

OPHELIA

Allison Paige

It's so cold. A shiver scurries across my body so sudden that my teeth chatter. The pungent scent of algae clings to my hair from the lake. That's why it's cold, my hair is wet. My whole body is wet. I open my eyes but there is nothing but blackness that greets me. Why can't I see anything? I sit up, slamming the flat of my forehead into something and am pushed back into the wood floor violently. It must be wood that I'm lying on for it has that hollow sound that only wood has. It is not cold or rough enough to be stone.

Horror quickens my heart and I place my hands in front of me. There's a smooth top mere inches from my face. I feel around the box that confines my body, my heart beating faster. The breath in my chest quickens and I kick the bottom of the box without much force because there is not enough room for me to move.

"Let me out!" I scream. "Somebody please let me out! I'm alive! Can you hear me? Let me out!"

My throat is raw with desperation. I hold my breath in attempt to listen if anyone has heard me. As much as I strain my ears, the only thing I can hear is the sound of my blood pumping madly. Neither wind nor the rush of the sea can be heard.

They all thought I was mad. Poor Ophelia wasn't in her right mind.

I was not of sound mind, but neither was I mad. What is one to do when their father has been murdered by their lover?

It wasn't my head that had gone from me, but my heart. My heart. My love. My Hamlet.

How could he do this to me? He that was so precious to me stole something of even more value and yet...I loved him still. I *still* love him.

The news reached me and something inside my chest broke. I remember running. Blurred images of green and brown come back to me. I fell into the water. I don't know how I got there or why. I can't swim. And yet my feet led me there to the willows at the embankment and then there was darkness cloaked about me, pulling me down to its depths. It clasped me roughly by the ankles and dragged farther down.

I grip the white dress I know I still wear, wringing the water from it. They did not care enough to change me from my sodden gown. Something soft brushes my hand. Flowers. Oh God, they truly believe me dead. I finger the thin stem. If I had to guess there are the yellow petals that make the rue flower. For sorrow.

We were going to run away, Hamlet and I. He had a masterfully crafted plan on how we were to escape. Yes, that's it. I was to fake my death, down by the water. I cannot swim. But once they found my body they would place me into a newly crafted coffin. I would lay asleep after having drank the potion Hamlet gave me that would only give me the appearance of being dead.

It was all a part of the plan.

Father is dead.

I shut my eyes from the darkness, falling farther into its embrace. The tears dampen my chilled face as I sob. It was an accident. Hamlet could not have meant for this to happen when he knew how much I loved – love! – him.

Did he give me the elixir before or after Father's death?

I cannot remember what happened.

No one is coming for me.

My love. Where is he?

“Hamlet!” My throat constricts as I call. Softer, I cry “Father.”

I jolt with a start, slamming my head on the coffin’s top for a second time. Something woke me. What was it? Has Hamlet come looking for me?

“Hello! Help me! I’m here!”

Muted footsteps move around my head. I bang on the coffin with my fists. The wood bites into my soft skin hungrily with each strike. Why is no one helping me?

“Hamlet!” My voice is strained.

It’s not as easy to breathe as it had been before. Bits of color dash to and fro before my eyes. There are faces in them, people of court that I recognize. Their eyes are wide with madness, mouths hauntingly wide.

“Poor Ophelia,” they say.

I’m so tired. I breathe deeply but my lungs only catch a whiff of air. It’s so cold.

“Ophelia.” I hear my name from somewhere above.

Am I still under water? The sound of their voice is distorted and far off. Is it my love or my brother that searches for me? I almost forgot about Laertes. I get a vague image of him clinging to my lifeless form, screaming.

“If you’re there please answer me. I cannot find you.”

I touch the top of the coffin weakly but I cannot find the strength to knock. I’m here. I’m right here. My nails scratch over the surface in a silent response. There is not enough air left in this little box to call for him.

Pressure weighs heavily against my chest. My eye lids flutter in response and I knock against the wood plate. Right here.

Dirt falls against my parted mouth. Shuffling comes from above. It turns into nails digging against the coffin. They're uncovering my grave.

He's found me!

Hamlet. "Hhhh," I call.

"Cover your face."

Weakly I turn my head to the side just as something splits my prison apart. Pale light cuts across my eyes when the axe is pulled free. I gasp as air fills my lungs. It tastes of the water I drank before but sweeter. The sharp head of the axe continues to reign down until there is a hole big enough for me to climb out of.

"Ophelia!"

He came for me.

Hamlet pulls me against his chest as he wrenches me from death's embrace. Sweat and musk is what he smells like. I inhale the scent of him. There's something to him that was never there before. The dirt must have gotten into my nose because he wrecks of soil.

"You're so cold," I say when his hands grip my shoulders.

He smiles weakly. "That's how it is going to be now."

The tenderness of his affection warms me though. I reach for his face tearfully. The face I have come to know so well is sickly and gaunt. The heat of life's blood is no longer in his cheeks, making his skin appear ash in color. How long have I been gone?

Dried blood is flecked across his brow.

"It's not mine," he answers, pulling my hands away from the crimson stain. "I cannot stay long. I could not let you suffer beneath the earth when you so deserve the sun. Forgive me, my love, for the pain I have caused you."

“’Tis no pain that I cannot conquer.”

Sad lines tug at the corner of his brown eyes. How weary he looks. “My brave girl. I must go.”

“Where are you going?” I cannot keep my eyes open. I’m not ready. “Take me with you.”

His chilled fingers run back through my hair, and he squeezes. “You cannot go where I will be. When you are old and gray, my Ophelia, I will come back for you.”

Tears run down the edge of my face he is swift to wipe away. He doesn’t mean what I think he does. It’s not supposed to end like this.

“I’ll be seeing you, my love.” Gently he presses his lips to mine. It warms the fire he started within my chest so long ago. How good it feels to be loved by the one you love.

Darkness takes my hand as he lets it go.

It’s cold in the field when I wake. White fog sits patiently at the edge of the forest, waiting for an invitation to cross into the thin blades of grass. The moon’s light shines eerily across turned soil and broken coffin. Between me and it, is a silver handled axe.

“Hamlet,” I call.

Not even the wind answers.

The taste of him lingers on my lips.

How am I to live alone with this heartache? What is a life when it is made up of tragedy and unhappy endings?

Something delicate is clenched between within fist. I uncurl my fingers to the red rose with its crumpled petals. A promise of his love for me. It is the name of the ship he said would take us from this place. Together.

Somewhere in the harbor it is waiting.