

THE SECRETS OF THE LIBRARY

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The strict kingdom of Azure stood alone and reclusive in the rolling hills of Threshia. Smoky clouds of tyranny looked down on the kingdom, creating an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair. Many severe and unyielding rules were enforced upon the unfortunate townsfolk to make sure they knew no power or bravery. The kingdom's elders, who believed knowledge was a dangerous thing for women, had forbidden them from reading, keeping their access to literature limited to recipes and picture books.

The library stood bittersweetly in the centre of town. It was a grand building that many loathed, not that they would say that out loud, with shelves that spiralled towards the roof. Mountains of novels pile up untouched, away from those deemed unworthy of them.

Elizabeth Brown was a sweet and spirited young girl, whose curiosity could sometimes get the better of her. She had grown up listening to stories of brave heroines and evil hags from her older brother, William. If anyone found out what he was doing he could be severely punished but he risked the consequences anyway to share them with her. Each new story added fuel to the fiery blaze of passion inside her, the quiet yearning she could not cease. One pivotal evening, Elizabeth stood in the town square, her gaze fixated on the library. The hues of pinks, purples and yellows bathed the fortress of knowledge in light, granting the building its own halo. Elizabeth's mind was made up. She would sneak into the library.

The moon hung low in the sky, a spotlight for Elizabeth's stage – the Kingdom of Azure. She was cautious to avoid the glare of the eagle-eyed elders by creeping through narrow alleyways and back roads. The library's doors sit slightly ajar as if inviting her in. She slipped inside, the scent of old parchment and ink enveloping her like a warm embrace. She took a deep breath in, after all this time Elizabeth finally felt alive.

Elizabeth moved hesitantly, her finger caressing each of the spines of the books. The library was her kingdom and each book, a soldier ready to whisk her away to a new world. Each title whispered promises of knowledge, adventure and freedom. She still couldn't fathom that she was here, the one place she couldn't go but belonged. Just as she reached for a book with a particularly interesting cover, the floor creaked beneath her, the silence deafening.

She felt her stomach churn, looking to her left she saw the silhouette librarian approaching fast, his candle casting mysterious contours along the library walls. Panic washes over Elizabeth. With a quick glance, she spotted a narrow passageway behind the shelves and without a second thought, she darted into the darkness.



Elizabeth held her breath, praying that the shadows would conceal her. The librarian paused, his candle illuminating the space where Elizabeth had just been. Time felt suspended as Elizabeth watched, her breath ragged and shallow in her lungs.

“Come out Elizabeth, I can see you behind the bookshelf.” His voice was a soft melody carried by the winds of knowledge that circulated the library. Elizabeth's heart stopped in her chest, she felt her stomach churn with unease. She had been caught and her apprehender had recognised her! Her mind raced with possibilities. Would they arrest her? Would they kill her? She didn't know, and what about William? She was so caught up in the thrill of her midnight adventure that she had never even thought about her beloved brother or what the consequences would be for him.

Tentatively, she inched out of her hiding place preparing herself for whatever was to come. Much to her surprise she didn't see a scowling face of a town elder, instead she saw someone else, someone she knew but couldn't quite place.

“Uhh,” Elizabeth floundered trying to find a way to explain her being in the one place she was so clearly banned from. The familiar stranger raised one withered hand signalling her to stop with the excuses. He knew exactly what she was doing here.

“I'm sorry,” she said, her voice almost lost in the silence. Elizabeth moved her eyes, avoiding his burning gaze. As her stare began to rise from the floor, something dusty pink caught her eye. Too nervous to register it, Elizabeth blinked once. Then twice. Then for a final time before her eyes finally met a familiar face. Behind the hood of thick robes, the smiling face of Gerald, the kingdom's custodian, peeked through. His face was a map of wrinkles, evidence of years of laughter and love. His eyes, though lined, held a spark of wisdom and warmth that many who lived in Azure lost a long time ago.

Gerald smiles kindly, “Be at ease my child. You need not worry, for you are among friends.” Elizabeth tilts her head with scepticism as he continues. “There have been others like you before, too curious for their own good, and punished dearly for it. But you are different, my dear, for you have an ally...In me.”

And with that Gerald reaches up and pulls off the hood of his robes to reveal long silver hair that shines in the moonlight and instead of the uniform boots librarians must wear, delicate pink slippers shined outwardly.

Elizabeth steps back with a loud gasp. “Who are you?” she asks, unsure of what else to say.

The woman lets out a small laugh. “My name is Gemma but my friends call me Gem”. Gem looks deep into Elizabeth's eyes, “Can I tell you a story, dear?”



"I was once a young girl like you, my child – with a thirst for knowledge that had me hiding in the darkness too but the one who brought me into the light was my father, who used to sneak me books. Until one day, they came for him...and I never saw him again. The guilt consumed me and I didn't touch another book for years, until I realised he would have wanted me to fight and give others the same opportunities I had. I knew I could not help girls and women like us as Gem and so that is how I became Gerald."

Elizabeth was speechless, "Having to hide who you were all this time, isolating yourself from everyone. It must have been really hard. I'm sorry you had to do that." She finally voiced.

"It was," Gem replied solemnly, "But now that you're here, the wait and sacrifice was worth it."

The rest of the night flew by like grains of sand passing through Elizabeth's fingers. They exchanged small smiles and exciting stories packed with adventures. Unfortunately, their enthusiastic and lengthy conversation was abruptly ended by the loud shouting of the grandfather clock downstairs, alerting them that the rest of the town would soon be up. As Gem began to tuck her hair back under her hood, she gathered up some books off the shelves.

"Don't forget these" she said with a wink before placing them in Elizabeth's hands.

"Thank you for everything," Elizabeth replied.

With the book clutched tightly to her chest, Elizabeth made her way back home, letting the wind steal her laughter of astonishment. She opened the book Gem had given her, its pages whispering promises of magic and wonder. The words danced before her eyes, and she felt a sense of freedom she had never known before.

THE END

