

Excerpt from *UNFORTUNATE* by Kailey Bright

Published by New Degree Press, 2021

CHAPTER 1: PROPERTY OF THE MONTGOMERY HOUSE

Rain splattered against the Montgomery mansion. Each drop the same as the last, no different from eight years prior.

Like all other servants of Iridion, I could recall my Choosing Ceremony within an instant from a seemingly random trigger. I saw it in other servants' eyes when their House came over; how their eyes widened, expanding and darkening; how their bodies stiffened in odd postures as the recollection began, and how their bodies loosened back to normality as the recollection ended and numbed. I'd seen it when a bird chirped, when a particular Gifted yelled too loudly, when someone laughed or cried a certain way, or even on clear days when nothing could possibly go wrong.

For me, the rain commanded the memory to flourish from its dark corners, flashing in fragments every now and then as the wind grew stronger, as thunder and lightning shattered the sky.

I could hardly look out the window without becoming completely immobile. There used to be another servant who comforted me during these rainy episodes, but you're gone now.

Instead, I distracted myself with the routine morning chores around the house before the Montgomerys arose from their beds—polishing all open surfaces of the house, polishing them again for good measure, and kindling a fire in the living and foyer areas on opposite sides of the manor.

The fire crackled to life. Satisfied, I left it to grow, consume, and brighten. Entering the kitchen, a breakfast menu formed in my mind. Someone cleared his throat from above.

I craned my neck upward. Mr. Montgomery, Head of the Montgomery House, stood at the staircase, peering down at me with his distinct yellow eyes. Even with cane in hand, he kept his posture straightened and professional. I did the same.

“Good morning, Mr. Montgomery,” I greeted, bowing to him. “Any requests for breakfast, sir?”

“The gutters were not cleaned yesterday before the storm.”

Had I not cleaned them yesterday? No, that was a task originally set for this upcoming Monday.

“Right away, sir?”

Mr. Montgomery’s already narrowed eyes squinted dangerously thinner. “Is that a problem?”

“N-No!” I waved my arms violently in front of me, my voice elevated. “It’ll be done before breakfast, sir.”

“Good,” asserted Mr. Montgomery. “Remember Mr. Harris and Mr. Walton will be here today. The house must look perfect for their arrival.”

I nodded, no longer trusting my voice. If I woke Melanie now and moved the first laundry duties immediately afterward, maybe the storm would pass before I ever had to step foot outside.

But Mr. Montgomery didn’t leave. Waiting. Watching.

I took a trash bag from under the sink and begrudgingly walked toward the manor entrance, placing one foot shakingly in front of the other. Closer now, I could no longer ignore the sound that came with rain. Harsh winds whistled through the door hinges. I halted as a memory flashed.

My mother placed a decorative pin behind my ear.

I jolted, patting my hair for a piece that was no longer there. Taking in a deep breath, I opened the door.

My eyes caught sight of the dark blue coloring of the world. I inhaled sharply, the muscles along my spine instinctively tightening.

A pale pink dress. Huddled, crammed together. With other dresses. Other Unfortunate girls.

I blinked, and the outside yard came back into focus. I left the safety of the manor.

Droplets drilled into my skin, drenching the pink dress my mother had bought for this special occasion. Gingerly moving through the stone walkway became futile. I slipped, fumbling on the cobblestone road in hopes of reaching the town square in time for the ceremony.

I looped around to the side of the manor. The front-yard garden stretched out before me. Remembering when the flowers automatically sprouted there—the work of an Avlis contractor—I wondered how the lilies were holding up in such dark weather, desperate to cling onto a distraction. But the flowers were intact, unlike me, swaying in the wind to the beat of every droplet.

I moved on, stopping dead in my tracks as I caught sight of a ladder amidst the grey haze. Reaching forward, my feet sank into the garden mulch. Panic spread through my body with every heartbeat.

If I was going to be picked, I could not appear dirty.

We were divided by age.

Forcibly aligned with other ten-year-old Unfortunate girls, a City Guard scoffed at my muddy shoes. We wore tacky lavish outfits dampened by the rain.

Eyes glanced about nervously.

I shook the memory away, turning my attention back to the task at hand. Thunder crackled above; I gripped the ladder for dear life. My chest tightened and didn't ease as the rumble faded in the distance.

After several shaky breaths, I silently screamed at my left hand to move. It did, followed hesitantly by the other as I advanced upward toward the roof of the Montgomery manor.

Rain pelted downward in harsher waves. A loud booming noise erupted from above, followed by a strike of bright light that illuminated the roof. I screamed, hunching down and covering my ears. My fingers felt icy against my wet face. A silence enveloped the sky once more as the thunder dissipated. Every nerve in my body spiked, telling me to leave, get off the roof, and go back inside—where you would be waiting for me. You would rub my shoulder, laugh off the situation, and tell me you'd brave the rain in my place.

But you were gone.

And the thought of leaving now was laughable. I didn't have that luxury. My body betrayed my desires, rising and walking toward the roof's edge.

A thick buildup of dead, wet leaves greeted me.

I reached in, my hand sinking into the mass, as I made a mental note to clean the gutters earlier next summer. Transferring the mulch from the gutter to the trash bag, I ignored the dirt and grime as it crawled up my arms.

One side complete.

Hauling the trash bag to the back of the house, I began the process again.

The gutters cleared, I cautiously moved down the ladder and toward the front of the house.

"What about this one?" the mother asked, gesturing to a girl only two children away.

The father frowned, but before he could respond, a Gifted child stood directly in front of me with an excited grin on her face. "Mother!" she called. "Look at this one!" The Gifted child pointed straight at my Unfortunate heart. I held back a flinch.

The parents turned their attention to me, their eyes blank and noses raised. "What is it, sweetie?" the mother asked.

“Molly sees something she likes,” commented the father as the Gifted child came closer and pushed me down. I hit the concrete hard.

I stepped out to the roadside without injury, placing the filled trash bag in a bin. A large vehicle would come through sometime later this week for pickup.

Light began to pull through the clouds, the rain dulling to less droplets. My breath steadied, the Choosing Ceremony receding back into the dark corners of my mind. But it would come back, as it always did when the sky broke out into tears.

Stepping back into the foyer, a chill ran inside my bones and rattled my body in sudden and long shakes. I ran into the servant bathroom down the left hall, drying myself off with a worn towel instead of waiting for the fire to warm me.

Within the reflection of the mirror, I could clearly see the words that inscribed my life. A plaque resided in every Gifted House and in every public space servants spent a considerable amount of time in. Here, a plaque resided in the foyer and this very bathroom. The sign read off the six Unfortunate Laws of Servitude I had to abide by:

- An Unfortunate servant must carry out any and all orders given by their Gifted House and those their Gifted House permits.
- An Unfortunate, once selected from an annual Choosing Ceremony, becomes a faithful servant to the selected Gifted House. An Unfortunate cannot leave their current Gifted House unless dismissed or released to another designated Gifted House by a leading member of the current Gifted House.
- All unchosen Unfortunate girls and women are required to attend the annual Choosing Ceremony from the time they turn ten years of age to the year of their twentieth birthday.
- An Unfortunate can be punished in any extremity their Gifted House deems necessary and by those their Gifted House permits.
- An Unfortunate servant is permitted one Sunday off each month unless specified differently by their Gifted House.

- An Unfortunate cannot harm any Gifted under any jurisdiction beneath Divine power.

Underneath the rules was a string of bold capitalized letters declaring,

FAILURE TO UPHOLD ANY AND ALL LAWS IS PUNISHABLE BY IMPRISONMENT AND/OR
DEATH.

“You know what is required of you, yes?” the mother inquired.

I nodded, knowing the Unfortunate Laws of Servitude like a brand on the back of my hand. Studying the six rules for almost a year now, my mother prepared me for my first Choosing Ceremony in the hopes of being chosen.

“I do, ma’am.”