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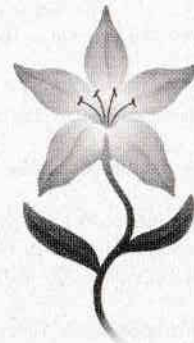
Also by Lynette Noni

The Prison Healer

The Gilded Cage

The Blood Traitor

THE PRISON HEALER



By Lynette Noni

H
HODDER

wrenched the basket from her hands, berries flying everywhere, and caught her fingers in his crushing grip. She didn't get the chance to say more before her mother's shrill voice bellowed out a warning.

"RUN, FARAN! *RUN!*"

Her father's grip turned painful, but it was too late for him to follow his wife's order. Soldiers were pouring from the cottage, their armor glinting silver even in the limited light, their swords raised.

There were at least a dozen of them.

So many.

Too many.

The little girl reached through the scratchy brambles for her brother's hand, his palm sticky with jerriberry juice, his fingers trembling. There was nowhere to run, trapped as they were with the icy river at their backs, the current too fast and deep for them to risk crossing.

"It's all right," their father said shakily as the soldiers neared. "Everything will be all right."

And then they were surrounded.



TEN YEARS LATER



CHAPTER ONE

Looking down at the boy strapped to the metal table before her, Kiva Meridan leaned in close and whispered, "Take a deep breath."

Before he could blink, she braced his wrist and stabbed the tip of her white-hot blade into the back of his hand. He screamed and thrashed against her—they always did—but she tightened her grip and continued carving three deep lines into his flesh, forming a Z.

A single character to identify him as a prisoner at Zalindov.

The wound would heal, but the scar would remain forever.

Kiva worked as fast as she could and only eased her grip once the carving was complete. She repressed the urge to tell him that the worst had passed. While barely a teenager, he was still old enough to discern the truth from lies. He belonged to Zalindov now, the metal band around his wrist labeling him as inmate H67L129. There was nothing good in his future—lying would do him no favors.

After smearing ballico sap across his bleeding flesh to stave off infection, then dusting it with pepperoor ash to ease his pain, Kiva wrapped his hand in a scrap of linen. She quietly warned him to keep it dry and clean for the next three days, all too aware that it would be impossible if he was allocated work in the tunnels, on the farms, or in the quarry.

"Hold still, I'm nearly done," Kiva said, swapping her blade for a pair of shears. They were speckled with rust, but the edges were sharp enough to cut through steel.

The boy was shaking, fear dilating his pupils, his skin pale.

Kiva didn't offer him any reassurances, not while the armed woman standing at the door to the infirmary watched her every move. Usually she was given a degree of privacy, working without the added pressure

of the guards' cold, keen eyes. But after the riot last week, they were on edge, monitoring everyone closely—even those like Kiva who were considered loyal to the Warden of Zalindov, a traitor to her fellow prisoners. An informant. A spy.

No one loathed Kiva more than she did herself, but she couldn't regret her choices, regardless of the cost.

Ignoring the whimpers now coming from the boy as she moved toward his head, Kiva began to hack at his hair in short, sharp motions. She remembered her own arrival at the prison a decade earlier, the humiliating process of being stripped down, scrubbed, and shorn. She'd left the infirmary with raw skin and no hair, an itchy gray tunic and matching pants her only possessions. Despite all she'd been through at Zalindov, those early hours of degradation were some of the worst she could recall. Thinking about them now had her own scar giving a pang of recollected pain, drawing her eyes to the band she wore beneath it. N18K442—her identification number—was etched into the metal, a constant reminder that she was nothing and no one, that saying or doing the wrong thing, even looking at the wrong person at the wrong time, could mean her death.

Zalindov showed no mercy, not even to the innocent.

Especially not to the innocent.

Kiva had been barely seven years old when she'd first arrived, but her age hadn't protected her from the brutality of prison life. She more than anyone knew that her breaths were numbered. No one survived Zalindov. It was only a matter of time before she joined the multitudes who had gone before her.

She was lucky, she knew, compared to many. Those assigned to the hard labor rarely lasted six months. A year, at most. But she'd never had to suffer through such debilitating work. In the early weeks after her arrival, Kiva had been allocated a job in the entrance block, where she'd sorted through the clothes and possessions taken from new inmates.

Later, when a different position had needed filling—due to a lethal outbreak that took hundreds of lives—she was sent to the workrooms and tasked with cleaning and repairing the guards' uniforms. Her fingers had bled and blistered from the unending laundry and needlecraft, but even then, she'd had little reason to complain, comparatively.

Kiva had been dreading the order for her to join the laborers, but the summons never came. Instead, after saving the life of a guard with a blood infection by advising him to use a poultice she'd seen her father make countless times, she had earned herself a place in the infirmary as a healer. Nearly two years later, the only other inmate working in the infirmary was executed for smuggling angeldust to desperate prisoners, leaving the then twelve-year-old Kiva to step into his role. With it came the responsibility of carving Zalindov's symbol into the new arrivals, something that, to this day, Kiva despised. However, she knew that if she refused to mark them, both she *and* the new prisoners would suffer the wrath of the guards. She'd learned that early on—and bore the scars on her back as a reminder. She would have been flogged to death had there been anyone skilled enough to replace her at the time. Now, however, there were others who could take up her mantle.

She was expendable, just like everyone else at Zalindov.

The boy's hair was a choppy mess when Kiva finally set the shears aside and reached for the razor. Sometimes it was enough to just cut away the tangles; other times, new arrivals came with matted, lice-infested locks, and it was best to shave it all off, rather than risk a plague of the small beasts spreading around the compound.

"Don't worry, it'll grow back," Kiva said gently, thinking of her own hair, black as night, that had been shorn upon her arrival yet now fell well down her back.

Despite her attempted comfort, the boy continued trembling, making it harder for her to avoid grazing him as she swiped the razor over his scalp.

Kiva wanted to tell him what he would face once he left the infirmary, but even if the guard hadn't been watching closely from the doorway, she knew that wasn't her place. New prisoners were partnered with another inmate for their first few days, and it was that person's responsibility to offer an introduction to Zalindov, to share warnings and reveal ways to stay alive. If, of course, that was desired. Some people arrived wanting to die, their hope already crumbled before they stepped through the iron gates and into the soulless limestone walls.

Kiva hoped this boy still had some fight left in him. He would need it to get through all that was coming.

"Done," she said, lowering the razor and stepping around to face him. He looked younger without his hair, all wide eyes, hollowed cheeks, and protruding ears. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

The boy stared at her as if she were one move away from slitting his throat. It was a look she was used to, especially from new arrivals. They didn't know she was one of them, a slave to Zalindov's whim. If he lived long enough, he would find his way to her again and discover the truth: that she was on his side and would help him in any way she could. Just like she helped all the others, inasmuch as she could.

"Finished?" called the guard at the door.

Kiva's hand tightened around the razor before she forced her fingers to relax. The last thing she needed was for the guard to sense any spark of rebellion in her.

Impassive and submissive—that was how she survived.

Many of the prisoners mocked her for it, especially those who had never needed her care. Zalindov's Bitch, some of them called her. The Heartless Carver, others hissed when she walked by. But the worst, perhaps, was the Princess of Death. She couldn't blame them for seeing her that way, and that was why she hated it the most. The truth was, many prisoners who entered the infirmary never came out again, and that was on her.

"Healer?" the guard called again, this time more forcefully. "Are you finished?"

Kiva gave a short nod, and the armed woman left her spot at the door and ventured into the room.

Female guards were a rarity at Zalindov. For every twenty men, there was perhaps one woman, and they seldom remained at the prison long before seeking posts elsewhere. This guard was new, someone Kiva had noticed for the first time a few days ago, her watchful amber eyes cool and detached in her youthful face. Her skin was two shades lighter than the blackest black, indicating that she hailed from Jirva or perhaps Hadris, both kingdoms renowned for their skilled warriors. Her hair was cropped close to her scalp, and from one ear dangled a jade tooth earring. That wasn't smart; someone could easily rip it out. Then again, she carried herself with a quiet confidence, her dark guard uniform—a long-sleeved leather tunic, pants, gloves, and boots—barely concealing the wiry muscles beneath. It would be a rare prisoner who was willing to mess with this young woman, and any who did would likely find themselves on a one-way trip to the morgue.

Swallowing at the thought, Kiva stepped backwards as the guard approached, giving the boy an encouraging squeeze of his shoulder as she moved past. He flinched so violently that she immediately regretted it.

"I'll just"—Kiva indicated the pile of discarded clothes that the boy had worn before changing into his gray prison garb—"take these to the entrance block for sorting."

This time it was the guard who nodded, before setting her amber eyes on the boy and ordering, "Come."

The scent of his fear permeated the air as he rose on wobbling legs, cradling his wounded hand with the other, and followed the guard from the room.

He didn't look back.

They never did.

Kiva waited until she was certain she was alone before she moved. Her motions were quick and practiced, but with a frantic urgency, her eyes flicking to and from the door with awareness that if she was caught, then she was dead. The Warden had other informants within the prison; he might favor Kiva, but that wouldn't keep her from punishment—or execution.

As she rifled through the pile of clothes, her nose wrinkled at the unpleasant smells of long travel and poor hygiene. She ignored the touch of something wet on her hand, the mold and mud and other things she'd rather not identify. She was searching for something. Searching, searching, searching.

She ran her fingers down the boy's pants but found nothing, so she moved to his linen shirt. It was threadbare, some places ripped and others patched up. Kiva inspected all the stitching, but still there was nothing, and she began to lose heart. But then she reached for his weathered boots, and there it was. Slipped down the damaged, gaping seam of the left boot was a small piece of folded parchment.

With shaking fingers, Kiva unfolded it and read the coded words contained within.

⊕ ≡ ~ < ≡ > ~ * ≡ .

> ∪ ~ ⊗ ~ » # × ≡ .

⊕ ≡ ⊕ # » » ∩ || ⊕ ≡ .

Kiva released a *whoosh* of air, her shoulders drooping with relief as she mentally translated the code: *We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.*

It had been three months since Kiva had last heard from her family. Three months of checking the clothing of new, oblivious prisoners,

hoping for any scrap of information from the outside world. If not for the charity of the stablemaster, Raz, she would have had no means of communicating with those she loved most. He risked his life to sneak the notes through Zalindov's walls to her, and despite their rarity—and brevity—they meant the world to Kiva.

We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.

The same eight words and other similar offerings had arrived sporadically over the last decade, always when Kiva needed to hear them the most.

We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.

The middle part was easier said than done, but Kiva would do as she was told, certain her family would one day fulfill their promise to come for her. No matter how many times they wrote the words, no matter how long she'd already waited, she held on to their declaration, repeating it over and over in her mind: *We will come. We will come. We will come.*

One day, she would be with her family again. One day, she would be free of Zalindov, a prisoner no longer.

For ten years, she had been waiting for that day.

But every week that passed, her hope dwindled more and more.

CHAPTER TWO

He arrived like many of the others: covered in blood and looking like death.

A month had passed since any new arrivals had appeared at Zalindov; a month since Kiva had been forced to carve a Z into anyone's flesh. Aside from the usual prison injuries and an outbreak of tunnel fever—for which the victims had been quarantined, some of whom had died and most of whom wished for death but would be back on their feet once the fever passed—there had been little work for her to do.

Today, however . . .

Three new arrivals.

All men.

And all rumored to be from Vallenia—the capital of Evalon, the largest kingdom in Wenderall.

It was rare for the wagons to appear in the winter months, especially those that came from the southern territories like Evalon. Usually prisoners hailing from such great distances were held in city dungeons or village lockups until the spring thaws, when they would be less likely to perish during the weeks of travel. Sometimes the guards themselves didn't survive the journey through the Belhare Desert and over the Tanestra Mountains, especially when the weather turned and blizzards swept across the pass. And for those venturing directly from Vallenia, they also had to cross the Wildemeadow and the Crewlling Swamplands, then cut straight through the heart of the Crying Woods—an arduous journey at the best of times, especially when coupled with the savage treatment of the transfer guards.

Winter, summer, spring, or fall, it didn't matter when the prisoners

came or where they were from: travel to and from Zalindov was always perilous. Located in the north of Evalon, close to the borders of both Mirraven and Caramor, the prison wasn't easy to reach from any of Wenderall's eight kingdoms. Nevertheless, all of those kingdoms used the prison, their problematic citizens transported from all corners of the continent, without care as to whether they would survive the journey.

Indeed, of the three men who had been delivered through the front gates and sent straight to the infirmary today, only one required Kiva's attention, since the other two had already passed into the everworld, their bodies pale and stiff. They didn't yet reek of decay, indicating their ends must have been recent, but that made little difference. They were dead—there was no bringing them back.

The third one, however . . . The pulse beating within him was a surprise, weak as it was.

Looking down at him, Kiva wondered if he would last the hour.

Doing her best to ignore the two corpses draped across metal slabs to her right, Kiva studied the living man, considering where to begin. He needed to be washed, not just because he was filthy, but because she couldn't tell how much of the blood coating him was his and if there were any wounds that need tending.

Rolling her shoulders, Kiva pushed her ratty sleeves up to her elbows, wincing as the coarse gray material irritated the still-healing flesh along the inside of her right forearm. She wouldn't allow herself to think about what the guards had done to her three nights ago, or what might have happened if the newest guard—the young woman with the watchful amber eyes—hadn't arrived when she did.

Kiva still didn't know why the woman had intervened and warned the others of the Warden's displeasure. The guards weren't fools. They knew that while Zalindov was ruled with an iron fist, the Warden didn't condone abuse of power from his guards. That, however, didn't stop them from violating the prisoners. They just took care not to get caught.

The newest guard hadn't yet lost the spark of honor, of *life*, in her amber eyes, which usually faded after the first few weeks at the prison, turning into bitter resentment. It was the only reason Kiva could come up with for her interference. But as grateful as she was, she now felt as if she *owed* the amber-eyed guard, and it never boded well to owe anyone anything at Zalindov.

Stifling her troubled thoughts, Kiva collected a wooden pail of fresh water and returned to the man's side. Carefully, methodically, she began to clean him, peeling away the layers of his tattered clothing as she went.

Never forget, little mouse: no two people look the same, but we are each beautiful in our own ways. The human body is a masterpiece that deserves our respect. Always.

Kiva sucked in a sharp breath as her father's voice drifted across her mind. It had been a long time since she'd been overcome with a memory from her childhood, a long time since she'd heard the nickname "little mouse"—something she'd earned from squeaking audibly anytime she was startled as a child—a long time since she'd felt the sting of tears in her eyes.

Stop it, she told herself. Don't go there.

Inhaling deeply, she gave herself three seconds to regain control, then resolutely continued her work. Her heart ached at the whisper of her father's gentle instruction, her thoughts involuntarily traveling to the days she'd spent in his workroom helping with the villagers who had sought him out for one malady or another. Her earliest memories were of being by his side—fetching water, tearing linens, even sterilizing blades once she was old enough to not hurt herself in the process. Of all her siblings, she was the one who had been born with their father's passion for healing, the one who wanted to ease the suffering of others.

Now here she was, about to carve out yet another man's flesh.

Her thigh itched. She ignored it.

Gritting her teeth, Kiva pushed aside her memories and focused

on removing the last of the man's clothes, leaving him only in his underthings. She felt no discomfort at the sight of him lying before her nearly naked. It was second nature for her to look at him with professional eyes, merely assessing the damage to his flesh. In the back of her mind, she could appreciate his toned build and the honeyed skin peeking out from beneath the blood that she continued to wash away, but rather than wonder what kind of life had led to him having such a healthy physique—and what had then led him to Zalindov—she instead feared what it would mean for him upon his awakening. He had enough muscle definition to indicate his strength, which could draw the wrong kind of attention and earn him the worst kind of job allocation.

Maybe it would be better if he didn't wake up, after all.

Berating herself for the thought, Kiva redoubled her efforts to clean him, aware, as always, of the guard watching her every move. Today it was the Butcher who stood in the doorway, having replaced Bones during shift change. Those weren't their real names, but Kiva's fellow prisoners had valid reasons for using them. The Butcher was rarely seen outside of the Abyss, the punishment block pressed up against the north-eastern wall. His name was both a warning and a promise for all those who were sent there, few of whom ever returned. Bones, on the other hand, was seen regularly around the prison grounds, often patrolling the top of the limestone walls with a crossbow over his shoulder, or stationed in the watchtowers. While not as dread-inducing as the Butcher, his predilection for snapping the bones of inmates on a whim meant Kiva was always careful to give him a wide berth.

It was uncommon for either of the brutal men to be on duty in the infirmary, but the prisoners were restless of late, with winter's bite making everyone more agitated than normal. Recurrent frosts meant food rations were at an all-time low, the produce damaged by the harsh weather and limiting what the laborers could harvest from the work farms. When