

JOE ARMS



Bird Nest
photograph

PATRICK DEENEY

Where is Away

Houses flew past as Rei ran down the narrow alleyway. Her eyes locked on the slanted rooftops, watching as a flock of red darted back and forth, the last robin of the fall. It chirped happily as it fluttered against the pale grey sky.

Behind her, the footsteps were growing fainter by the second. She turned quickly to see how close they were. The red scarf around her neck flailed in the wind, partially blocking her sight. Two men were entering the alley, frantically trying to catch up. She smiled and turned her eyes back toward the sky. The bird had moved faster than she had anticipated, landing on a house half-way down the next alley. She giggled, watching it peck at a few of its feathers and take off towards the next rooftop.

The alley ended, opening up to a larger thoroughfare crowded with dozens of people. Rei dodged inbetween the groups as she sprinted towards the next narrow corridor. A dog had stopped a few feet in front of her. She leapt into the air, taking care to not graze the dog with her foot, landed softly, and continued running.

A man stepped into the alley's entrance, effectively blocking it from her. She sped up, hoping to break past this blockage and continue following the robin, now just a red speck in the sky. She lowered her shoulder and prepared for impact.

"Hold it now, missy." The man picked her up and spun her, taking away all her speed. "What're ya doing out 'ere?"

"Let go of me!" Rei started kicking.

"fraid I can't do that, missy." The man set her down on the ground, but kept his hands on her shoulders. "Y'ur father already paid us to get ya. We wouldn't want to disappoint 'im now, would we?"

The two men that had chased Rei down the alley had finally caught up with her. Both were panting heavily.

"Oi, what're you two thinking! Bein' out ran by a girl."

The taller of the two caught his breath first, "Sorry, Chez." He placed his hands on his knees, doubled over, and resumed his panting.

The other man was larger. He wiped his sweat-covered forehead with a meaty arm as he struggled to talk, "She's just too fast."

"Pathetic. Head back. Boss will deal wit' ya later." The two men nodded and started down the street.

Chez moved, steering Rei into the thoroughfare and in the opposite direction. The two merged with the midmorning foot traffic, making their way towards the mansion sitting quietly at its end.

They walked in silence, passing the guards patrolling the front gate. The ivory walls of the mansion reflected the gloomy sky, casting a pale light down into the busy courtyard. Men and women, all wearing the uniforms of butlers, maids and gardeners, strode through the courtyard going about their daily business. The front doors of the mansion stood open with a balcony jutting out into the air directly above them. The doors towered over them as they passed under and into the great hall.

A man stood in the center of a red rug that ran the length of the room. He charged over as soon as he saw Rei and Chez enter. "Rei Alistor!" The purple bathrobe that was wrapped around him billowed out around his legs as he moved. "How dare you try to sneak out again! Do you know how much this cost me?"

Rei avoided eye contact. "You didn't have to spend anything, Father. I always come back." Sometimes she wished she didn't. Sometimes she wished that she could be gone forever.

"That's not the point! You are the daughter of one of the most important men in the city." Her father gestured to himself.

Rei rolled her eyes. Whenever she was in trouble, her father would always start off this way. He had inherited a metal works company from her grandfather. The company made everything from fences and iron bars to the very nails that held the majority of the buildings together. That metal works business took off and netted her family a fortune. Her father had always had a big head, or so she had heard in whispers every time she snuck out, but it grew even larger once he owned it all.

"Do you know what could have happened to you out there?" her father continued, "You could've been raped, killed, or worse—kidnapped and held for ransom! You're just lucky that I found you first."

Rei mouthed the last few sentences of the speech her father

gave. It was always the same speech she got whenever she was brought back after sneaking out. Her father was always more worried about him losing money and losing face than the safety of his daughter. He never really cared about her, just about how bad she made him look.

Her father gestured toward the man that had accompanied her home. "Thank you, Chez. You did a fantastic job." He then stared straight at Rei, "This is your new bodyguard. Wherever you go, he goes."

"But, Father!"

"No buts! You seem to want to wander around the city, so he will accompany you every time you do and make sure you don't get hurt."

Rei stayed silent. Protesting wasn't going to get her anywhere: it never did. Once Father had decided something, he never went back on his word. How she detested his bullheadedness. Her mother had too.

"One more thing." He clapped his hands. Two servants walked forward, carrying a rather large object. They stopped next to her father, struggling to keep whatever they held, up. "You're lucky I love you so much," he sneered as he pulled off the covering, revealing an oversized, ornately decorated birdcage with a single bird sitting inside.

Rei took a step toward the cage. "Is that a lark?" They were her second favorite kind of bird, the first being robins. It sat on a small bar that hung from the top of the cage, cleaning its light brown feathers. Its head lifted from under its small wing and looked around at the people surrounding it. Rei placed her face near the cage to get a closer look. The bird locked in on her face and stared at her for a moment.

Then it started to sing. Its sweet melody echoed throughout the room. Soon the chirps echoed off the walls, surrounding them in a fugue of cacophonic bliss.

"One of the few," her father shouted over the noise. "Cost me a pretty penny. But I know how much you love birds."

Rei stood up. "I love them because they can fly. They are free to do whatever they want, and don't have to stay in one place if they don't want to."

"See, but this is better. Instead of leaving here and going outside, now you can watch it fly from the comfort of your room! I got it a big cage so that it can have lots of room to fly."

Rei looked back towards the bird, "That's not what I meant. What's stopping me from letting it go?"

Her father motioned for her to come closer. "Look here," he whispered. His breath stunk of tobacco, another nasty habit of his.

A brown droplet of spit clung for dear life to his lower lip and his face was covered in a patchwork of morning stubble.

He placed a hand on the birdcage, jiggling a sturdy padlock wrapped inbetween the metal bars. "I locked the cage door. That way you can't let this one go."

"I'll find a way," Rei whispered back, staring at the droplet of spittle on her father's chin.

"I thought you'd say that. And if you do somehow release it, you're going to wish you left with your mother. Got it?" He spat out the last two words, sending a few more drops rocketing from his mouth. His breath stunk. "I have spent enough money over the years to try and keep you happy and I'm getting sick of it. I don't care what I promised your mother before she left, but this is the last time." He stood up and gestured towards the other man, "Chez, please escort my daughter to her room."

"Aye, Mister Alistor." His rough hands clasped Rei's nimble shoulders and gently pushed her towards an open door on the side of the hall. A staircase led towards the higher levels of the mansion. The two servants followed them, careful not to let the birdcage fall or hit against the marble walls. They climbed slowly as the lark fluttered in the cage, chirping softly.

"Yur father seems a bit strict." Chez removed his hands from her shoulders.

"Isn't that an understatement?"

"e seems scared that 'e'll lose ya. That ya never will come back."

"I wish I didn't have to. But he always sends someone after me. It's all because of Mother..."

"Yur mother?" The lark stopped singing. Its last chirp reverberated off the stone surrounding them in its high-pitched din.

Rei stopped walking. "She left when I was just a little girl."

"I'm sorry. I 'idn't know."

"It's fine. It's been so long I hardly think about it anymore..." Her voice caught in her throat. Why was she lying to a man she just met? She thought about her mother all the time.

"What happen', if ya don't mind me askin'?"

"She flew away. At least that's what I tell myself."

"Do ya know where she went?"

Rei stared at the cool stone steps. Her mind had strayed into territory not easily abandoned. "No... When I was younger, I often had dreams that she turned into a bird and flew away. So when I was little I thought that if I followed the birds, they would lead me to her. That they would lead me to 'away,' wherever that was." The lark started to chirp again as Rei continued her ascent.

They reached the top of the staircase and started down a long

hallway. Rei's room was halfway down its length.

The curtains from the balcony wafted inward as they opened the door. Rei entered slowly, reluctant to return to its affluent embrace. She sat down on her bed on the opposite side of the room and watched as the two servants gingerly placed the birdcage on an empty table near the door, bowed and left.

The bird inside chirped occasionally as it paced the inside of the cage.

Chez whistled at the extravagance that surrounded him. "Why would ya want to leave all this?"

Rei flopped backwards, letting her feet hang off the edge of the bed. "It's not the place I hate." She gazed at the surrounding purple walls, hoping they would break away and set her free. In here she felt like she was on display. Just a novelty to keep locked up, only taken out when her father had any desire to interact with her. He didn't love her as a daughter; he loved her because she made him money. If she hadn't been born, her grandfather wouldn't have named her father as his successor and her father wouldn't have all the money he pined for when he was young. Her father had already started planning what was next for her: marriage to a wealthy family's son so he could get more money and power.

Rei didn't want that. She didn't want to be tied down to someone just because she was told to. She wanted to be free, to experience all that she could, to fly away from it all, like her mother did.

Chez walked out onto the balcony and whistled again. "Whadda view!" It was about midday now. The sun was high in the sky, filling the city with light.

Rei got up and joined him, "See that building there?" She pointed to a rooftop about ten feet away and a few feet below them.

"Whadda 'bout it?"

"I often dream of jumping onto it. That's how I would escape from here."

"Ya'd never be able to clear da gap. And if ya don't, it's at least a two story fall."

Rei leaned against the metal railing. "A girl can dream, can't she?"

"Aye, that she can."

The two stood for a few moments. The lark continued to chirp occasionally, begging for its release. "Why would ya tell me 'bout yur escape plan? Ya know I can't let ya do it."

"Because all it is, is a dream. Who knows if I can actually make it?" She paused. "If you don't mind, Chez, I think I would like some alone time."

"Course, ma'am." He walked off the balcony and towards the door. "I'll be waitin' jus' outside if ya need anythin'" He grabbed the door handle and started pulling it closed behind him.

"You don't have to, you know."

"Sorry, ma'am. Y'ur father's orders."

Rei scoffed. "Of course." Her father wanted to keep her on an even shorter leash this time. She turned to face him. "Thank you, Chez, for listening."

He nodded and closed the door behind him.

Rei moved from the balcony to the birdcage. The lark noticed her coming, and started pecking at the cage door. Rei stuck her finger in between the narrow bars and scratched it on the head.

"Sorry, little buddy; I wish I could help. But if I do, that means bad things for both of us."

The lark stopped pecking and looked at her. Desire filled its eyes, a need to get away from here. To get to wherever away was.

Rei stopped petting it and headed to her bed. The lark started to call, but its call had changed. The soft sweet chirps that had filled the hall earlier had gone, replaced by raspy squawking. The sound assaulted Rei's ears as the tiny bird pecked harder at the cage door, relentlessly trying to open it. Rei curled up on her bed and threw a pillow over her head to block out the noise as she tried to dream.

Familiar images from her past formed before her. The air was saturated with the smell of cooking meats and the light from lamps hanging across the thoroughfare. Rei shuffled her short legs as fast as she could to keep up with the hand she held. Birds fluttered in the late summer air, darting between the strands of lights, playing a musical game of tag.

The courtyard was filled with people celebrating the coming of the fall. They dashed between groups, chatting quickly and moving on to the next group. To Rei, they seemed to be mimicking the birds.

The hand that gripped hers pulled a little harder. "Quit dawdling, Miss Alistor. Your father wanted you back a while ago. He'll sure to tan my hide for this!"

Rei started to slow down even more, "I want to watch the birds, Nanny!" She tried to retract her arm from her nanny's meaty hand that encompassed it, but the grip was too strong. She struggled against it, for any sort of freedom.

"Miss Alistor, please. We have to ge—"

A scream shattered the calm chatter that had surrounded them. All the eyes in the crowd shot upwards towards its source. The mansion that sat at the end of the courtyard reflected the yellow-orange light on its ivory walls. A woman was standing on

the railing of a balcony directly above the massive front doors.

An awkward silence blew into the courtyard, as she stood stalemated between Rei's father and nothingness. Two voices could be faintly heard passing through the void.

"Darling, please. People are watching." Father took a step forward gesturing for her to step off the rail.

"Just shut it. I've had enough. Its' always about impressions with you. That, and money. That's all you ever care about."

"Not true!" He inched a little closer. "I care about you!"

"Bullshit. You only married me because your father didn't want to give away everything to a son who was a dead end to the family name. I'll give you credit though, that was some acting. Pretending that you loved me just long enough for your father to name you successor and then die. I wish I had just stopped and thought about it earlier."

"I—I—" He paused. "I love our daughter."

"Do you really love her?" She glanced over her shoulder at the crowd gathered below. Rei made eye contact with her. Her mother was a beautiful woman. Her face was always painted with make-up, making her skin look flawless. The blonde hair that adorned her head always seemed to bounce when she moved. But now, her face was pale, a dark purple bruise cradled one of her eyes and her hair hung listless by the sides of her head, straightened and disheveled beyond all recognition. She didn't look the same.

The man paused again for a second. "Of course I do! What kind of monster do you think I am?"

"Then prove it."

The man paused a third time. He took a step backward and scratched his head. "How? What do you want me to say to get you off that railing?"

"Promise me you will make her happy."

"Fine. I promise, now get down from there, or else people are going to start talking."

"That's not good enough. I want you to promise me that no matter the cost, you will try to make her happy."

"You know I don't go back on my word."

The woman nodded, stepped down from the railing, and walked towards the man. The two started to move inside the building. His hand slowly crept up the back of her slender neck and gripped it tightly. The woman fell to her knees in pain as the man muttered something to her, then threw her to the ground and walked away. The woman slowly staggered to her feet and stared after the man. "I hope that if you ever treat Rei as badly as you did me, she leaves you, too!"

The man turned around laughing. "Leave me? Where are you

going to go? You wouldn't survive a day without your life here."

The woman turned towards the balcony. "I'm going away. I just can't do this anymore. I could handle your arrogance, your selfishness, your stubbornness. I could even take the abuse to a certain point, because I keep telling myself that it was all for her. But I just can't do it anymore, I just can't go on, knowing that every remaining day would be the same for the rest of my life. It literally is breaking my spirit. You promised to take care of our daughter no matter what. So I know she will be all right; she's a strong girl."

"What do you mean?" The man stopped walking and turned to face her. "Where are you going!?"

"I told you, I'm going away." The woman started running for the railing. She leapt into the air and spread her arms out like wings as she dove like a swan into the open air.

For a moment, she flew. Rei watched as her mother soared into the night sky. The nanny quickly moved in front of Rei, attempting to shield her from the sight.

Rei watched as her mother disappeared behind the nanny's head. For a second, all was quiet. Then, a small robin fluttered out from behind the nanny.

The little bird caught Rei's attention as it fluttered among the lanterns that hung above her. The bird glided gently toward her, circling her once before flying off into the night sky.

Hours had passed while the lark screamed for its freedom. A knock at the door stirred Rei from her dreaming state. Her father entered with a tray of food.

"Good, you're still here! I see Chez has done a fantastic job at keeping an eye on you."

Rei sat up and nodded, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. The sun had sunk low in the sky, casting horizontal beams through the open balcony door.

"Excellent! I brought you some food, in case you were hungry." Her father set it on another table near the balcony and made his way over to the birdcage. "He is a noisy little fellow, isn't he?" The lark started to squawk louder as he put a finger through the bars.

Her father reached to scratch its head. The lark dodged and bit his finger. Her father pulled it away, swearing violently. The bird started to fly around the cage, smashing its head into the sides as it did so.

"Nasty creature isn't it?" her father laughed as he wiped his finger off and walked over to the bed.

"What do you want?" There was no emotion in her voice.

"Can't a father bring his only daughter dinner, and only hope for some love in return?"

Rei didn't answer. The lark started shaking the cage bars with each hit of its head.

"I see. Nothing I do is good enough for you. Is that it? Nothing is up to your standards?"

Rei looked away, "No."

"What do you want from me? I've given you everything you have ever wanted! I have spent so much damn money on you and all you give in return is a cold shoulder? Everything I have ever done for you is for the best!"

"Best for who? Huh?" she snapped back, "You don't even care about me, do you? All you ever care about is making more money for yourself, without even considering what I want!"

Her father clenched his fist, tensing the muscles in his arm. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down before he spoke, "What? What do you want?"

"I want my mother back!"

"You can't have her back!" he shouted as he walked back towards the balcony. "She's gone away. She left us. She left me because she hated me." He stood, looking out over the city. "She left because of me," he repeated, slower, "Now you want to leave me too, but I won't let you. I won't be left alone! I will make you love me if I have to!"

Rei didn't respond, she could feel the leash around her neck growing shorter. The lark started to hit the cage harder, rocking it on the table.

"I have tried doing things the nice way, buying you whatever I thought would make you happy. Now I have to take more drastic measures..." He looked over at the tray of food sitting on the table near him. "Let's see how a couple of days without food does you." He picked it up and threw it over the balcony railing. The food sailed over the side, dropping between the balcony edge and the neighboring roof.

Her father marched towards the door, "Stay in here for a few days. See how well you do without me. You'll come crawling back eventually. Then you'll appreciate me. Then you will love me!" He stormed out, slamming the door, and left Rei and the bird alone.

The lark had beaten its head bloody. It desperately tried to fly, as it slowly collided with the cage walls again. Its screeching stopped as it fell hard against the base. Its breathing slowed as the blood poured from its head. Soon it was still. It was free.

"I'll find a way." She looked at the bird lying still at the bottom of the cage. "I'll find away."

The sun had sunk below the horizon, letting darkness fill the

room. Rei stood up and walked towards the balcony. The roof was only a few feet away. She could make the jump. She had to make the jump.

The night breeze gently blew against her face as Rei passed through the balcony doors. She climbed over the railing, holding on tightly.

The door slowly opened as Chez knocked quietly. "Ma'am?" He looked over to where she stood.

Rei looked back and smiled. Then she flew.

EMILY PAPE

The Giggle

"Well, that looks pointless." It was a cold voice, sharp while smiling.

Ella stopped mid-shovel and let out a seething breath. She stood up and turned to face the repulsive old man from down the road, assuming an unconvincing neutral façade. He had stopped on the edge of the recently cleared pavement. The snow was falling so fast that it was hard to see anything far beyond her driveway, so there was nothing to distract her from the thin lips stretched taut over teeth yellowed with age, or the cool black eyes glittering underneath his ragged mad bomber hat. She wasn't sure what color it had been originally, but it was a dingy shade of gray now. His coat was just as worn, like he had bought it fifty years ago and never taken it off.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Peterson," Ella said, her voice stiff.
"How are you today?"

"Quite well, my dear." His smile widened into a manic, unsettling thing, paired with a gaze that bore with unparalleled focus. It wasn't what he said. It was how he said it—sly niceties delivered with a toneless edge. Ella thought it was odd, how clear his voice was; older men were supposed to have rough, aged voices.

Ella's skin crawled. This town had a lot of old people living in it, the sort of place where the kids had all grown up, moved away, and never come back. Some of the neighbors were nice and some were rude. That was how neighbors were. But not this guy. This guy occupied a category of unpleasant that was all his own. It wasn't just the way he acted, like being a malevolent creep was an unconscious tick he couldn't seem to shake. It was the way