

A stepping stone away

Chapter 1

We'll be back before you know it. Those words echoed through Mary's head. Her heart ached. She wanted to curl up and cry.

"Get a grip, Mary!" she chided herself.

Women are supposed to never show weakness and to show that they can handle pressure, but thinking of Thor and her father made her feel weak. She desperately tried to distract her mind by gazing at the deep blue ocean.

It *always* made her feel better, those deep waves splashing gently over the sand.

Not now though.

She could still not wrap her mind around the events of the morning. She had been told that Father and her brother must fight in the horrid barrier war. Deep in the harsh Amazon rainforest. She rushed down the stairs as fast as she could and threw herself into Father's arms. "We'll be back before you know it," he had said before they walked out of the door.

She fiddled absentmindedly at the hem of the silk dress Mother gave her. *You look like a proper lady!* Father had exclaimed when he saw her. Please. She felt *ridiculous* wearing that dress. She looked like a skinny bird wearing a petticoat.

Mother always said she has sharp features, like a hawk and *that's* what made her...attractive. As if! All the girls at school are *twenty times* more attractive than her. Most of them were already asked for their hands in marriage.

No one had asked her...

Her dark brown hair was tied up in a bun. She was forced to wear small pumps that Thor gave her. She even wore the dress she got from Mother, but nothing worked. She just wasn't attractive enough. The only thing that seemed to make sense to her was that she was *definitely* going to get married if Mother can help it.

She wondered what mystery lies in those dark waves. Mary could feel tension in every wave. The waves called to her, tempting her.

"Mary!" Mother's frantic cry startled her.

Mary silently cursed. She should've told Mother! Why does she have to get so worried?

Because people go missing.

She gave the ocean a longing look, and went back home.

Chapter 2

That's it! Mary thought as she hitched up her dress and rushed home. I've done it now! She'll hit me on my hands with a wooden *spoon!* She wasn't looking where she was going. She was too busy thinking what her punishment will be. A night in the cellar? A hiding? Missing a meal? Or getting sent to bed early? RIP!

Mary stumbled and fell over a rock. Hurriedly, she turned her head to see what had caused that awful noise and almost screamed.

Her dress!

A horrible rip snaked around her hem. Those beautiful silkypatterns! Ruined.

Mother's going to *kill*her!

She quickly grabbed the piece of fabric that tore off. She felt nauseous. She quickly got to her feet and rushed home.

Mother was pacing along the front porch, her brow creased with worry.

"Mother!" Mary cried.

Mother looked up and saw her. Her eyes blazed.

"Young lady, where have you been?"

"I-I was just..."

"You have no excuses! I've been worried sick!"

"I am sorry, Mom, but..."

"No 'buts' Mary! I can't..."

Mother froze. She looked down at Mary's dress and staggered backwards. Her hand was on her chest and she gasped. "Mary! What on earth...? Your... your dress!"

Mary hung her head in shame, and clenched her fists. "I-I tripped," she said through gritted teeth.

Mother just stared at her in horror. Then she took a deep breath to steady herself. When she spoke, her face was a dark shade of maroon.

"Wash yourself in the bathroom. When you are finished meet me in the kitchen."

"But..."

"Now!"

Mary rushed up the stairs and into her room. She bit back her tears and stripped herself of her clothes.

Quickly, she grabbed a threadbare towel from her closet and marched to the bathroom.

The bathroom is a cold room with a rack with a selection of chamber pots, towels, bars of soap and sponges. There is a big basin with a shower head and a small washbasin.

The cold water snaked along her naked body, making the room feel like a meat locker. Warm water was preserved for men only. Cold water was meant for women.

A silly rule.

In the bath, she let her tears flow across her face. Why was her mother always looking upon her as a disgrace? Why was her life such a misery? Why, *why* did Father and Thor have to leave? The water started to get warm, and Mary let just a few drops pass over her body before she closed off the water connection in the shower head. The pleasant sense of the warm water was gone. The threadbare towel gave her no warmth.

In her bedroom, on her small and comfortable bed, were the clothes her mother had put out for her.

Oh dear. It was her maiden's dress. A ridiculous, hideous blue woollen dress with puffy sleeves. Together with thick, white woollen socks, a pair of black school shoes, a thick, smelly and dusty apron, and a sweaty bandanna. The right fit for her punishment: labour.

Yuck.

It made her stomach churn just to look at the outfit. No way she was going to even *touch* the bandanna.

Standing in her undergarments, she gave the outfit the look.

"Hurry up, now!" Mother cried.

Scratch-scratch.

The dress and socks made her body feel like a colony of ants were tap dancing along her skin. The bandanna smelt like something Mother had scraped out of the chamber pots.

Yuck.

Downstairs were a sewing machine, sponges, a mop, a broom and a wash basin.

Oh dear.

Mother came out of the living room with a stern look ironed on her face.

"Now, you will complete this list of chores because we have a guest coming. Hurry up now.

Chop-chop!"

Hard labour all right.

Mary sighed as she looked at the list. She certainly walked straight into that one.

Chapter 3

The smells escaping from the chimney made Mary's stomach growl like a cornered animal. She was still busy scraping the gunk out of the pipes. It looked like a worm died in green muck. In every household, hard labour was a punishment. It was disgusting and made her nose wrinkle.

The only hard labour men endured, was going to the army.

The only thing that made her feel better were the waves.

And Olivia.

Especially Olivia.

Olivia is an olive-skinned girl who lives right next to Mary. The most awesome girl in the world lives next to her.

Her thoughts drifted to boys.

There was only *one boy* who ever spoke to her. It made Mary blush just thinking about him.

His name is Jacob. Jacob Field.

She once stumbled past him. Literally.

He helped her up and she saw her reflection in his eyes and then noticed just how shiny his eyes were. She felt like her heart did a little skippy-tap of embarrassment. It made her blush shyly. He put his hands inside his pockets nervously and said: "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yes, I I am."

Whoa.

His ears glowed bright red and it made him seem cute.

"Um, do you need help picking up your books?" Oh shoot. Mary nodded shyly and he helped her pick up her books, their fingers touching...

"Mary! Hurry up!"

Mother towered over her, like a giant.

Mary dropped the brush in relief. The pipes were clean and all chores completed.

"Our guest is almost here. Come now, go get dressed. There are clean clothes on your bed."

Chapter 4

The clothes on her bed were much less hideous. A simple blue dress with a silk hem, white heels, a grey hairribbon and a pearl necklace. Who is visiting? Maybe Olivia, Mary thought hopefully. Probably not.

"Come now, Mary! Our guest is here! Why don't you answer the door and show our guest inside?" Mother called.

Mary elegantly made her way down the stairs, like Mother taught her. Mother smiled warmly at Mary. "Go on."

Mary pulled open the door and started to greet their guest. "Good evening, madam. Welcome to my humble abode. Please, do come..." The words stuck in Mary's throat as she studied the woman standing in the doorway.

The woman had a long, beautiful frame and lush black locks braided with daisies. Her bright green eyes had bags from no sleep and her delicate brow had worry lines creased into it. Her lips and cheeks were rosy pink and she wore a simple maroon dress with a pendant. Her long lovely arms cradled two babies, wrapped in silk, sleeping soundly. Her face was so gentle, Mary immediately recognised it.

"Mary!" the woman exclaimed, a dimple forming in her cheek as she smiled.

A smile appeared on Mary's lips.

The woman was Claire, her sister.

Claire smiled at Mother and said: "Mother, I've missed you both so dearly. I have come to stay with you as my husband is also in the war and I can't support two children on my own. I hope that I am welcome."

Mother nodded in approval and showed Claire inside.

Chapter 5

As soon as Claire gave her babies to Mother, Mary gave her a huge hug. Claire smiled warmly and hugged her back.

"I've missed you," Mary whispered.

"So have I," Claire replied.

Mary was still surprised. Claire left for a honeymoon with her husband the last time Mary saw her. Mother ushered Claire inside and gave her some tea. She looked relieved to have a moment to rest a little, but she carried a lot of weight on her shoulders as she was now supporting and raising two children all by herself.

It clearly stressed her out.

Mary choked up a little when she realized how closely Claire resembles their father. The black hair, long frame and green eyes. The babies resembled their mother greatly. Mary herself looked more like Mother.

Mother had made a delicious meal: Egg and lamb quiche for starters, oxtail stew for the main course, and apple pie for dessert. Mother was just digging in to the apple pie, when Mother cleared her throat importantly.

"I do hope you've enjoyed your dinner, ladies, but I have something to announce."

Mary and Claire looked up expectantly.

Claire took her babies gently out of Mother's arms and asked if she could give them their dinner. Mother nodded.

Claire walked past Mary and whispered: "I can only feed one at a time because they get into mischief quickly when they are together. Would you care to hold one?"

Mary nodded, but couldn't ignore the confusion. What was Mother about to say?

Mother waited for Claire to feed her babies, then she cleared her throat again. The baby was heavy, but felt so delicate in her arms. It made her smile.

"I have great news!" Mother continued. "Mary, a young man visited me one morning and asked for your hand in marriage!"

Mary spat out her pie all over Claire, who jumped up in surprise. Her hand in marriage? No, this can't be possible! Mary sat there, frozen in shock.

Claire came to her senses and said: "Why, this is wonderful news! Mary, you must be thrilled!"

More like shocked.

"He asked if he could meet you in a few weeks' time and I agreed. That should be just enough time

to get you ready!" Mother cried excitedly.

Mary struggled for words, and didn't notice she was holding the young infant so tightly, her arms started to go numb. The child squirmed under its blankets and wriggled in her grasp.

"Ready for what?"

"To become a proper lady!" Mother exclaimed.

Claire tilted her head as she smiled at Mary and took the child from her arms. Mary felt so hurt by Mother's words. Father always said she was a proper lady, but clearly, she wasn't. The babies yawned and snuggled up against their mother.

"I think I shall head upstairs," Claire whispered and slowly made her way up the stairs.

Mother placed her hand on Mary's shoulder and smiled proudly. She nodded and then Mary noticed just how tired she was. She stood up from her chair and silently walked up the stairs and let her thoughts fill her head.