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Written by Vic James

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VIC JAMES

GILDED CAGE



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Book One



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Thank you for everything, especially the library books

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Prologue



Leah

She heard the motorbike first, then the galloping horse – two distant points of noise in the darkness, converging on her as she ran.

Apart from her boots striking the ground, Leah wasn't making a sound, and neither was the baby she held close. But their pursuers didn't need to hear them to find them. The only place she could run to was Kyneston's perimeter wall, and the only hope of escape once she got there was the infant bundled in her arms, her daughter Libby.

The moon was alternately covered and revealed by high, rapid clouds, but the faint radiance of the wall shone steadily along the horizon. It was like the streak of hallway light beneath a bedroom door, comforting children waking from nightmares.

Was that what her life at Kyneston had become: a nightmare? It had once seemed to fulfil all of her dreams.

The roar of the bike engine was closer now and the thudding hooves had fallen behind. Her pursuers could

only be Gavar and Jenner. Both were way off to the left, bearing down in a line that headed straight for her. But Leah had reached the wall first.

She slumped against it for a moment's relief. One hand rested on the ancient masonry as she dragged in a breath. The wall felt cool beneath her fingers. It was slick with moisture and furred with moss, jarring with the illusion of warmth from the unnaturally glowing brickwork. But that was the power of Skill for you. There was nothing natural about this place or the people that lived here.

Time to go.

'Please, my darling. Please,' Leah whispered to her child, pulling aside the edge of the blanket she'd knitted and kissing Libby's silky head.

The baby fussed as Leah gently untangled an arm and took her small hand. Chest heaving with terror as much as exertion, Leah leaned on the wall and pressed her baby's palm to it.

Where the tiny fingers touched the weather-beaten brick, a greater brightness bloomed beneath them. As Leah watched, the luminescence spread, flowing through the mortar between the bricks. It was weak, but visible nonetheless. And – there! – the light jumped and climbed upward, stronger now, becoming firmer, sharper. It took on outlines: an upright, then an arch. The gate.

From the darkness came a mechanical snarl. The motorbike engine being choked off. Dying.

Then another, closer sound broke into the night: a leisurely handclap. Leah recoiled as if it had been an actual slap.

Someone was waiting there. And as the tall, slender figure stepped into the spilling light she saw that, of course, it was him. Silyen. The youngest of the three Jardine brothers, but not the least. He brought them into Kyneston, all those serving their days, and it was his Skill that kept them here on his family's estate. How could she have imagined he'd let her escape?

The slow applause stopped. One of the boy's narrow, nail-bitten hands gestured at the vaulting ironwork.

'Be my guest,' Silyen said, as if inviting mother and child in for tea. 'I won't try and stop you. I'm rather fascinated to see what little Libby is capable of. You know I have . . . certain theories.'

Leah's heart was pounding. He was the last one of them that she'd trust. The very last. Still, she had to take the offered chance, even if it was no more than a cat momentarily lifting its paw off a mouse's back.

She studied his face as if moonlight and Skill-light might reveal the truth of his intentions. And as Silyen met her eye for perhaps the very first time, Leah thought she glimpsed something. Was it curiosity? He wanted to see if Libby could open the gate. If she could, maybe he would let them both through. Purely for the satisfaction of seeing it – and just perhaps to spite his eldest brother.

'Thank you,' she said, in little more than a whisper. '*Sapere aude?*'

'"Dare to know" indeed. If you dare, I will know.'

Silyen smiled. Leah knew better than to mistake it for compassion or kindness.

She stepped forward and pressed Libby's hand to the faintly outlined gate, and beneath the baby's sticky fingers it blazed. Like molten metal flooding a casting mould, it bloomed with brilliant life: an efflorescence of ironwork, leaves and fantastical birds, all topped with the entwined 'P' and 'J'. It looked exactly as it had that day, four years before, when Leah arrived at Kyneston and it had swung open to admit her. Just as it had looked, no doubt, hundreds of years ago when it was first created.

But the gate remained shut. In desperation, Leah grabbed one of the wrought-iron vines and pulled with all her strength. Libby began to wail loudly. But the din no longer mattered, Leah thought with dull hopelessness. They wouldn't be leaving Kyneston Estate tonight.

'Ah, how interesting,' Silyen murmured. 'Your child – that is, my brother's child – has the blood to wake the gate, but not the Skill to command it. Unless, perhaps, she's trying to tell you she doesn't want to leave her family.'

'You're not Libby's family,' Leah spat, roused to fury by her fear, hugging her baby more tightly. Her fingers cramped from struggling with the unyielding metal. 'Not Gavar, not any of y—'

A shot rang out and Leah fell to the ground crying aloud. Pain raced through her body as fast and bright as the light through the gate.

Gavar walked over unhurriedly and stood above her where she lay, tears leaking from her eyes. She had once loved this man: Kyneston's heir, Libby's father. The gun was in his hand.

'I warned you,' Gavar Jardine said. 'No one steals what's mine.'

Leah didn't look at him. She turned her head, resting her cheek against the cold ground, and fixed her gaze instead on the blanketed bundle lying a few feet away. Libby was howling with hurt and outrage. Leah's heart yearned to touch and soothe her daughter, but for some reason her arm no longer had the strength to reach even that short distance.

Hooves clattered to a halt nearby. A horse whickered and two booted heels hit the ground. And here came Jenner, the middle brother. The only one who might intend good, but who was powerless to act.

'What are you doing, Gavar?' he shouted. 'She's not some animal you can just shoot. Is she hurt?'

As if in answer, Leah let out a keening sound that died in an airless gasp. Jenner hurried to kneel beside her and she felt him wipe the tears from her eyes. His fingers were gentle against her face.

'I'm sorry,' he told her. 'So sorry.'

In the dimness that gathered around her, which the shining gate did nothing to dispel, she saw Gavar tuck his gun beneath his coat before bending low and gathering up their daughter.

Silyen walked past, towards the great house. As he went, Gavar turned his back and hunched over Libby protectively. Leah could only hope he would be a kinder father than he had been a lover.

'Silyen!' she heard Jenner call. He sounded distant, as if he stood in the Kyneston Pale calling across the lake, although she could still feel his palm cradling her cheek. 'Silyen, wait! Can't you do anything?'

'You know how it works,' came the response, so faint that Leah wondered if she had imagined it. 'No one can bring back the dead. Not even me.'

'She's not . . .'

But maybe Jenner trailed off. And Gavar had surely hushed Libby. And the gate must have faded away, its Skill-light extinguished, because everything went quiet and dark.