

Wildflowers

by kereia

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Chapter 1 of 1

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When Katie arrived at Azkaban prison, she was all but vibrating with suppressed anxiety. The entrance hall was bustling with Ministry officials and concerned relatives, and it took her a moment to find Kingsley Shacklebolt among the clustering mass of impatient people.

As she forced her way through the shifting throng, excitement and worry was evident on the faces around her, and Katie imagined that her expression held the same emotions.

Her grandmother had been imprisoned here for seven months...her only crime being that she'd stood up to her brother, who had supported Voldemort, and banished him from the family home at Beachy Head.

Katie had been helpless to prevent her uncle's retaliation, and by the time news of her grandmother's fate had reached her, Venerity Bell had already been imprisoned. Katie would have braved the dangers of an appeal, if it had not been for the letter her grandmother had sent, in which Venerity strongly discouraged her from taking any further action.

Katie had always admired her grandmother's strength and level-headedness, but now that Katie was about to see her again, fear and worry wound around her heart like a hungry snake.

A loud bang filled the crowded space, and a cold rush of air followed on its heels. Katie saw the enormous double doors that had barred access to the cell tract fly open, and a cheer rose throughout the hall. People surged forwards, carrying Katie along, and she had to struggle not to stumble and fall lest she be trampled by the stampede.

Katie heard Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice rise in an attempt to restore order, but it was hopeless. Within seconds, she was carried past him, through the doors and into the cell block. Here, the crowd dispersed as cells were blasted open and prisoners were released.

In a daze, Katie rushed onwards, past laughing, sobbing people who embraced long lost friends and family members. Her eyes darted into every cell she passed, hoping to spy the woman who was the only family that *she* had left. Her journey led her down several flights of stairs and long, gloomy corridors. Torches adorned the walls between the cells, but even their flickering light could not dispel the innate darkness of the place.

Katie shivered when she thought of Dementors patrolling the halls...of the unbearable hopelessness and torment their presence must have caused.

"Katie? Katie, is that you?"

Katie came to such a sudden stop that she stumbled and slipped on the worn stone floor; with a thud she fell on her arse, but in an instant she had scrambled to her feet again and backtracked to the cell she had just passed.

Her grandmother had always been small, but Katie could feel a lump rise in her throat as she took in her slight, malnourished figure, her limp, greasy curls, and the filth on her skin and robes.

"Oh, Gran," she whispered as tears sprung to her eyes.

"Now, we'll have none of that, dear. Take out your wand and open this confounded gate, so you can give your grandmother a proper hug."

Hearing the familiar, resolute voice, Katie laughed through her tears and raised her wand. Seeing the circumstances in which her grandmother had lived roused her fury and supplied her spell with more power than she had intended.

When the dust settled, her grandmother daintily coughed behind her hand and shot Katie a bemused glare. "Well, that certainly did the job."

Then, Katie all but pounced across the open space between them and crushed the older woman to her.

"I'm so glad you're alive." At Venerity's startled gasp, Katie immediately released her. "Are you alright? Are you hurt? Oh Merlin, we have to get you to St. Mungo's." Though she realized that she was babbling, Katie's anxiety was past conquering.

She grasped Venerity's hand and tried to lead her down the corridor, past the people running along the hall, when her grandmother patted her arm and resisted.

"Calm down, Katie, dear. I am perfectly alright, but we cannot leave, yet. We need to take Marcus with us."

Katie stilled in confusion.

"Who is Marcus?"

Instead of answering, Venerity crossed over to the cell opposite her own and motioned for Katie to join her. Curious, she approached, and when she saw the huddled figure on the ground, her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Marcus Flint?" she gasped and involuntarily took a step forward.

"Hello, Katie." His voice was low and strained as he greeted her, and Katie could see the pain in his eyes. His hands were pressed protectively against his stomach, and for a moment Katie thought that the flying stonemasonry she'd set loose had injured him, but she could not see any blood on his skin or the tattered remains of his clothes.

She blinked in surprise, her brain rebelling at the sight of him, and she could not help but wonder what a pure blood Slytherin could have done to become imprisoned here.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, but before he could answer her, her grandmother put her hands on her hips and glared at her sternly.

"I really think an explanation can wait. Can't you see that he's in pain? The poor boy needs a Healer, so hurry up and open the cell."

Dazed, but unwilling to argue, Katie obeyed and cautiously stepped into the cell. As she approached him, an unbearably sweet, rotten smell assaulted her senses. Gagging, she pressed a hand to her nose, but kneeled beside him regardless.

The solemn, resigned look on Marcus' face finally convinced her that his presence here was not some elaborate scheme to serve the Death Eaters' agenda. She carefully touched her hand to his, then parted the torn folds of his robe.

The skin of his chest and stomach was blackened, and she could feel an unnatural heat radiate off him that made her shiver. Katie was repulsed and felt ashamed for it. It was obvious by the strain in his shoulders, the sweat on his skin, and the tightness of his mouth, that he was in great pain.

"What on earth happened to you?" she whispered.

He met her gaze levelly. "Souvenir from my parents," he gasped, his breathing heavy.

Katie sat back on her heels, too shocked for words. Instead, she swallowed and forced her mind to concentrate on the task at hand. Her wand hovered indecisively above his trembling body.

"Whatever I'm going to do, it will hurt you more. I'm sorry," she said, but the understanding in his eyes did nothing to ease her mind. Then, Marcus' eyes fluttered, and he groaned low in his throat. His gaze shifted, lost focus, and Katie could tell that he was drifting away. She could hear her grandmother move impatiently behind her.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Oh, the curse has been spreading ever since he came in here. That must have been about five months ago. It progresses very slowly, but he's lost consciousness a few times in the past few weeks."

Katie stared at her grandmother, aghast. "Five months?"

Venerity nodded sagely, her hands twisting and entwining with unmistakable concern. "He's been in almost constant pain, not that he let it on at first, stubborn knucklehead that he is." Disapproval and annoyance laced her tone, but Katie could hear the worry underneath it.

That decided her. Without further hesitation, Katie picked up a fist-sized stone from the debris around her and pointed her wand at it. "Portus," she said.

The stone glowed for a second, and then returned to its dull grey colouring.

"Come here." She lowered the stone to Marcus' body, and waited until her grandmother's hand hovered above it. "On three. One, two...."

At the count of three, Katie felt the familiar pull behind her navel, and the world dissolved around them. Over the rushing of the wind, she could hear Marcus' ragged scream.

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Two months later, a disgruntled Katie followed her grandmother up the stairs to St. Mungo's ward for spell damage. "Why do I have to visit him?"

"Because he doesn't have anyone else, and I'm sure he would be glad to see a friendly face." Venerity threw Katie a glance across her shoulder. "Though, I suppose, he'll have to do with a preternatural frown. Really, I am surprised at you. You went to school with him. I'm sure you can spare an hour or two to visit one of your former classmates and show a little more grace about it."

Katie swallowed the snappy retort that rose in the throat.

"He's a Slytherin; we weren't exactly friends at Hogwarts." Indeed, the only accurate description for their relationship would have been "enemies", but she didn't think it wise

to point this out. "Besides, he sees you every day. I'm sure he doesn't need or want anyone else to make a fuss."

Reaching the top of the stairs, her grandmother turned to face her. She had that look on her face...the one that had made Katie cringe ever since she'd been a child.

"This is not about making a fuss, young lady. For you, this is about common courtesy. Wasn't this infernally useless war enough to make you realize that this absurd rivalry between the houses only serves to drive us further apart? I am disappointed that you would be so petty, Katie." She took a deep breath, and Katie felt colour rise into her cheeks.

"And as for me..." Venerity trailed off, her expression shifting as she struggled for composure. Her voice fell to a harsh whisper, and Katie was distressed to see tears swim in her grandmother's eyes.

"As for me, I don't know how I would have survived that place if it hadn't been for him. I spent two months alone in that dreadful cell, Katie. No one to talk to, no one to listen. You can't imagine how utterly abandoned and forgotten I felt - as if I'd simply dropped off the face of the earth.

"He wouldn't let me give up. He was shoved into that cell, and I could see that he was so much worse off than I was, and he just plain refused to give in and let them win. If it hadn't been for him, I think I'd be in here as well, up in the mental ward."

Katie blinked away tears. Shame filled her entire body, and she hated herself for not fighting for her grandmother's release, regardless of Venerity's explicit wishes.

Guessing her thoughts, Venerity reached up and gently cupped Katie's cheek. "Oh, don't cry, my dear. None of this is your fault. If you had done anything to help me, they only would have locked you away, too. And I'm alright. I'm sorry I was so harsh just now. I didn't mean to upset you."

She rose on her toes and pressed a tender kiss to Katie's forehead. Then, she straightened the cream-coloured cardigan above her green robe and grasped Katie's hands in both of her own. "Now, let's see how Marcus is feeling, shall we?"

Katie nodded in silence, her emotions too raw to speak.

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Half an hour later, Katie found herself alone with the bed ridden patient, as her grandmother had excused herself under the pretext of getting tea for all of them. Katie rather suspected this to be an unobtrusive ruse to make her spend some time with Marcus alone, though she didn't dare to speculate as to her grandmother's motivation.

"You didn't have to come, you know." Marcus regarded her with a neutral expression as he adjusted the pillows behind his back.

"Oh, of course I did. It's my pleasure, really." She added a dismissive wave of her hand and realized that she sounded exactly the way the women at her grandmother's tea parties did...all proper manners and lofty decorum.

Her horror at this revelation must have been apparent on her face because, for a moment, Marcus pressed his lips together to swallow the laughter that danced behind his eyes. However, his efforts were in vain, and shortly thereafter he dissolved in open amusement.

Only a second later, he was bent double, groaning in pain, and clutching his stomach.

Immediately, Katie was by his side, rubbing his back and holding his shoulder. "Are you alright? Do you need a healer?"

Marcus straightened slowly and clenched his teeth, his eyes staring straight ahead as he took a deep, careful breath.

"I'm fine," he wheezed. "I just have to be careful not to laugh." He gave her a half-hearted grin, his teeth barely showing between his parted lips.

"I'll take care to be extra serious, then." Though her words were flippant, her tentative smile took the callousness out of them.

He gave her an indecipherable look. "I guess that shouldn't be too difficult for us. I don't think I remember a single moment when we weren't serious with each other."

"That's one way to put it." The memory of their rivalry on and off the Quidditch pitch was still fresh on Katie's mind, but she decided to take her grandmother's admonishments to heart and turned the conversation away from their resentful history.

Although she was aware that the circumstances of his imprisonment must be painful to him, her curiosity won the upper hand.

"How did you end up in Azkaban?"

Immediately, his face closed down, and she could see him grind his teeth at the recollection. "I had a disagreement with my parents," he said.

"A disagreement?" she asked in obvious disbelief.

When he caught her gaze, she almost flinched away from the anger swirling behind his eyes.

"It might be difficult for you to believe, but not all Slytherins are Death Eaters. The world isn't made up of only black and white."

"I didn't say that," Katie snapped back. Her temper rose at the unfair accusation, particularly since she hadn't done or said anything to imply that she believed him to be a Death Eater, regardless of the fact that she'd had her suspicions.

"You were thinking it," he growled.

In an instant, Katie was on her feet, her fists clenched, her expression outraged. "Oh, so now you know what I'm thinking, do you? Well, I'm so glad we don't have to talk at all, then."

He seemed taken aback by her sudden fury. His brow furrowed as he tried to gauge her sincerity.

"Katie...."

"No." As far as she was concerned, this conversation was over. "You're right. Why on earth should I have ever been suspicious of you following You-Know-Who, when you made such a point of standing up to Draco Malfoy while you were at Hogwarts, or when you made such an obvious effort not to run around with his and his father's cronies."

Sarcasm was heavy in her voice, and Marcus' face darkened.

"Now, hold on a minute here."

But she had already turned on her heel and was storming out the door, startling her grandmother who was carrying a tray laden with tea and biscuits.

"What on earth is going on here?" Venerity asked, bewildered.

Katie threw a cold glance over her shoulder at the silently fuming Marcus. "Slytherins and Gryffindors don't get along, Gran. I'm sorry, but that's just not going to change."

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By mid-summer, Katie and her grandmother had restored the house to its former amiable atmosphere. When Venerity's brother had taken up residence at Bardon House, an Edwardian mansion with extensive grounds along the channel, he and his wife had redecorated everything according to their baroque taste, and Venerity had been horrified when she's first walked into the door.

"This place is starting to feel like home again," Venerity said wistfully.

Katie laughed quietly and tied the sash around the last curtain in the sitting room. "Yes, it is. Now, we only need to sort out the garden." She tried not to groan. Even though her spell work had been more than sufficient to restore the house, gardening had never been her forte, and her dread was directly proportional to the vast size of the mansion's grounds.

However, to Katie's surprise, Venerity only patted her hand and said, "Don't you worry about that, dear. I already hired a gardener."

"Really?" Katie's eyebrows rose. "Someone I know?"

A musical note echoed through the entrance hall, alerting them to a visitor at the door. Her grandmother nodded before she turned away and marched towards the hall. "Marcus," she said.

For one moment Katie froze, then, she hurried after her. "Marcus? Marcus Flint?"

"Do we know any other?" Venerity asked with studied casualness.

"You can't be serious."

"I am *perfectly* serious, dear. He is qualified for the job, and now that he's been released from St. Mungo's, he has no place to go. So, I offered him the small cottage by the lake."

"He's going to live here?" Katie asked, her voice rising. Then, she stopped dead. "Wait a minute, what do you mean 'he's qualified?'" While Katie had never taken an interest in Marcus' life, she'd known that he'd started a professional Quidditch career after leaving Hogwarts.

"Hello, Katie. Venerity." Marcus nodded courteously as Katie all but barrelled into him when she reached the entrance hall.

Katie's grandmother beamed at the tall, young wizard and amicably shook his hand. "I'm so glad you came. Katie will help you get settled in and show you the grounds. We'll have tea at five." She threw a smile in Katie's direction, and for a moment, Katie was reminded of a barracuda. The image was so absurd that she couldn't help but roll her eyes at her own silliness.

Without further ado, Venerity shoosed them out of the house, and the polished double doors fell shut with a resounding thump.

Marcus cleared his throat, an amused expression on his face. "Your grandmother is..." there was a slight hesitation in his voice, "...a very kind woman."

Katie scoffed. "If, by that, you mean that she's a match-making old hag, then you're absolutely right," she grouched and stalked off down the stairs, studiously ignoring Marcus' surprised bark of laughter.

The sound ended in a strangled moan, and berating herself for her thoughtlessness, Katie darted back up the steps and cautiously touched his arms. "Oh damn, I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

Marcus nodded and closed his eyes for a moment until the pain passed. When he opened them again, Katie found herself caught in the dark depth of his gaze and felt an odd flutter in the pit of her stomach. Realizing what it meant, she became annoyed...a defensive reflex cultivated by her natural stubbornness.

"Let's go, then." Pulling away from him, Katie flicked her wand at the trunks and packages that hovered next to the door. The luggage floated after her, and once she'd summoned her broom and made sure that Marcus had mounted his own, she took off.

The grounds rushed past beneath them as Katie turned her broom towards the lake. It was a short flight, but once they arrived at the cottage, she came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh dear," she breathed softly and touched down on the paved area that marked the beginning of a garden path. "I'm sorry. I knew that the grounds haven't been tended in a while, but I had no idea that there would be such a mess around here." Her gaze travelled around the overgrown garden, the man-high weeds that obscured both the view of the lake and the crop of trees that framed the right side of the cottage. Moss covered the paved path and had crept up to the outer walls of the building, and a branch had been torn off the ancient oak near the entrance, damaging the roof above the living room.

She was just about to tell him that he'd have to stay at the mansion until they'd done some repairs when Marcus forestalled her. "It'll be fine. I can fix the roof temporarily with a couple of spells and buy new shingles when I go into town tomorrow."

He caught the sceptical expression on her face and gave her a crooked smirk. "Why Katie, if I didn't know better, I'd say that you look as if you're worried about my welfare."

It wasn't an easy feat to raise her eyebrows and scowl at him at the same time, but somehow Katie managed it. The next two hours were spent stowing away Marcus' possessions and repairing the roof and water damage, which Katie insisted to do on her own. When she was finally satisfied that she had done all she could, she sighed and pushed her wand into the pocket of her robe.

Her gaze wandered around the small, but snug room, and finally settled on Marcus, who was leaning against the doorframe, long black hair spilling around his shoulders. He had his arms crossed and an amused expression on his face, which, she noted too late, intensified when Katie's eyes lingered appreciatively along the muscles visible beneath the fabric.

Embarrassed that she'd been caught staring, she straightened her shoulders and tried not to wonder when he'd had the time to develop that kind of definition during the last three months.

"Something the matter?" Marcus asked nonchalantly.

Katie went through several snappish comebacks in her mind and then decided to ignore the question entirely. "Would you like to see the grounds now, or would you prefer to get settled in first?"

He shrugged, a smug little grin tugging at his lips. "Now is fine."

They retrieved their brooms and set off again, Katie taking the lead. While she explained to him where the border stones were located that marked the boundaries of the Bardon House estate, she grew steadily more surprised at his detailed knowledge of the flora they passed. Upon reaching the coast, Katie landed just beyond the edge of the cliff top. The wind was whipping at her long, chestnut hair, but the air was hot enough to make the gales refreshing instead of uncomfortable.

Dropping to the windswept grass, she invited Marcus to do the same, and when he had settled down next to her, she broached the subject that had puzzled her the entire afternoon.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a gardener."

His expression grew stormy. "My parents were Death Eaters, and everybody knows it." He looked across the ocean, legs stretched out in front of him, his weight resting on his elbows. "It's not easy to find work with that kind of affiliation."

"But you were in Azkaban for five months."

"I'm a Slytherin, Katie. That's all they want to know." He shot her an uncertain glance and rose, rubbing his hands along his thighs. "Which reminds me, I wanted to apologize for going off on you like that at the hospital."

Katie could see that the sentiment did not come easily to him, which made her appreciate it more. She gave him a tiny smile and shook her head. "Neither one of us was acting terribly mature that day," she pointed out. "I'm sorry, too."

For a long moment, Marcus held her gaze, and Katie felt that excited flutter inside her belly again. To distract herself, she bombarded him with questions about what he planned to do, and together, they spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the ornamental garden that her grandmother wanted to have replanted on the terrace behind Bardon House and the hot house that Venerity had allowed Marcus to build near the cottage.

"You know how to cultivate *Colocasia Esculenta Magicus*?" Katie's eyes widened in disbelief.

Marcus smiled broadly, his mind running along the same lines as Katie's. "Yes, I do. It's an old family secret." He stretched out on the grass and studied the fast transit of the clouds against the darkening sky.

"You're going to be rich," she said, her voice sounding slightly dazed. She'd inherited a fair amount of gold from her parents, and her job paid more than well enough for her to live very comfortably, but she knew how much a quarter ounce of powdered *Colocasia* fetched on the market. "Damn, you're going to be filthy rich."

Marcus laughed and pressed a hand protectively against his chest. "I'll teach you, if you like."

Knowing only too well how fast plants wilted when she so much as looked at them, Katie shook her head. "Thanks, but I'd rather leave you to it." She smiled at him and, finally noticing that dusk was approaching fast, she rose to her feet.

"Damn, we missed tea." Katie looked towards the horizon and, as so often when she came here, the spectacular sunset took her breath away. She must have stood hypnotized for several minutes because she suddenly became aware of Marcus' body brushing against her shoulder as he stood beside her.

"This is a beautiful place," he said quietly, and Katie wrenched her eyes away from the sky, taking in the peculiar expression on his face, half amusement, half sincerity, and for a second her gaze darted to his full, soft lips. Then, she collected herself and rolled her eyes.

"We're not going to get all emotional and schmoopy here," she stated firmly, the tone of her voice not broking any argument.

Marcus smirked. "We're not?" he queried and reached for her.

Katie drew in a startled breath when he pulled her flush against him, and her hands settled instinctively on his upper arms. She wasn't sure if she wanted to push him away or pull him closer.

Marcus bent his head, a rakish look in his eyes that made her heart skip a beat. "Wouldn't it be fun, though, if we did?"

For a moment, Katie was seriously tempted, but then she firmly pushed him away. "No, it would not be." Her own reaction to him had caught her off guard, and the fact that she couldn't quite understand how she'd gone from loathing him to wanting him was slightly disconcerting.

"Hogwarts was a long time ago, Katie," he said, but he released her, an expression of regret on his face.

"For you it might be, but not for me." She took a deep breath and stepped back. "This is just going a little too fast."

His eyes never left hers as he considered her words. Then, he nodded in acquiescence and retrieved their brooms. "Allow me to take you home."

The sudden, almost old-fashioned, attempt at courtesy made her want to laugh and kiss him at the same time, but she refrained from doing either and merely accepted his offer with a warm smile.

Her conflicting emotions occupied her mind throughout the entire flight back, and by the time she saw the large building rise before her, Katie was more than ready to throw caution to the wind and follow her desire to kiss him senseless.

When they touched down at Bardon House, Katie could see that the lights in the window that her grandmother had already retired to her rooms...no doubt a strategic manoeuvre, Katie thought. The chuckle that spilled out of her throat was born of equal parts exasperation and fondness, and she drew a surprised Marcus deeper into the shadows of the door, so they could not be seen from the window.

"What are you up to?" he asked with a game smile.

Ignoring the question, Katie threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down for a passionate kiss. For an instant, Marcus froze, but then she felt his arms wrap around her as he slanted his mouth against hers. Half a step backwards brought her up against the wall, and Katie sighed when she felt his solid weight press into her.

Her tongue brushed along his bottom lip, seeking entrance to his mouth, and he was only too happy to comply with her wishes. Katie had no idea how long they stood there at the top of the stairs, but when they finally came up for air, she was panting and her entire body felt suffused with heat and a delicious ache that pulled at her deep in her abdomen.

"I thought you wanted to slow down," Marcus murmured against her skin. The deep rumble of his voice reverberated through her, and Katie closed her eyes blissfully when she felt his mouth trailing warm, wet kisses along her neck.

"Mmmh," she sighed, and her preoccupation drew a quiet laugh from him. Reluctantly, she disentangled herself and gave him an impish smile. "I changed my mind." Then, she pressed a quick, chaste kiss to his lips and opened the door.

"Would you like me to go into town with you tomorrow, so we can repair your roof?" she asked.

Walking backwards, Marcus nodded. "I'll pick you up at nine." He smirked briefly, and she could see a promise in his eyes that made her knees weak.

"Nine sounds great," she breathed, a little dazed, and then closed the door on his low, rumbling laugh, an equally excited smile stealing onto her face.

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It was well past noon before Katie was satisfied with the work she'd done on the roof. After they'd replaced the support beams, she had nudged Marcus out of the house, insistent that she could finish the work on her own. Part of her reason for this was that the state of disrepair in which she'd found the cottage was an affront to her ingrained sense of hospitality, and another part was that the memory of their kiss invaded her mind every time she looked at him, and the distraction was equal parts exciting and annoying.

A flick of her wand restored the furniture to its proper place, and Katie nodded with approval as she inspected the room one last time before heading outside.

When she left the cottage, she stopped in surprise as she noted the change that had come over the wilderness around her. The weeds and moss had disappeared, the trees and hedges had been trimmed, and the garden path led to a clean stone patio that afforded an excellent view of the lake beyond. Katie felt slightly incongruous when she realized that she had been so absorbed in her work that the extent of Marcus' efforts had entirely slipped her notice.

"That's pretty impressive," she said, her eyes skimming with obvious admiration across the orderly flower beds, which were empty now, but ready to be planted.

Marcus finished clearing a rectangular space along the crop of trees. "Well, since you kicked me out of my own house, I had to find something else to do." He winked at her, forestalling her instinctive protest. "Thanks for repairing the roof."

Katie pursed her lips, and then shook her head, a self-deprecating smile stealing onto her face. "You're welcome." She Summoned her broom and approached him. "Is this where you want to put the greenhouse?"

Marcus nodded. "It's ideal; the oaks are on the north side, so there's sunlight all day." He looked down at her with a teasing smirk. "Venerity sent one of your house-elves to deliver a picnic basket."

Katie barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. "Of course she did."

Her exasperated tone drew a low chuckle from Marcus. He turned towards her. "First, you call her a match-making hag, then, you snog me senseless, and now you're annoyed because she sent us food; the two of you have an interesting relationship."

At the memory of the kiss, Katie could feel colour rising onto her cheeks. Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes, well, neither one of us likes to be handled, but sometimes she just can't stop meddling." She shrugged. "I know that she means well, but it's annoying."

Though Marcus nodded sagely, she could see the amusement dancing in his eyes. "She is very much a Gryffindor; no sense of subtlety."

Not two days ago, the comment would have made her lash out at him as she'd done in the hospital, but now, Katie settled for a half-hearted scowl and lightly punched his shoulder. "Don't start that again," she said, although she secretly had to admit that she agreed.

Katie mounted her broom and threw a glance over her shoulder. "I just want to check the roof from the outside again before we tackle that picnic basket. It won't take long."

"I'll come with you."

They surveyed Katie's wand-work from the air and then touched down on the old part of the roof. Katie crouched down to take a closer look at the seam where she'd laid out the new shingles. Her eyes expertly assessed the work as Marcus sat next to her. Katie smiled with satisfaction. "It looks good."

"Personally, 'beautiful' is the word I'd go for." Marcus voice was low and so close that Katie could feel the warmth of his breath caress her neck.

She turned her head and found him looking at her, his face no more than a couple of inches from hers. For a moment, she was torn about whether she wanted to kiss him or not, but before she could say anything, Marcus leaned forward and caught her upper lip between his own. Heat flushed her body instantly, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

Marcus leaned into her, and the motioned over-balanced both of them, and Katie fell onto her arse pulling Marcus with her. They broke apart, and Katie giggled. The sound was transformed into a low moan when Marcus flattened his hand against her stomach and brought it around her waist while his mouth pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her throat.

"Marcus, we're on the bloody roof."

He gave her a devilish smirk, and the desire she saw in his eyes suffused her body with delicious warmth. "Your point being?" he asked, his voice a husky whisper as he bent his head to kiss her.

With a sound half growl, half sigh, Katie raked her fingers through his long black hair and kissed him passionately. Her tongue delved into his mouth where it was engaged with skilled playfulness. She felt Marcus' hand brush against the underside of her breast and arched against him, eager for his touch. They lay entwined on top of the roof, Marcus half on top of her, their legs tangled, his knee between her thighs, and Katie's hands abandoned his hair to open his shirt.

The warmth of his body melted into her skin, and she ran her hands over his chest, skimming along the tender skin of his stomach to the smooth expanse of his strong back. She felt his cock press into her stomach and, as his hand cupped her breast, she lifted her hips and pressed against the hard length between them, drawing a strangled gasp from Marcus' throat. His thumb brushed across her tight nipple. Adjusting his position, he ground against her. Katie moaned into his mouth. She could feel the wetness between her legs...the low, thrumming ache of want and need and passion.

Drawing her knees up, she let her hands wandered down to his arse and pulled him hard against her. Marcus groaned quietly, the sound washing along her skin. "Maybe we should take this inside? We're on the roof, remember?"

But Katie was long passed caring. She pushed against his shoulder, drew her knee up to his waist and rolled on top of him. "Screw the roof," she murmured, her mind and body floating on the sensations his hands and lips evoked. She caught his mouth in a long, deep kiss, swallowing his laughter. Her hips brushed rhythmically against his, grinding the bulge beneath his clothes against the juncture of her legs, and it didn't take long before she'd found the right angle and his erection pressed against her clit.

With a sharp intake of breath, Katie threw her head back and repeated the motion, rapture coiling inside her abdomen, tighter and tighter until she could hardly bear it. Sitting up, Marcus wrapped his arms around her waist. His breath came in harsh pants, and Katie's fingers got once again lost in his hair. She could feel his mouth, hot and wet and eager, suckle her breast through the fabric of her robe, and she closed her eyes, losing herself in the fire that consumed both of them.

A second later, she heard the sound of tearing cloth, and then warm air caressed her chest and back, her robe pooling around her hips. Katie gasped when she felt the wet heat of his mouth on her bare skin, and she whimpered when his tongue flicked tortuously slow along the softness of her breast, teasing her. In her desperation, she ground hard against him.

"Fuck, Katie," Marcus cursed quietly and threw his head back, his eyes closed in concentration as he tightened his hold on her. Katie could hear the blood rushing through her veins, felt the hard drum beat of her heart and, within moments, the coiled spring inside her snapped and she cried out in breathless ecstasy.

She felt Marcus tremble below her as he followed her across the edge, and she almost fell on top of him, her muscles limp, her body sated. He caught her in his arms and drew her close as he shifted onto his side, his head buried in her neck. As blissful lethargy settled into her bones, Katie slowly inspected the torn edges of her robe.

"You ruined my clothes," she mumbled quietly, her tone at once smug and peevish beneath her predominant amusement.

Marcus cursed in such imaginative ways that Katie could not help but laugh. *I ruined your clothes?* Bloody hell, woman, do you have any idea what you have done to mine?"

Looking into his dark eyes, she saw laughter dancing in their depths and smiled. She kissed him lightly and whispered in his ear. "If I remember correctly, the cottage has a very luxurious bath tub."

Her wicked grin was answered by one of his own, and before she could move, Marcus had pulled her to her feet and, holding her against him, reached for his broom. "That

would be the bathroom right next to the master bedroom, right?" he asked, his expression eager. Leaning against him, Katie only reached up to pull him into another kiss.

The End