

I strode across the dandelion dotted yard scattering chickens, robins, and fairies in my haste, an open-ended basket swinging from one hand, a pair of clippers clenched in the other, my mind whirling like a storm. No one could replace my father, not for me, not for my family, not for the kingdom.

Reaching the flowers bordering the yard, I threw the basket and clippers on the dirt near the dried up hyacinths and daffodils. “Stupid bandits,” I sobbed, snot dripping from my nose. “Stupid, stupid bandits.”

The sun, now one-quarter of its journey through the sky, warmed my face but not my heart. I brushed past the flowering red azaleas and pink rhododendrons, skirted around Isabella’s arbor-covered garden bench, angled through the freshly sprouting vegetable and herb gardens, and stumbled my way past the sheds to the fallow field about an arrow’s shot from the cottage.

I threw my black-clothed self to the ground and glared back at the cottage. How could my mother marry this man, Lord Rella, not yet two months after my father’s death? He was wealthy to be sure, but the man had very little sense—I was sure of it. And he would never be a father to me.