been prepared and food had been laid out in the dining room.

“Well lead the way, girl” my aunt demanded, standing from her chair. The henchman pushed off
the wall he was leaning against, causing a very skittish Mary to jump in fear. The poor girl was
terrified, like many of the servants must have been. Their home had been defiled and filled with
hardened criminals. I could see her trembling as her eyes nervously skipped between each of us.
“Get up!” the man commanded. I moved to my feet, but my limbs were sore and numb after sitting
for such a time on my knees. Unable to meet his demands, I was promptly grabbed by the hair and
dragged across the room towards the door. Biting my tongue to smother my cries of agony, I
managed the strength to get to my feet. Nevertheless, the barbarian did not relinquish his grip as he
pulled me along after Mary and Mrs Reid. We were lead to a familiar corridor and entered the
chamber just next to my own. I could not withhold the howl of pain as I was shoved onto the floor
once more, landing awkwardly on my wrist.

“Move along, girl!” Mrs Reid snapped at Mary, who stood helplessly in the doorway watching my
mistreatment with horror. “Go an see to the needs of our men. Now!”

“I am so sorry” Mary mouthed to me. A silvery tear ran down her cheek as she gave me one last
look of pity before leaving me to my aunt and her men. I lay quietly on the floor while Mrs Reid
roamed the room. Her callous eyes surveyed the fine furnishings and expensive drapery. Soon
enough we were joined by Grobey.

“Settling in I see,” he said drawing near to me.

“Just secure the harlot and get out. I would like to rest” My aunt demanded as she began to ready
herself for bed.

“Indeed” Grobey chucked. “For we wouldn't want to lose her again, would we”. He crouched
down next to me and grasped my injured wrist. I winched as he unlocked the shackle roughly,
before attaching it to the thick oak bed frame. I refused to even acknowledge the wretched man, but
his war-torn fingers gripped my chin, forcing me to look into his face. With one last smug grin, he
returned the key to his coat pocket and rose to his feet. “Goodnight ladies” he laughed, leaving the
room along with the other henchman.

For many hours I lay on the cold hard floor listening to the chaos unfolding in the rooms beyond.
The brigade of bandits were awake until the small hours of the morning, no doubt getting
unimaginably drunk on Mr Rochester’s impressive collection of expensive whiskey and port.
Though the storm outside continued to rage nosily, the sound of the harsh wind and thunder were
often disturbed by raucous laughter, drunken arguing, shattering glass and the scream of frightened
women. With every whale of distress, my heart sank further. It killed me that I had brought such
misfortune to the kind people who had taken me in. They had given me a home and their love - and
I had returned it with pain and misfortune.

Despite the pandemonium, Mrs Reid had been asleep for several hours. She snored with all the
grace of a wild boar - a characteristic that was surprisingly endearing in comparison to the rest of
her hateful persona. While she slept peacefully I stared into the darkness with no hope of rest. It
was not the noise that kept me awake, nor even my throbbing wrist or cold and uncomfortable
position on the floor. I had spent many a night sleeping rough, in desperate conditions while on the
run thus it was not all that unfamiliar. It was not any physical pain which kept sleep at bay but
emotional torment. I spent those hours in deep mourning, silently weeping for the life I would
never have. I wondered if it would have been better to have never known love. If I had submitted to
my fate all those months ago, no one at Thornfield would have gotten hurt. I would not be haunted
for the rest of my life with versions of a happy life with Edward. I would not have to mourn a
marriage that was never to be, nor children who I was never to carry. It would have spared me
from so much pain, but I knew I would never regret coming here. I knew I would cherish my
memories of freedom, friendship and love until my dying day.

Throughout my life, I had tried my best to live by the word of the lord and forgive those who had
wronged me. I knew that Mrs Reid’s cruel and unjust treatment was bourne of twisted resentment
from a time before I was born but in that moment I truly hated her. She had trampled everything I
had ever had into dust and left me beaten and broken. At the time I could not even fathom how I
could come to forgive her. Though it broke my heart that she had never had any love for me, I deeply resented that she was willing to hurt other innocent people, people I cared about, in order to spite me.

Finally, just a few hours before dawn, the noise from the men settled. I realised that over the course of the evening, they had probably depleted Thornfield’s liquor supplies. With nothing left to fuel their drunken rampage I assumed they had eventually fallen asleep. Now, the house was still, with only the storm piercing the silence of the night. It was then that the full extent of my situation began to swell in my chest. Fear, anger, hopelessness, loneliness, guilt and sorrow rose within me. My wrist twinged painfully as I smothered an uncontrollable bout of sobs with my hand. I was so lost in my own grief that I nearly did not hear it.

It began quietly as it always did, a faraway chuckle echoing from the upper floors. The familiar sound continued to build until the cackle could be heard loudly throughout the Hall. Hope blossomed in my chest as I realised Arthur had escaped once again. I expect our captors were not informed of his wonderous tendency to escape even the most labyrinthine prisons. As I lay, curled in the dark shadows of the bedroom floor I prayed that Edward had escaped with him. I strained to hear any note of the voice of my beloved but was deaf to all but the increasingly animalistic howel of Arthurs guffaw. Unlike his earlier antics, he seemed to become louder and more aggressive as time passed. Soon enough a great commotion had begun.

I had no idea what was happening beyond the bedroom door, but Arthur was joined in a chorus of great crashes and banging. More glass shattered and people began to yell and scream. While some voices were raised in distress and confusion, others bellowed out in pain and terror. “Run!” someone shrieked before the entire Hall shook with the impact of a explosion. Mrs Reid jolted upright, finally pulled from sleep by the excitement. As smoke began to filter from beneath the door, she jumped from the bed.

“What is going on?” she demanded. As Arthur roared out another terrifying cackle her eyes widened with fear. “What is that noise?! Who is that laughing?!” Suddenly the door burst open, revealing a rather dishevelled Grobey.

“The lunatic set the house ablaze!” he cried. “Hobbs and many of the others are dead. You need to get yourself out now, Reid. Go now, I will bring the girl”. My aunt gasped in horror, running from the room in a blind panic. I could not help but smirk at their distress. “You think this is funny?” Grobey demanded, coming to stand over me. I could not help but admire the justice of karma in that moment.

“Yes, yes I do” I replied with a demented chuckle. It pleased me to see them suffer through the same fear they joyfully inflicted. My taunt was rewarded with a hard slap across the face, which made my head spin. Though the strike left my mind reeling, I felt a surge of pride, knowing I had gotten under his skin. He did not like it when I laughed at him, so I felt inclined to laugh some more.

“You are going to die tonight,” I said smugly, throwing my head back, releasing a devious cackle. I relished in the small power my hysterics gave me, watching as rage burned in his eyes.

“You little bitch” he yelled, raising his fist to strike me once again. I closed my eyes, laughing still, and awaited the impact. But it never came.

There was a big crash and suddenly Grobey lay on the floor beside me. Looking up, I saw Edward standing over him. His clothes were torn, bloodied and covered in soot. He glared down at Grobey with a truly murderous look.

“Do that again and you will lose the hand” he growled, producing a pistol and pointing it at his opponent. Grobey, however, was not a man to cower when challenged. He threw himself off the ground, launching at Rochester. The gun went flying across the room and was forgotten as a fist fight ensued.

“Edward!” I cried, dazed and confused, I watched in horror whilst fighting to free myself from my shackles. Pulling against the chain on my wrist accomplished little more than chaffing the skin painfully, but I was determined to break free and help in some way. The room was filling with smoke, making it difficult to keep track of the pair as they exchanged punch for punch. It all
became a blur of flailing bodies and grey mist. I strained my eyes to see through the haze, just making out the blurred outline of Grobey as he straddled Edward’s torso, laying punch after punch against his dear face. Despite the beating he was taking, Edward did nought to push Grobey away, instead, I saw him reach behind him towards the hearth. Suddenly, Rochester had the fire stoker in hand, and with one sharp swing, he gained the upper hand. Grobey fell to the side - unconscious after just a single strike.

For a moment, Edward collected himself, attempting to steady his wheezing breath. Finally, he turned to me, kneeling down at my side to inspect the chains which bound me to the bed.

“The entire house is ablaze. We need to get out” he said, pulling at the shackles.

“He had the key. I think it is in his upper pocked” I cried urgently. Turning to the man, laying behind us, Edward searched his coat. Thankfully the keys were procured in no time. Blood rushed to my numb fingers as my bindings were released, but there was no time to relish in the feeling.

“Come, Jane. We need to go now” Edward urged, pulling me from the room. Adrenaline surged as we stepped over Grobey’s body without a backwards glance. Flames enveloped the entire corridor, but we had no choice but to run through it. Hand in hand we fled through the blazing inferno.

Arthur’s impassioned ravings continued to echo through the burning hall. How he continued without choking on the thick, hot smoke I could not fathom. We made it down to the ground level, where the smoke was nearly opaque. The entire House creaked and swayed ominously, burning ceiling panels falling perilously in our path. “Quickly, my love” Edward pressed, lifting me over a heap of fallen beams. My lungs began to burn with each ragged breath. I could feel the hot ash coating my throat, choking me.

“Mr Rochester! This way!” a voice called. We moved towards the sound, and a tall figure emerged from the smog. Mr Coles stood before us, covered in sweat and ash. “You are nearly there sir, just through there and you will be out. Everyone else is waiting for you on the cliffs”.

“Won’t you come with us, Coles?” I croaked.

“Not without Master Arthur, Miss” He replied, squinting into the smoky inferno that awaited him. “Come on Coles, it is far too dangerous” Edward insisted. “I tried to get him out before, but he would not come! You will never make it out of here alive!”.

“Be that as it may, I won’t leave without him, Sir” Coles said sadly. “That boy is the closest thing I have to a son”. Edward nodded in understanding.

“Well, I thank you for getting everyone out. I wish you luck, Coles. You’re a good man”. “Ditto, sir. Best of luck”. With that Coles stepped into the shadows, towards the upper levels where Arthur could still be heard. We watched after him for a moment, knowing it would be the last time either of us saw the man alive. A large beam fell from the ceiling and crashed to the floor next to us, embers exploded around us, and we were reminded of the dire circumstances we were in.

“Come, Jane” Edward urged, pulling us towards salvation. Mercifully, escape was just meters away and we finally made it out. The feel of cool, fresh air and rain against our overheated skin was indescribable. We fled the courtyard which was littered with falling debris. Outside the gates, everyone was huddled together in the storm. Adele, Sophie, Mrs Fairfax and the rest of the servants stood close together, covered in ash and dirt. There was little time for relief. Looking back, we all watched in horror as the ancient walls of Thornfield began to crumble into the blaze.

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