

An  
UNFORGETTABLE  
Love Sealed  
with a  
STAMP



AVA WINTERS

AMAZON BEST SELLING AUTHOR



An Unforgettable Love Sealed  
with a Stamp



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

*A Western Historical Romance Book*

by

*Ava Winters*

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# Let's connect!

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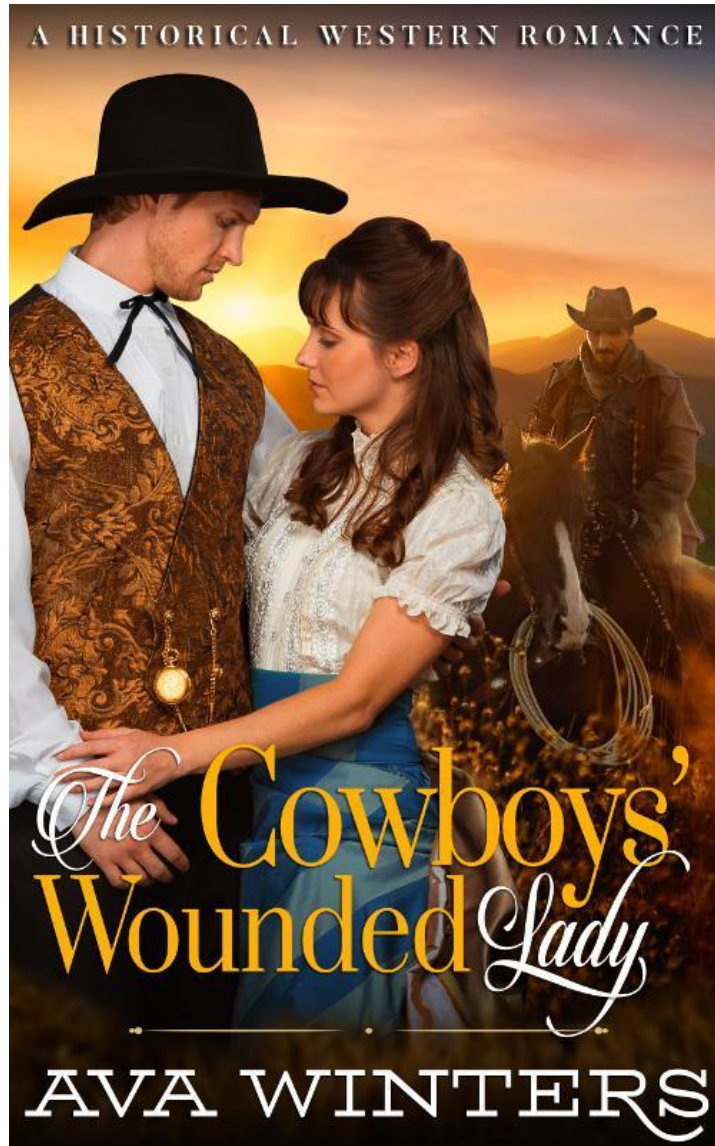
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# Letter from Ava Winters

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“Here is a lifelong bookworm, a devoted teacher and a mother of two boys. I also make mean sandwiches.”

If someone wanted to describe me in one sentence, that would be it. There has never been a greater joy in my life than spending time with children and seeing them grow up - all of my children, including the 23 little 9-year-olds that I currently teach. And I have not known such bliss than that of reading a good book.

As a Western Historical Romance writer, my passion has always been reading and writing romance novels. The historical part came after my studies as a teacher - I was mesmerized by the stories I heard, so much that I wanted to visit every place I learned about. And so, I did, finding the love of my life along the way as I walked the paths of my characters.

Now, I'm a full-time elementary school teacher, a full-time mother of two wonderful boys and a full-time writer. Wondering how I manage all of them? I did too, at first, but then I realized it's because everything I do, I love, and I have the chance to share it with all of you.

And I would love to see you again in this small adventure of mine!

Until next time,  
*Ava Winters*

# Blurb

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**An unexpected mail-order bride ignites a flame that will forever transform his heart in the untamed frontier of Colorado.**

In the rugged lands of Colorado, Sophia's life has been marred by tragedy and hardship. Orphaned at a young age and mistreated by her guardian, she embarks on a perilous journey to honor her best friend's dying wish. With letters in hand, she arrives at a ranch to fulfill a promise—but will this marriage of convenience save her soul?

Nathan, a haunted and cynical rancher, bears the scars of war and loss. Devastated by the demise of his family, he has forsaken hope and resigned himself to a solitary existence. When a woman claiming to be his betrothed arrives, his skepticism ignites a fiery clash. Sparks fly as they engage in a battle of wits and wills. Is this woman enough to crack open his locked heart?

In this tale of broken souls seeking solace, can Sophia and Nathan navigate the treacherous path of their hearts? As danger looms and their love teeters on the edge, will they find the strength to stand united against their common adversary?



# Prologue

*Chicago, 1865*

Sophia eyed her own reflection skeptically. Her tattered old burgundy dress was certainly the worse for wear, but still holding up. The only problem was the sleeves. She had owned the dress – her favorite – for a while, and after a few times of having to turn back dirty, frayed cuffs, it was natural that the sleeves were now too short, exposing an inch or two of her wrists.

Other girls might only worry about the chill Chicago winters and clothes that let in the cold, but Sophia had other things to think about.

Namely, the ring of purpling bruises around her wrist, pockmarked with little red crescents where nails had dug into her skin. She tugged experimentally on her sleeves, trying to pull them down further. It was no good. The bruises were unashamedly on show. Sophia would have to think of something else.

And, of course, there was the rich purpling bruise near her eye. That would be much harder to hide, but there wasn't much she could do about that. A layer or two of powder would hide the bruise in public, but Sophia had precious little powder left.

She heard a noise out in the hallway and hurriedly backed away from the mirror. She was supposed to be dusting in here, not eyeing her own reflection.

Sophia just had time to snatch up a duster before the parlor door opened. She immediately relaxed when she saw who was there.

“Jazzy, it’s you,” she sighed. “I thought it was... well.”

The two girls were so alike they were often taken for sisters. Sophia was tall, slim, dark-haired, and green eyed. Jasmine Hardy – or Jazzy, for short – was also dark-haired and light-eyed. She was much thinner than Sophia, and worryingly pale these days, but the resemblance was there.

They were not, in fact, sisters, or even cousins. Jazzy’s mother, Laura Hardy, had taken in Sophia six years ago, when Sophia’s mother died. It was an uncharacteristic flight of kindness, and one that Aunt Laura quite clearly regretted.

Six years. It felt like forever. Sophia still had scars from “Aunt” Laura’s original flights of temper. She’d insisted that Sophia call her Aunt Laura, as part of her pretense of kindness. Back then, Aunt Laura had tried to beat Sophia in a way that would keep the bruises and cuts hidden. She was less careful these days.

She hadn’t been at all happy at being obliged to take on her friend’s child, once she realized all the new responsibilities she’d have. The congratulations and attention that Aunt Laura received for her kindness quickly faded away, and she was left with a child that she didn’t want, not really. Another mouth to feed, another body to clothe, she’d screeched, not that she’d bothered to do either. She hadn’t kept quiet about her dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, Sophia’s only two options were to live with Jazzy’s mother or die on the street. Her father was

long dead, and they had no friends to help them. She'd only been fourteen at the time.

Now Sophia was twenty, and no closer to escaping Aunt Laura's talon-nailed clutches than when she was fourteen.

"I'm so sorry, Sophia," Jazzy whispered, stepping inside and closing the door. "I was sleeping upstairs when I heard the commotion. What happened? Oh, your eye."

Sophia automatically lifted her hand to touch her black eye, and the purple and yellow bruise blossoming across her cheek. It was throbbing, but she knew from experience it would be fading in a day or two.

Jazzy sighed, pulling out a clean cloth and a small bottle of ointment from her apron pocket. "Here, let me."

Keeping one eye on the door, Sophia allowed herself to be maneuvered to one of the chairs. Jazzy pulled up a stool, sitting in front of Sophia, and poured out a little of the ointment on the cloth.

"This will sting a little," Jazzy said, as if she and Sophia hadn't gone through these routines countless times over the past six years. She held the cool cloth to Sophia's cheek.

It did sting, but she was long used to it.

"Does it hurt?" Jazzy asked.

“A little.” Sophia kept her ears pricked for the sound of approaching footsteps along the hall. Aunt Laura always wore fine, heeled boots. They were expensive and very attractive, but the heels clicked loudly on the polished wood floors. Sophia would hear her coming.

Probably.

“So, what was it this time?” Jazzy continued; brow furrowed. She dabbed gently at Sophia’s bruised cheek. There was a thin, inch-long cut along her cheekbone, made by one of the prongs of one of Aunt Laura’s rings. It wasn’t a deep cut, thankfully.

“I oversalted the dinner,” Sophia said, hearing the bitterness in her own voice. “Apparently, anyway. It tasted fine to me.”

Jazzy pressed her lips together. “I heard her shouting upstairs. That’s what woke me. If I’d been down here, I could have stopped her. She won’t beat me.”

“I don’t want to risk it, Jazzy,” Sophia reached out, taking Jazzy’s hand. Her wrists were thinner and bonier than ever, and her megrims were back – hence the long naps. “I don’t want her to hurt you.”

“I don’t want her to hurt *you*,” Jazzy retorted. “Come upstairs, I’ve got something to show you. Quickly, Mama has just gone out. I saw her go from the upstairs window. I don’t know how long she’ll be.”

Sophia allowed Jazzy to tow her along upstairs. It was a fine, big house, with wood floors that Sophia meticulously swept and waxed, and dozens of expensive porcelain ornaments and lots of finely wrought wooden furniture that she polished diligently. The kitchen was another familiar place to Sophia. Aunt Laura had made it clear that she was to take over the business of cooking and cleaning when she first arrived. Sophia had not been a good cook, which had resulted in many beatings to begin with.

Her mother, Alison Cooper, had been an excellent cook, and never raised her hand to her daughter. Moving in with Aunt Laura had been something of a shock.

Jazzy was out of breath by the time she reached the top of the stairs, and Sophia frowned. The movement tugged at her bruised skin, and she winced, but Sophia was more focused on Jazzy, noticing how breathless she was, even after a short flight of stairs.

“Jazzy? Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Nothing to worry about. Come on, in here.”

She led the way into her bedroom. Sophia did not sleep upstairs with the family, of course. There was a freezing cold alcove off the side of the scullery, just large enough to fit a pallet bed, and Sophia slept there. She’d gotten used to the spiders and the occasional adventurous mouse.

Jazzy’s room, of course, was something different. It was warm and cozy, with well-swept floors, pretty curtains at the



window, and a clean, comfortable bed. She had a few pieces of furniture and a few knick-knacks set out on the dresser.

Sophia stepped inside, sinking down onto the little stool in front of the writing desk. Jazzy crouched down to pull out a small box from under her bed. She stood, wincing as she did so.

“Jazzy, you don’t look well. You’re paler than ever. Have you had breakfast?”

“I wasn’t hungry, but I saved some for you. There, it’s on a plate on the dresser.”

Sophia snatched at the food despite herself. It wasn’t anything special, just fruit, bread, bacon, and some cheese. Sophia had always hated eggs of any description, so Aunt Laura made sure that Sophia was only permitted to eat a bowl of lukewarm scrambled eggs for breakfast. Just another small act of malice.

Sophia hadn’t eaten since supper last night, and that hadn’t been much. Jazzy ate like a bird, but Aunt Laura had a hearty appetite, and made sure that there was hardly any food left on the table by the time Sophia was permitted to sit down and eat.

She stuffed the bread in her mouth, savoring the rich butter on her tongue.

“What’s that?” she asked, with her mouth full, gesturing to the box. Jazzy flashed a smile at her and opened it.

It was full of letters.

“I’ve been thinking,” Jazzy said. “I want to get away from Mama, and I want *you* to get away from Mama. I’m unlikely to get married here in Chicago, what with my health being so bad. The doctor keeps saying that a warmer climate will suit me better, so I thought, why not try and kill two birds with one stone? I’ve been writing to a rancher in Colorado as a possible correspondence bride.”

Sophia froze mid-chew. “A *correspondence bride*? Jazzy, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

She shrugged. “Why not? Lots of women do it. There are too many unmarried women in places like Chicago, and too many unmarried men in places like Colorado. It’s perfect.”

“You can’t marry a man you’ve never met. You hardly know him.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Look at all these letters – we’ve been corresponding for nearly six months,” Jazzy held out the box, and Sophia snatched out a few letters at random.

She scanned the letters, concentrating on picking out details. His name was Nathan Rowe, apparently. Jazzy was right – they’d been exchanging letters for months. He wrote well, as far as Sophia could tell. He seemed intelligent, articulate, pleasant, and genuinely interested in Jazzy.

“Are you going to marry him?” Sophia asked nervously.

She knew it was wrong to be so selfish, but the idea of living here without Jazzy was unbearable.

Jazzy shrugged. “We’ve been talking about it. I’d say so, although we need to iron out the details of the actual wedding yet. We’re not in love, of course. These arrangements are never about love. They’re about friendship, mutual respect, and an arrangement that’s good for both parties.”

Sophia swallowed hard. She knew she should be happy for Jazzy. She *was* happy for her, but of course this meant that Jazzy was leaving. For good.

And, of course, there was an odd feeling of jealousy there, too. Opportunities would open up to Jazzy that Sophia could only dream of. Jazzy *deserved* them, of course, but... well, couldn’t they both be happy?

*No*, came the bitter answer. *We can’t*.

“Well, I suppose if that’s what you want...”

“It is,” Jazzy said, flushing. “I do want to be married, Sophia. I’d like to be in love, but I’d settle for a man I like and respect, who’s going to take care of me.”

“Of course, of course. Well, Jazzy, I’m happy for you. I’ll miss you, but I’m glad you’ve got this prospect ahead of you.”

“That’s just it,” Jazzy said, beaming. “You can come too! Not right away, I don’t think, but once I’m settled and married, I’ll send for you, if Mr. Rowe doesn’t mind.”

It was a tempting idea, but Sophia didn’t want to let herself get carried away. There’d been the occasional hopes over the years, holding out the prospect of getting away from Aunt Laura. Nothing had worked out, and Sophia had gradually come to abandon hope. This was her home now, and she’d better get used to it.

She could leave, of course, but where would that put her? She was unlikely to get a job in town, not with Aunt Laura so reluctant to lose her unpaid servant. That was what Sophia was now. She cooked, cleaned, did all the chores, maintained the house, and nursed Jazzy when necessary. Aunt Laura would do her best to scupper any chance Sophia would get of leaving. She could just walk out, but what then? She had no family, no friends, no money, nowhere to go.

There were worse places than Aunt Laura’s home.

She scanned the pages of unfamiliar, neat, close-packed writing, trying to get some hint as to what sort of man had written it.

“That seems like a lot to ask,” Sophia said carefully. “After all, Mr. Rowe doesn’t know me. Why would he agree to let me live in his house?”

“That’s just it – I thought you could help out in the house. You know I haven’t the strength to do much housework. But if you came, you could help. It would be much better than now –

you'd be treated better, and fed better, and I can't imagine the work would be any harder than what you do now. What's more, we'd be together. Sisters by choice, if not by blood. That was what we said, wasn't it?"

Jazzy reached out, taking Sophia's hand. Sophia glanced up, seeing hope and anticipation and a little tinge of fear in Jazzy's eyes.

"All right," Sophia said. "Of course, I'll come. We're sisters, aren't we?"

# Chapter One

*Two Weeks Later*

Sophia stood in the kitchen doorway, peering out into the hallway. She could hear muffled voices upstairs. Doctor Preston hadn't stopped to speak to Sophia, any more than he would acknowledge a servant. He was a friend of Aunt Laura's.

Sophia had let him in, and he'd pushed past without a single glance at her. He'd hurried straight upstairs, face grim. He knew where Jazzy's room was, of course, and Aunt Laura had greeted him on the landing. They spoke briefly in hushed tones that Sophia couldn't hear, and then she heard the soft squeak of Jazzy's bedroom door opening and closing.

That was at least an hour ago, and nobody had come downstairs since then.

There was an absolute mountain of work that Sophia should have been getting on with. She had luncheon to make, the kitchen to clean, the floors to sweep, and mending to finish. But Sophia couldn't make herself do anything, not until she knew how Jazzy was.

Jazzy had been ill before. She'd had coughing fits that left her racked with pain, and days when she was too weak to get out bed. Sometimes she couldn't sleep, and Sophia could creep upstairs and sit with her all night.

That was what sisters were for, wasn't it?

The bedroom door opened, and Doctor Preston came striding across the landing and down the stairs, followed by Aunt Laura. Sophia just had time to dive back into the kitchen before they stepped down into the hallway.

“You mustn’t pamper the girl, Mrs. Hardy,” Doctor Preston said firmly. “These spells of melancholia are a symptom of a weak spirit. Her physical illness is exacerbated by lack of exercise and fresh air.”

“Are you sure?” Aunt Laura sounded genuinely frightened. “She looked so awful when she collapsed this morning. I didn’t know what to do. I... I thought she might die.”

“Quite sure. She is ill, of course, but I am a great believer in mind over matter, Mrs. Hardy. When you come over for supper tonight, we will discuss a further course of treatment.”

“Should I still come? Shouldn’t I stay with Jasmine?”

“What about that girl you have? She can watch her.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course, I am. Good day, Mrs. Hardy. I shall send my bill around this afternoon.”

Then he was gone, closing the door after him. Aunt Laura stood there for a moment or two, chewing one well-shaped

nail and staring at the door. Then she abruptly turned around again, in time to see Sophia peering out of the doorway, and her face hardened.

Aunt Laura was around thirty-eight years old, widowed for many years. She had a decent fortune, but nothing too impressive. Not enough to guarantee that Jazzy could have a comfortable future.

Their future was as pallid and unconvincing as the false front of blonde curls that poked out from under her bonnet.

“What are you doing, lounging around? You lazy, wicked girl!” Aunt Laura hissed. “Get back in that kitchen and prepare luncheon. Hop to it, girl!”

Sophia dived back in the kitchen, half-expecting Aunt Laura to come racing after her, possibly armed with an umbrella or a wooden spoon to beat her with.

But nobody followed her, and Sophia was left to get on with her chores in peace.

She was terribly worried about Jazzy, of course. Her health had declined rapidly over the past two weeks, and Doctor Preston’s merciless recommendations of long walks and plenty of cold, fresh air had left her bedridden for most of the time. Her meager strength was all used up on the mandatory walks, and the cold air seemed to make her lungs seize up. Doctor Preston was the sort of man who didn’t *believe* in illness, which was not ideal in a family doctor.



*I'll go up and see Jazzy as soon as Aunt Laura goes, Sophia told herself. I'll sit with her.*

\*\*\*

The front door closed, and Sophia waited for a few moments to make sure Aunt Laura wasn't going to come back for some reason. Then she raced up the stairs, heart pounding.

She hadn't been able to catch a glimpse of Jazzy all day. Aunt Laura had taken up Jazzy's meals. Sophia tapped on the door and waited.

"Sophia? Is that you?" Jazzy said, her voice worryingly hoarse and weak.

Sophia opened the door and felt her heart drop into her stomach.

The curtains were drawn, and there was only one candle lighting up the room. It was impossibly gloomy and stuffy in here, not at all the warm, friendly, cozy space that Sophia was used to. Jazzy was nestled in her bed, only her gaunt face and one languid hand sticking out of the covers.

She looked terrible. The room smelled stale and heavy, the thick curtains over the windows seeming to suck out what little light there was. The room needed a good airing, but Sophia knew that the rush of cool air would make Jazzy cough uncontrollably.

"Jazzy!" Sophia gasped.

Jazzy smiled weakly. “I look awful, don’t I? Doctor Preston seems to think that a brisk walk will make me better. I think Mama is finally realizing that he’s not a very good doctor.”

Sophia pulled up a stool to sit beside Jazzy’s bed. Close up, Jazzy looked worse than ever. Her skin had a grayish, waxy sheen to it, and her eyes were glazed and unfocused.

“I’m going to call the doctor back,” Sophia said firmly. “You aren’t well. I don’t care if he’s got a wretched dinner party to host or not – he’s got a duty of care to you. And if Aunt Laura complains, then...”

“Sophia, I’m dying,” Jazzy said softly.

There were a few moments of silence. Sophia swallowed hard, trying to compose herself.

“What are you saying? Don’t be silly, Jazzy. Of course, you aren’t dying. You aren’t well, but...”

“I’ve been *unwell* for most of my life, Sophia. This is... this is different. I can feel it in my bones. I thought that a new life and going to Colorado might be good for me, but it’s too late for all of that.”

“No, it isn’t,” Sophia insisted, a lump rising to her throat and threatening to choke her. She felt sick, and her head buzzed. It couldn’t be true. Jazzy was ill, but not *this* ill, surely? No, she wouldn’t let herself believe it. “It’s not too

late. You need to eat something, drink something, and have a good night's sleep. That's all you need."

Jazzy didn't even have the energy to shake her head. She made a tiny movement, then winced.

"I don't have the strength to argue with you, Sophia. I'm glad you came up – I thought I was going to have to come and find you, and I didn't know if I could. The thing is, I received a letter from Nathan Rowe just a few days ago. He asked me to marry him, and I've already bought a train ticket to travel to Colorado. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to get your hopes up. I didn't want to get *my* hopes up. I felt that if I told someone, it would somehow jinx it all."

"Then you can't *die*, silly," Sophia managed, feeling as though she were speaking underwater. "You have to go and marry Nathan Rowe."

Jazzy smiled weakly. "I'm not going to Colorado, Sophia. I can't. Not now."

"Jazzy, please..."

"Don't argue with me, Sophia, I can't bear it. Just listen to me, please."

Sophia swallowed hard, trying to fight back tears. She wasn't going to cry. Jazzy wasn't going to die. She couldn't. She couldn't possibly leave Sophia alone.

“You must go to Colorado,” Jazzy said quietly. “Mama hates you; we know that. I don’t know what will happen to you when I’m gone,” she broke off, coughing horribly, then continued. “Maybe she’ll throw you out, or maybe she’ll try and starve you to death, I don’t know. I won’t leave you here. So, you will take my train ticket, and you will go to Colorado in my place. You will marry Nathan Rowe,”

Another coughing fit racked Jazzy’s thin frame, and Sophia could hear a horrible rattle deep in her chest. “I know he’s a good man, Sophia, and you’ll have a much better life there than you would here.”

“But how am I supposed to do that?” Sophia said, her voice small. “He thinks he’s marrying you.”

Jazzy shrugged. “He’s never met either of us. It’s all I can think of, Sophia. If you don’t take this chance now, I don’t know what will become of you. Think of it as my dying wish.”

“Jazzy, don’t. I can’t believe that you are... are...” Sophia squeezed her eyes closed, not willing to believe it. “Perhaps you’re just having a bad day.”

“Perhaps,” Jazzy said, turning her glassy eyes to the ceiling. “But either way, I want you to take the letters, take my train ticket, and go to Colorado. I can’t go there now, and he’d never marry me now, not as ill as I am. If you don’t go, then neither of us will go to Colorado. So, you need to go. It’s only you that can save us now. Promise me you’ll do that?”

“Jazzy...”

“I need you to promise,” Jazzy said, her voice a little stronger than before. She smiled. “We’re sisters, aren’t we? Sisters always want the best for each other.”

A fat tear – the first of many, probably – rolled down Sophia’s cheek. She reached out to take Jazzy’s cold, clammy hand.

It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. Sophia felt as though she were standing on the train platform again, listening to some man – a sheriff, she thought – telling her that her parents would never be arriving. She remembered not quite believing him, not quite *understanding*, and staring into the distance for a train that was never going to come.

She felt like that now. Helpless. Angry. Despair washed over her. What was the use of anything, if Jazzy wasn’t in the world? It wasn’t *fair*.

“If it’s what you want,” she murmured, “I promise.”

Jazzy gave a sigh of relief. “It is what I want. And you must go tonight, Sophia. Promise?”

“I promise.”

Jazzy lifted her hand, weak and shaky, and lifted it to Sophia’s cheek. “You’re the best sister I could have wished for. I only wish we could have had a better mother.”

“When I am settled in Colorado, I’ll send for you,” Sophia promised, and Jazzy smiled.

“I’ll be waiting for your letter. Go and change into one of Mama’s good dresses. They should fit.”

“I can’t take one of Aunt Laura’s dresses.”

“You also can’t go to Colorado all bruised and tattered. Besides, I think Mama owes you a dress, don’t you?”

Sophia had to smile at that. “I suppose so.”

“Take out the box from under the bed. The train ticket is on top. The train leaves in an hour, so you’ll have to hurry. Come back here after you change – I’d like to see how you look in a really fine dress.”

That was more like the old Jazzy. Sophia leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Jazzy’s sweaty forehead.

“I won’t be long, just a few minutes,” she murmured. Sophia leaned forward to take out the box from under the bed and hurried out of the room.

\*\*\*

Aunt Laura loved clothes. She had more clothes than she could wear, and some were ridiculously fine and frilly. Sophia chose a comparatively plain one, in a rich dark green that complemented her eyes. The sleeves were long enough to cover her bruised wrists, and the pinched-in waist suited Sophia’s slim figure. Plus, it was warm and well-made. She’d never seen Aunt Laura wearing it, so Sophia didn’t feel bad about taking it.

She hurried back downstairs, shoving her old burgundy dress into an old carpet bag. She had another dress, an ugly pale gray that showed up the dirt and was a little too large for her, but she put that in too. Sophia only had one pair of shoes, which she was wearing, and a tattered old nightgown from when she was younger. All of it went in the bag, along with a comb missing a few teeth and one spare petticoat.

That was all Sophia's worldly possessions – those and the clothes she was standing up in. And a few unmentionables, of course, but naturally those were better left – well, unmentioned.

Time to say goodbye.

Sophia drew in a breath, smoothing her palms over her new clothes. There was too much to think about, too much to say. How could one say goodbye to a person who meant the whole world to you?

With one eye on the grandfather clock in the hallway – there was no telling when Aunt Laura would return – Sophia hurried upstairs. She tapped on Jazzy's bedroom door, but there was no answer.

“Jazzy? I came to say goodbye and show you the dress. I have to say, it's very...” Sophia stepped inside, and stopped short.

Jazzy lay back on the pillows, just how Sophia had left her. She was very still and very white, and her eyes stared unseeingly up at the ceiling.

“Jazzy?” Sophia repeated, feeling queasy. She took a step forward, reaching out to touch Jazzy’s hand.

Her skin was still warm, but her chest didn’t rise and fall with her breaths. She was quite unmistakably dead.

Sophia clapped a hand over her mouth. She moved to Jazzy’s bedside, feeling as though she were moving through water, and dropped heavily to her knees. The rough floorboards scraped her skin through her skirts, and Sophia clamped both hands over her mouth now, to keep in her screams.

*I never said goodbye,* Sophia thought. Her stomach heaved, and if she’d eaten anything recently, she was sure that she would have vomited.

Jazzy didn’t open her eyes and smile. Her cold hand didn’t reach out to take Sophia’s. No last-minute jokes, no comments on her new clothes.

She was gone.

Sophia didn’t realize that she was crying until she felt hot tears start to drip from her wrists, where they were streaming over her hands from her eyes. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed. A few moments, perhaps, and then Sophia was jolted out of her misery by the doleful tolling of the grandfather clock.

Stumbling woodenly to her feet, Sophia roughly wiped her eyes. There was no time for grieving. She hadn’t the



luxury of crying and wailing for Jazzy for hours. She'd promised. The train would leave in half an hour, and Sophia must be on it.

“Goodbye, Jazzy,” Sophia whispered. “Sleep well.”

# Chapter Two

*Six Months Previously, Colorado, Rowe Ranch*

Nathan woke late. Then he wasted what was left of the morning by lying in bed, feeling angry at himself over having slept so late.

The problem was that he'd been so used to having someone else wake him up. Nathan slept like the dead, he always had, and usually his brother would have woken him up in the morning. Nathan could see Jack now, leaning over him with a grin, pinching his ear or tickling his neck, or doing something otherwise annoying.

*"Time to get up, little brother. Can't sleep the day away today,"* he'd say, grinning.

Nathan's heart ached. He missed Jack more than he could say. He'd barely even come to terms with his mother's slow decline and eventual death. Sometimes the absence of Jack and his father felt like a physical pain, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle missing and drawing attention to the fact the picture would never be completed.

Nathan didn't even know where they were buried. A mass grave on one of the battlefields, no doubt. They'd visited his mother's grave together, all three of them, united. Now Nathan was the only one left, and there wasn't even any grave to visit. His father and his brother had died at the same battle that had nearly lost Nathan his arm, so he'd woken in pain and

delirious in a medical tent, his father and brother long buried in some fetid hole somewhere.

Nathan was lucky, he supposed. He could have died, could have lost his arm. Instead, he was here, whole, alive, and alone.

He sat up slowly, wincing at the tug of pain in his upper left arm. The mornings were getting colder, and the cold always made the old wound hurt more. The pain eased once the heat of the day set in, but early mornings were difficult. Some days, it felt as though someone had a knife inside the clump of scar tissue and was twisting and twisting and *twisting*.

He put a hand to his arm, rubbing it to try and dissolve the lump of pain. He could feel the scar, about two inches long, thick and knotted. It was thankfully hidden by his nightshirt, and Nathan intended to keep it that way.

Mornings and nights were the worst, really. That was when the big old ranch house, designed for a family of four and counting, seemed at its emptiest and quietest.

In an attempt to ward off the quiet, Nathan got up briskly, throwing back his covers and climbing out of bed. He dressed quickly, noting with annoyance how his shirts were rapidly getting too small for him. He'd put on a lot of bulk and muscle since he returned from war. There was a lot of work to do, and Nathan didn't have nearly as much help as he needed.

His fair hair brushed his collarbones, and Nathan roughly tied it back as a matter of course. He'd need to visit the barber

soon, to get his hair cut back into shape and his straw-colored beard either trimmed or shaved off entirely.

Not now, though. Now, there was work to do.

Nathan stepped out of the door, and was greeted by a tall, thin man lounging on the porch.

“Morning, Nate,” he said lightly. “I thought you’d died in your sleep. I was just about to come in and start looting.”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “Morning, James.”

He could never tell whether James was joking or not. The Rudd family had always been close to the Rowes, and although they’d drifted apart before the war, James and Nathan had something powerful in common – they were the sole survivors of families broken apart and lost. It seemed natural to hire James as his foreman, even though Nathan couldn’t really pay him as much as a good foreman ought to be paid.

“What’s to be done today?” Nathan asked, moving over to the bucket by the pump and splashing some water on his face. It was hardly a proper wash, but it would do. He could have a bath tonight, if he had the energy.

That was unlikely. Nathan had very little energy these days. When he came back from a long day of work, Nathan tended to just sit in the parlor and stare into space. There seemed no point in preparing decent food. It was just him here, after all. The books grew dusty in their bookshelves, and the cards and board games were shoved away in a cupboard and

forgotten. Dust collected on the sideboard and on the shelves because Nathan couldn't summon up the energy to wipe it away.

He just sat there until it grew dark, and he dragged himself upstairs to bed. On a good day, he would eat some cold meat and chew on a hard heel of bread when he came home. Nathan's appetite wasn't what it was, and if it wasn't for James and his lunch pails, stuffed to the brim every day, Nathan knew in a vague sort of way that he'd be too weak to do anything. He was sure that James knew what was going on, hence the full lunch pails and his insistence that Nathan eat every crumb.

"Not much," James answered, breaking into Nathan's thoughts. "Some more work on the perimeter fence, and the chicken coop needs repairing, unless you want the foxes to get all the poor birds. And the usual stuff, of course. I thought we could take the horses out later, give them some exercise."

Nathan nodded, drying his face on a rag. It still felt strange to feel the bristles of a full beard on his face. He'd never had a beard before the war. Before Jack and their father died. They'd had beards, but Nathan preferred to be clean-shaven. He wondered what they'd think of him with a beard now.

Or what they'd think of him at all.

"Did you have breakfast?" James asked lightly.

"No time. And no food, unless you count half a loaf of hard bread."

James sighed. “You have to eat right, Nathan.”

“Don’t nag me.”

“You need a wife.”

“I do not need a wife. I nearly had a wife, didn’t I? Look how that worked out.”

James’s thin face took on a mulish expression. He wasn’t going to let this one go. “You’re not happy here alone, Nathan. You’re not taking care of yourself, and this big old house has to be lonely. People have noticed, too. You weren’t at church yesterday, and Pastor Sixsmith was worried about you.”

“Pastor Sixsmith can mind his own business. I’m not in the mood for courting. Besides, who would I court?”

“I don’t know,” James sighed, scratching his head. “This can’t go on, Nathan.”

In a fit of anger that seemed to come from nowhere, Nathan rounded on the pump bucket and kicked it, scattering cold water everywhere.

“Why can’t people just leave me alone?” he snapped.

James didn’t flinch. “Because you shouldn’t be left alone, that’s why. I lost my brothers in the war, too, Nathan. Don’t

carry on as if I don't know what you feel like."

Nathan turned away, a red-hot wave of guilt stealing over him. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I know you're just trying to help."

"You can make it up to me by going into town and seeing Pastor Sixsmith. He wants to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to him."

"Why? Because he makes you feel guilty? Tells you what you don't want to hear – the truth? Go on, Nathan. I'll get started on the ranch chores, and you go into town."

Nathan swallowed hard. He still couldn't look at James. He hadn't had many friends before he left for war, but the ones he did have had been quickly driven away by his fits of temper and irrational behavior.

He *knew* he was being bad-tempered and unreasonable, but he couldn't stop. Nathan sometimes felt that there was something wrong with him beyond the scar on his arm, but he didn't dare delve too deeply into his own mind to find the answer.

Perhaps he was afraid of what he would find.

"All right," Nathan said, feeling like a scolded child. "I'll go and see Pastor Sixsmith."

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The old chapel in town was too small for their congregation. The roof leaked – Nathan had never heard of a church roof that didn't need repairing, it almost seemed like a badge of honor – and the pews were narrow, hard, and deeply uncomfortable. The floors were filthy after every service, from all the work boots, caked with dried mud, that tramped over them.

When Nathan arrived at the chapel, Pastor Sixsmith was busy sweeping the floors.

He was around sixty, but a shockingly vital man for his age. He was tall, and well-built, strong despite his age, and with a vibrant shock of white hair which would never allow itself to be tamed, not with pomade, water, or anything. He claimed to have broken no less than fourteen combs in his hair over the years.

“Hello, Father,” Nathan muttered. He felt like a naughty child.

Pastor Sixsmith paused in his sweeping, straightened up, and placed a fist on his hip.

“Hello, Nathan. I didn't see you in church yesterday. Is everything all right?”

“I overslept,” Nathan said. He didn't bother to explain that he seemed to oversleep every morning. When he slept, that was the only time that he felt even a little happy. He wasn't plagued by nightmares when he slept, only when he was awake.



Pastor Sixsmith smiled knowingly, and Nathan had the strangest feeling that he knew all that anyway.

“Well, it’s good to see you here, anyway. Have you a moment or two to talk?”

“Yes, of course. Want me to help with cleaning out the chapel?”

“No,” Pastor Sixsmith said decisively, leaning the broom against the wall. “Come along to my house, and we’ll have something to drink.”

It wasn’t a question, or even a suggestion. It was simply a statement of what was going to happen.

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Around fifteen minutes later, Nathan found himself sitting down at a kitchen table which was too small for the two of them. Pastor Sixsmith’s tiny house, just behind the chapel, was plain and serviceable, decorated only with an incredible number of doilies and crocheted blankets, gifted to him by various ladies of the parish.

Nathan had expected a neat cup of brew and not much else, so was surprised to find himself presented with a huge mug, a bowl of hot stew, and several slices of thick bread, buttered well.

“This is a lot, Father,” Nathan murmured.

“Well, I heard that you’re not eating as much as you should. A lad of your size needs to eat plenty to keep up his

strength. You need a wife.”

“Funny, James said the same thing,” Nathan said, swirling his spoon around the bowl of stew. “You say *wife*, but you seem to be referring to someone to cook and clean and keep my house and take care of me. That sounds more like a maid or housekeeper to me.”

Pastor Sixsmith smiled wryly, lowering himself into a seat opposite. “I’m afraid for many men, the words *wife*, *mother*, and *housekeeper* are inseparable. You are not one of those men, which is why I’m about to give you this advice. Eve was a complement to Adam. His equal, his partner. They were designed to work together through life, providing friendship, spiritual support, emotional support, and even love. A man’s wife ought to be the greatest friend he has ever known. That is what I want for you, Nathan.”

Nathan shrugged. “Don’t we all want that for ourselves?”

“*It is not good for man to remain alone*,” Pastor Sixsmith quoted. “You are not happy, Nathan. Especially after your fiancé abandoned you.”

“She wasn’t my fiancé, not really. We’d talked about marriage, and I thought she loved me, but I hadn’t made a proposal before I left. I suppose I can’t blame her.”

Pastor Sixsmith directed a level look at him. “Can’t you? Well, I did not invite you here to discuss your past. I want to talk about your future. In my opinion – and you know I rarely venture my opinions – I believe marriage would be a good thing for you, if you could choose the right woman.”

Nathan didn't bother to point out the ridiculousness of Pastor Sixsmith *rarely venturing an opinion*.

“And marry who? There are no single women in town. Not respectable ones, at least. Should I just keep asking strange women to marry me until one says yes?”

“Of course not. You will need to look further afield. My advice is to seek out a correspondence bride.”

Nathan sucked in a breath. “Write away for a bride? For some poor, desperate woman who can't get married in her hometown to come and marry me? I don't think I have yet sunk that low, Father.”

Pastor Sixsmith tutted. “It's not about desperation, Nathan. It's about exploring other opportunities. Most men and women have a very limited circle of friends, friends of friends, and so on. They can only search for prospective mates in their own town. But the world is large, Nathan. So large. You know everyone here. Are you going to wait for a family to move in with a single, eligible woman in the household? For a woman looking for a husband to fall into your lap? No, Nathan. We must take control of our lives, and for you, that means searching further afield.”

“I don't want to marry a stranger.”

“By the time the woman arrives, she won't be a stranger. I have researched how these correspondence courtships work. You write an advertisement in the paper and choose which of the replies you'll respond to. You will likely exchange letters

for months before you choose to meet. And, if the woman is everything you hoped and vice versa, the wedding can go ahead quickly. If anything, this is a more sensible form of courtship. You have to form your opinions based on what you hear and read, rather than from looks and impulse.”

Nathan, mechanically spooning stew into his mouth, was equally horrified and surprised that he was genuinely considering Pastor Sixsmith’s proposal.

“I don’t even know what I would say in the advertisement,” he said weakly.

“You would tell the truth,” Pastor Sixsmith said firmly. “Your name, age, prospects, your reasons for marrying, anything you can think of.” He leaned forward, smiling softly. “I would help you, Nathan.”

Nathan sucked in a breath. “I... I will think about it, Father.”

“Good. I can ask for nothing more than that, can I?”

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Three weeks later, Nathan found himself staring down at around half a dozen letters, all written in reply to his advertisement. For the first time in a long time, Nathan felt a spark of hope flare in his chest. Each woman seemed kind, clever, and most of all, interested in him.

Oh, it wasn’t a love match, but Nathan thought he might prefer that. He knew first hand how much love could hurt. Betrayal and love went hand in hand, more often than not.

One letter in particular caught his attention, and Nathan kept coming back to it.

*Dear Nathan Rowe,*

*Your letter intrigued me, and I simply had to write back. Before I say anything more, in the spirit of honesty, I must tell you that my health is not good these days, and I would not be able to manage heavy household chores. However, I've always wanted a family and home of my own, and I am not lazy.*

*I've had several gentlemen ignore my replies already because of my health, and I completely understand if you would prefer a healthier wife. I have one sister, and she is my dearest friend – if this works out between us, I cannot wait for you to meet her.*

*My name is Jasmine Hardy, but most people call me Jazzy. It's a terrible nickname, and I hate it, but there it is.*

There was more to the letter, of course, but there was something about the way Miss Hardy wrote – so plain, cheerful, and forthright – that caught Nathan's attention.

Pastor Sixsmith leaned over his shoulder.

“Well? Have you chosen a lady to reply to?”

“Yes, I have,” Nathan answered, tapping Miss Hardy's letter. “This one. I want to write to this one.”



# Chapter Three

## *Present Day*

The jolting of the train shook Sophia awake, making her bang her forehead on the side of the train window. She sat up, wincing and rubbing the new sore spot on her head.

She must be getting close now.

Sophia sat up, yawning, stretching, and trying in vain to find a comfortable position on the hard train seat.

It had been a long way from Chicago to Colorado. For the first stretch of the journey, Sophia had expected Aunt Laura to board at every stop, full of rage, intending to drag her off the train and back home.

Really, Aunt Laura had no right to do any such thing. Sophia was twenty, and fully within her rights to leave without notice. The only thing Aunt Laura could complain about was the theft of her dress – Jazzy had given it to her, but Sophia could hardly appeal to her.

*Oh, Jazzy.*

Sophia closed her eyes, tears pricking at her eyelids again. Whenever she'd dozed during the interminably long train trip, she'd dreamt of Jazzy. Then, when she woke up, the realization that Jazzy was dead and gone came flooding back, and Sophia wanted to burst into tears.

Her only friend, her *sister*, was gone.

As the journey progressed, Sophia tried hard not to cry anymore. Not because she didn't want to grieve for Jazzy – Sophia didn't think she'd ever really stop missing her – but because she didn't want to look bleary and blotchy when she arrived. Her future hung on this man she was supposed to meet, this Nathan Rowe. This was the future Jazzy had wanted for herself, and what she'd wanted for Sophia. It was her dying wish, and Sophia didn't care if the man turned out to be an ogre – she was going to marry him. It was what Jazzy had asked her to do.

First, however, Sophia needed to tell him the truth. She had to tell him that she was *not* Jazzy and was in fact a stranger he might never have heard of.

No, he *had* heard of her. Jazzy had mentioned her in several letters, if only in passing. She obviously didn't want him to think that he was going to be saddled with a second woman in the house – not yet at least.

*Clever Jazzy*, Sophia thought with a smile. *Wait until you're married. Then casually ask for your sister to stay.*

Sophia had spent the train journey reading and rereading the letters, trying to get an understanding of what sort of man Nathan Rowe might be. He seemed decent enough, but it was easy to make yourself seem a different way over a letter. Essentially, she'd only know for sure when she met him in person.



And that moment was almost here.

The train was slowing down, chugging into a small train station. Steam billowed about the windows, and the few passengers in Sophia's carriage stirred themselves, peering out of the window and taking a look around, before settling down to whatever they were doing before.

Not many people seemed to be getting out here.

Sophia got to her feet, gathering up her single bag and feeling very underprepared. She felt numb, as if this was all happening to someone else. Her legs and arms were heavy, and her head buzzed like she was about to get a headache. She made her way down the narrow aisle and stepped out of the door onto the train station platform.

It was a warm day, with no hint of a chill in the air. Apparently, autumn had not yet reached Colorado. There was hardly anyone on the platform, except for one moustachioed businessman who rudely shouldered past Sophia to get on the train. Shielding her eyes against the sun, she glanced around, squinting at silhouettes.

Where was he?

Sophia had the final letter from Nathan Rowe, and she knew that he was supposed to pick Jazzy up from the train station. Sophia couldn't help but feel a flash of annoyance. If Jazzy had been here instead of her, she wouldn't have been able to stand here, waiting. The single bench was taken up with a sour-faced woman and her gaggle of children, and there

was nowhere else to sit. Jazzy would have been far too tired after her ride to stand around, kicking her heels.

Squinting against the sun, Sophia took a few steps forward to get clear of the train, and immediately walked into something warm and solid.

She gave an undignified little *oof* noise, and back away, peering up at the man she'd just walked into.

He was tall, with curly dark hair and large brown eyes, shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat. He was around twenty-five or twenty-six, with a gaunt face that might have been handsome if he wasn't scowling.

"Sorry," Sophia said, her voice sounding less firm and more squeaky than she would have liked. "Are... are you here for me?"

"That depends," the man said, his voice a low, unfriendly drawl. "Who are you?"

She swallowed. "I'm here to meet Nathan Rowe. Do you know him?"

"Ah, Nathan. Why yes, actually, I do know Nathan. Everyone *knows* Nathan in this town, but I flatter myself that I'm the only one who *truly* knows him."

What was she supposed to say to that? Sophie blinked, glancing nervously up at the unfriendly stranger.

“I see,” she said vaguely. “Can... can you direct me to where I might find him?”

“Rowe Ranch? Goodness, I’ve been there three times in the past month. It sits up on the mountainside, squatting over the town like a monster on the hill. You can’t miss it.”

Sophia was still trying to think of how to respond to that when the man turned on his heel and walked away. When she finally realized that he was leaving, she called after him.

“What? What do you mean?”

He didn’t turn around. “Tell Nathan that Michael Jasper says hello.”

What a strange man.

Sophia barely had time to try and figure out what on earth he meant before somebody tapped her on the shoulder.

Flinching, she turned around to find two men staring at her. One was a tall, thin, dark-haired man of about twenty-five, and the other was a much older man with a headful of wild white hair.

“You must be Miss Hardy,” the older man said, with an air of authority.

Sophia should have contradicted him there and then, but he hadn't *asked* her who she was, had he? She hadn't lied. Instead, she swallowed, glancing between the two men.

“Yes, I am. You're not Nathan Rowe, are you?” she asked nervously.

Well, now she *had* lied. The older man's gaze narrowed just a little, as if he sensed her lie. Sophia lifted her chin. People couldn't tell when other people were lying, not just at first glance.

“Goodness, no. I am Pastor Sixsmith, and this is James Rudd, Nathan's foreman. I must say, you look very healthy. We heard that you were ill. I apologize for leaving you standing on the platform.”

Sophia swallowed. She decided to sidestep that question. So *that* was why the men were looking at her with a faint air of suspicion – she looked too healthy.

“Oh, I see,” Sophia said aloud, deliberately not addressing the unspoken question about her health. So, neither of these men were Nathan Rowe. He hadn't come to meet her himself.

Why not? They were getting married, weren't they?

Sophia bit back her nerves and concentrated on making a good first impression. These were obviously trusted friends, and it was in her best interest to impress them.

“Well, it's a pleasure to meet you,” she said. “What now?”

“We can take you back to the ranch,” James Rudd spoke up. He was staring over Sophia’s shoulder, maybe eyeing the disappearing man who’d spoken to her first. It piqued Sophia a little that he wasn’t even looking at her. Did he dislike her, or was it just nerves? There probably weren’t a lot of young women in a town like this, not if Nathan Rowe, a landowner, needed to send away for a wife. “We should get moving. Can I take your bags? Bag,” he amended, eyeing her tattered carpet bag.

Sophia tried to keep a smile on her face.

“No, it’s quite all right. I have it,” she said.

The two men glanced at each other.

“Very well, then,” Pastor Sixsmith said. “Come along, it’s this way.”

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Pastor Sixsmith and James Rudd mostly talked to each other in low voices. Sophia was a little relieved that they didn’t seem to expect her to chatter away. She was glad to have the time to compose herself and gather her thoughts.

She hadn’t meant to say that she was Jazzy. Somehow, it had just slipped out, and Sophia had an awful feeling that Pastor Sixsmith *knew* she wasn’t telling the truth. How, she couldn’t have said, but didn’t pastors have some sort of sense when it came to liars?

She sat on the edge of the hard cart seat, carpet bag balanced on her knee, half-listening to Pastor Sixsmith and James Rudd's muttered conversation. James Rudd drove, and Sophia tried to stay calm. She focused on the scenery.

They were travelling steadily uphill, idyllic hills and woodland spreading around them. Nobody bothered to point out the ranch – Sophia was left to notice it herself.

It was a large house, two stories, with a generous porch around it. There was a large courtyard and various outbuildings dotted around. The cart rolled into the courtyard, wheels and hooves clacking on rough cobbles. A lot of the ranch looked new, actually. Sophia had no idea how much of the land belonged to the ranch, but what she could see looked new – fresh paint, fresh repairs, new equipment. Very new, in fact.

She didn't notice the man until he started hammering in some nails. Sophia flinched at the noise, glancing his way.

There was a chicken coop a little way from the house, and a tall, broad-chested man was leaning over it, making some repairs. He had a serious, Roman profile and fair hair, long enough to be tied back into a rough knot at the back of his head. He was bare-chested, and it was apparent that he often went without a shirt, judging by his rich, even tan. Sweat trickled down impressive shoulders and a toned abdomen. He straightened up, wiping away sweat from his forehead, and Sophia caught a flash of sharp, pale blue eyes.

It occurred to her then that she shouldn't be ogling a half-naked man, and she hastily averted her gaze. Out of the corner

of her eye, she saw the man scramble for a dirty linen shirt and pull it on over his head. Then he headed towards them.

“I didn’t realize the time,” he said, his voice smooth and deep. “I’m Nathan Rowe. You must be Jasmine Hardy. Would you prefer Jazzy?”

Well, this was it. This was the moment of truth. Sophia desperately wanted to smile and say yes, she was Jazzy. She could be Jazzy, easily enough. No one in town would ever really know the difference.

But it would be a lie. It wouldn’t be real. Or legal, for that matter.

Sophia drew in a deep breath. “I’m not Jazzy, Mr. Rowe. I’m sorry.”

There was a moment of silence. Pastor Sixsmith and James Rudd, who’d been whispering together, spun around to glare accusingly at Sophia. Nathan faltered.

“What? Father, James, did you pick up the wrong woman?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Sophia continued. Nathan was at least half a foot taller than her, and hovered a little distance away, obviously trying not to loom over her.

“Well, let’s hear it,” Nathan said, glancing nervously at his two companions. “What happened?”

“Jazzy mentioned me in her letters. My name is Sophia Cooper, and we were sisters. Well, not actual sisters. Sisters by choice, not by blood, we always said. Jazzy would have mentioned that she was in bad health, too. Pastor Sixsmith and Mr. Rudd seemed to be expecting me to look more ill. Jazzy was very ill.”

“I’m aware of that. She was very open about it.”

Sophia swallowed hard. “She’s dead, Mr. Jasper. She died shortly after she bought the train ticket to come out here.”

There was another long silence. Nathan passed a dirty hand over his face.

“Oh,” he said finally. “That’s... that’s a pity. A real pity.”

Sophia nodded. “Yes, it is. Before she died, she said that she wanted me to come up here instead of her. In her place, if you like.”

“Are you telling me that your sister’s dying wish was for you to marry me? Not for you to simply tell me what happened?”

“The thing is...” Sophia hesitated. She didn’t want to blurt out her whole miserable life to Nathan Rowe here and now. It smacked too much of a sob story. She didn’t need pity – she needed Nathan to hold up his end of the agreement. Unfortunately, he’d made the agreement with Jazzy – not with Sophia. That might be a problem. “The thing is that my home



situation is very bad, Mr. Rowe,” she finished. “I won’t lie to you. Jazzy had hoped that if things worked out between the two of you, that I could come up and stay, if you were agreeable. I’m a hard worker, and I can cook, clean, and manage a house. I’m capable, intelligent, and generally thought to be good company. I’m not the woman you thought you were going to marry, though. I’m not Jazzy.”

“I knew she wasn’t telling the whole truth,” Pastor Sixsmith said heavily. “This is my fault – I’m the one who pushed you into finding a wife, Nathan.”

“I didn’t mean to lie,” Sophia insisted. “I never meant for it all to get this far. There wasn’t time to write to you and tell you what had happened.”

“How should we believe a word you say?” James Rudd threw himself into the fray. “You could be anyone.”

“I have Jazzy’s letters,” Sophia said, fumbling in her carpetbag. She drew out the little box and took out the letters, tied neatly with green ribbon. She held them out, and Pastor Sixsmith snatched them away. He flicked through the letters and showed them to Nathan.

“Are these yours?” Pastor Sixsmith said.

Nathan barely glanced at them. “Yes, they are mine. Jazzy did mention her sister, Sophia. It was clear that they were close.”

“She hasn’t exactly been upfront with the truth. You can’t possibly...” James Rudd began, but faltered when Nathan shot him a look.

“I’d like a little privacy to talk to Miss... Cooper, was it?” Nathan said. “Alone, please.”

He gestured for Sophia to follow him up onto the porch. Pastor Sixsmith and James Rudd stayed down by the cart, exchanging unimpressed looks and glowering at Sophia. She tried not to care. After all, she could have had a much worse reception.

Nathan sat down on a rocking chair and indicated that she should take the chair behind him.

“You took a real risk, coming out here,” he said. “Whatever life is like for you at home, it must be bad.”

Sophia swallowed hard. “Yes, it is. This is my last chance, Mr. Rowe. I’ll be honest with you. There’s a reason Jazzy told me to just come out here, rather than write to you and explain the situation.”

He nodded, twisting his long fingers together. “I had no idea she was so ill. She was very honest about her health, but...”

“I wish I could say that it was a surprise,” Sophia said. “But she was so ill. Looking back, I... well, I don’t know what I could have done, or what anyone could have done. But she

was excited to come out here. A new life. Nobody but me knew about it, not even her mother.”

“Would I have liked her?” Nathan said, his voice so quiet that Sophia nearly missed it.

She took a moment to compose herself before speaking.

“Yes,” Sophia said quietly. “You would have liked her very much. I’ve never known anyone like Jazzy, and I never will again.”

A long silence stretched out between them.

“Have you ever had your heart broken, Miss Cooper?” Nathan said suddenly.

“If you’re talking about losing a sweetheart, then no. But I’ve lost both my parents and just now I lost my best friend in the world. Would you call that heartbreak?”

“Yes, I would. Well, as you may have guessed, I’ve had my heart broken plenty of times, including once by a sweetheart. I’m not looking for love and romance, because I don’t believe they exist. I have my own reasons for looking for a correspondence bride, just as you have your own reasons for becoming one. I’m no Romeo, but I’m a good man. I can offer kind treatment, a comfortable home, and friendship. You won’t want for anything. I need you to work – I can’t run my house and the ranch at the same time. The work isn’t too heavy, though. As I said, you can have a comfortable life. We won’t be alone, we’ll be together.”

Sophia shot a sharp, surprised look at him. He wasn't looking at her; he was staring out at the scenery, a faraway look on his face. There was a strange sort of sadness there, and Sophia suddenly felt herself wanting to put her arms around his shoulders and pull him close.

She didn't, of course.

“In short, I'm asking you to marry me, Sophia Cooper,” Nathan continued. “Neither of us expected this, but we're both here now. So, what do you say?”

A flood of relief went through Sophia. She hadn't failed Jazzy. She hadn't left her only home only to find herself destitute.

“Yes,” she said. “Of course, I'll marry you.”

# Chapter Four

For once, Nathan hadn't been able to take refuge in sleep. He'd lain awake for hours.

What if this was a terrible mistake?

What if Sophia Cooper was nothing like Jasmine Hardy? What if it was all an elaborate scam?

What sort of scam it might be, Nathan had no idea. What a woman could hope to gain from marrying a mid-level rancher was beyond Nathan.

But Sophia wasn't lying. Nathan knew in his heart of hearts that she was telling the truth.

So, that left him with two choices. Reject her and any chance of marriage and happiness – because Nathan knew he'd never send away for another correspondence bride – or marry Sophia Cooper in the place of Jasmine Hardy.

Even though he'd never known the woman, Nathan felt a pang of sadness to know that she was dead. He'd seen it on Sophia's face, too – a raw emotion, naked sadness that could never be forgotten. That sort of loss hurt for a long, long time.

And then before he knew it, morning was here, and Nathan had barely slept at all. He rolled out of bed and stared groggily down at the floorboards beneath his feet.

Well, here went nothing. Time to marry a stranger.

There was a sharp rap at the front door. James, no doubt, come to fulfil his duties as a best man.

“I hope you’re up!” James called from outside. “If you don’t answer the door in one minute, Nathan, I’m going to put my elbow through a window and get in that way. You’re getting married today.”

“I know. Do you think I’d forgotten?”

“I don’t know. This is you we’re talking about, Nathan.”

Nathan stumbled downstairs, unbolting the front door. James stepped inside, lithe and fresh, dressed in his Sunday best.

Unfortunately, James’s Sunday best was still a little too small for him, sagging at the chest and too short at the wrists and elbows. Still, it fit better than Nathan’s Sunday best. He didn’t dare breathe too deeply in case all the buttons on the shirt popped off.

James frowned, rubbing his own clean-shaven chin. “Not getting a shave, then? It’s too late now, of course.”

“Yes, I know it’s too late. Look, Sophia knows what I look like. I’m sure she doesn’t mind my beard that much.”

Nathan combed his fingers through his hair, a little self-conscious to be seen with it unbound. He could imagine his father snorting and telling him he looked like a woman.

Well, Nathan knew that he didn't. Part of him was proud of his long hair. It shone like gold when it was washed and brushed, and there was no trace of femininity in his form or face.

Who decided that long hair was only for women, anyway? Nathan had met many Indians who kept their hair long, smooth, and glossy, and were proud of it. They said that their strength was in their hair.

*Just like Samson*, Nathan thought, remembering his favorite Bible story.

"Come on, we'd better hurry," James said. "Have you had breakfast? I'll fix you something before we go."

"Better not. My Sunday best is tight. The only thing between me wearing it and me bursting out of it in front of the whole congregation is one good meal, James."

James winced. "All right, then. Empty stomachs it is."

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The chapel was half empty. Nathan was surprised that anyone was here at all. He hadn't told anyone that he intended to marry, and he'd sworn Pastor Sixsmith and James to secrecy.

Obviously one of them had told, because at least a dozen or two locals were already sitting in the pews, smiling expectantly up at Nathan. A few people mouthed *congratulations* to him, and Nathan smiled weakly back.

Pastor Sixsmith was standing at the altar, prayer book in hand.

“Are you all right, Nathan?” he said quietly.

“Yes, yes, quite all right. Where is Sophia?”

“Coming, I believe. Mrs. Harrison is helping her dress.”

Nathan nodded. It wasn't proper to Sophia to stay at his house the night before their wedding, of course. Pastor Sixsmith had asked a local widow to put Sophia up for one night and bring her to the chapel in the morning.

Nathan half expected Mrs. Harrison to come bursting in, flustered and red-faced, and announce that Sophia had absconded.

Instead, the doors opened, and Sophia herself appeared. No fanfare, no grand entrance, nothing. The door opened, and there she was. She wore the same dark green dress as yesterday and had a handful of wildflowers and greenery as a bouquet, probably gathered from Mrs. Harrison's garden.

Mrs. Harrison herself gave Sophia a reassuring smile and hustled past her to slide into one of the pews. Sophia stood where she was for a moment, panic written clearly on her face.



Then Pastor Sixsmith cleared his throat and gestured for her to come forward. Sophia did, striding determinedly down the aisle until she stood beside Nathan, and they both turned to face Pastor Sixsmith.

“Dearly beloved...” Pastor Sixsmith began, with the deep bass tone he used for grand occasions.

Nathan glanced sideways at his bride-to-be. He’d seen Sophia before, of course, but he hadn’t really *seen* her. He’d had a rough impression of a tall, slim girl with dark hair, and then suddenly his mind had been reeling with the revelation that this was *not* the woman he’d been writing to and intending to marry. Then, once they’d decided to marry after all, Pastor Sixsmith had whisked her away to Mrs. Harrison’s.

Looking at her now, Nathan was surprised at how pretty she was. She had a pale, oval face, a neat rosebud mouth, and vivid green eyes that looked lighter compared to the dress she wore. Her dark hair – shot with lights of gold, he noticed – was pinned up and decorated with a blue ribbon that she hadn’t been wearing yesterday. A present from Mrs. Harrison, most likely.

She was tall, too – no more than a head shorter than him, which was unusual. Most ladies barely came up to Nathan’s shoulder.

As if sensing his scrutiny, Sophia glanced sideways, catching his eye, and Nathan hastily directed his gaze forward.

What did Sophia see when she looked at him? It was clear that she knew nothing about him, and only needed to marry a man to give her a life and keep her safe.

Nathan wasn't enough of a hypocrite to be upset at that.

He knew that he wasn't bad looking. He was nothing impressive, but the average woman would hardly turn up her nose at the idea of marrying him.

Looks weren't everything, but it was a nice place to start.

Pastor Sixsmith cleared his throat pointedly, attracting Nathan's attention back to him.

"Do you, Nathan Rowe, take this woman, Sophia Cooper, to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Nathan's throat suddenly felt dry. It was difficult to breathe, like a giant invisible fist was squeezing his neck and cutting off his air.

"I do," he managed, hating how hoarse and weak his own voice sounded.

"And do you, Sophia Cooper, take this man, Nathan Rowe, to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," Sophia said, her voice clear and steady.

It was done. They were married. No going back now.

Pastor Sixsmith went through the rest of his spiel, but Nathan hardly heard it. He turned mechanically to face the congregation when Pastor Sixsmith presented Mr. and Mrs. Rowe to them. He nervously smiled at the applause and smiles and was grateful that there was no call to kiss the bride.

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Most people hung around after the service, getting in the way and offering congratulations. At first, Nathan couldn't understand why they were still here, until people started to make veiled, casual inquiries as to whether there would be food and dancing later. Then it all made sense. Weddings were usually something for the whole community, with everyone contributing to the potluck, bringing more food than anyone could eat, and usually a fiddler at least, so everyone could dance.

Not today, though. The good-natured, hopeful smiles dropped off their faces when Nathan handed Sophia up into the cart and climbed up himself, offering a perfunctory wave.

Pastor Sixsmith waved enthusiastically back, giving Nathan an encouraging smile. He seemed to have gotten over his dislike of Sophia and her "lie" and was simply glad that Nathan was married.

Now for the difficult bit. Nathan snapped the reins and they set off. A long, awkward pause ensued.

Nathan wondered about making some jibe about being married and decided against it. He couldn't think of anything, anyway.

“You haven’t seen the inside of the house yet, have you?” he said, when the silence was too much.

Sophia seemed entirely composed. She sat with a straight back; hands loosely clasped in her lap, flowers resting against her arm.

“No, not yet.”

“You probably should have seen it before we got married. What if it was a hovel?”

“Is it a hovel?”

“No.”

Sophia nodded. “Should be all right, then.”

More silence. Nathan wracked his brains to think of something to say. Should he just let the silence drag on? Was she enjoying the peace and quiet? Was his inane babbling getting in the way of her enjoying the scenery? Was this a look into their future – awkward silence, nothing to say to each other, and regret on both sides?

“I think we’ll get along well together,” Sophia said suddenly, and he shot her a surprised glance.

“You do?”

“Yes. I’m used to running a house, so you won’t need to worry about cooking and cleaning. Will I have my own room?”

“Of course.”

“That’s good, thank you.”

Sophia relapsed into silence, and this time, Nathan let it be. No doubt she needed some time to process the wild turn her life had taken, just like he did.

So, they continued on their way until the cart pulled into the courtyard. Nathan leapt down, hurrying around to help her down from the cart.

He was too late – Sophia had already leapt down herself, neat and nimble. She clutched her carpet bag to her chest, warily eyeing her new home.

“Is that all you have?” Nathan asked, indicating the carpet bag.

“Yes, this is everything. I had some aprons at home, but they were left behind.”

Nathan nodded. “Well, there’s an old apron somewhere in the kitchen. I’ll give you money to buy more material for aprons, and extra for new clothes.”

Sophia flinched. “I don’t need new clothes.”

Nathan hadn’t expected such a sharp retort to his offer. He wondered what hidden memory had come surging up to make her speak that way – he had a feeling that she would need new clothes. The green dress was nice, but if that was her best, she couldn’t wear it every day.

He didn’t say anything about it, though.

“Go on inside, and I’ll put the horse and cart away,” Nathan said. “I’ll give you the tour in a minute.”

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Nathan hurried to put away the tired old mare and the cart in the barn. The whole situation felt surreal. He had a *wife* waiting for him at home. He didn’t know whether to be thrilled or terrified.

When he returned, Sophia was sitting on the porch, in the same seat she’d sat in last night when they decided to get married after all.

“Any chores I can help with?” she said mildly.

Nathan shook his head. “This is your first day at home. I think you deserve a little time to settle in, don’t you?”

“What about supper?”

“Pastor Sixsmith baked an apple pie, and James sent down a roast chicken and some vegetables. Supper is well taken care

of. Shall we go in?”

Sophia nodded, getting to her feet and following him inside.

“This is the kitchen, of course,” Nathan said, feeling a little obvious.

It was a good kitchen – a large space, and well-stocked. The pantry opened up off the kitchen itself. In there, herbs hung in bunches from the ceiling. Sophia’s face brightened, and she reached out to touch one of the dried bunches.

“Oh, I see you have your own herbs.”

“Yes, my mother always used to collect them and keep them in here. I can show you where to find them, if you like.”

“I would like that, thank you.”

Feeling like they’d seen all there was to see in the kitchen and pantry, Nathan led the way into the parlor. A door opened off the kitchen and let into the parlor, which was a small but cozy space. A large grate – cold now, of course – stood against the wall, and chairs were arranged around it. Sophia went straight over to the bookshelves and ran her fingers gingerly along the spines of the books.

“Aunt Laura never had any books in the house,” she murmured under her breath. “She said that reading was a waste of time.”

Nathan waited for Sophia to elaborate on who Aunt Laura was, but she said nothing, so he didn't press.

"The books belonged to my parents," Nathan explained. "They're mine now, so of course that makes them yours, too. Do you like to read?"

"Yes, but I rarely have the opportunity," Sophia's hand lingered over the books, as if she wanted to take one but didn't quite dare.

Nathan moved over to the bookshelf and took a particularly dog-eared old tome off the shelf.

"Do you mind being frightened?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Do you like mysteries and Gothic horror?"

"I've never read any, but I'm sure I will like it."

"Excellent. This is one of my favorites. It was my mother's favorite book, too."

Sophia took the book and read the title aloud. "*The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Interesting."

"Read it and see what you think. Come on, I'll show you your room. You can take the book up with you and read it tonight if you're not too exhausted."



Nathan was beginning to feel a little more comfortable. He'd seen Sophia's face light up when he presented her with the book, and that was a good start. He led the way out of the parlor and towards the narrow, spiral staircase in the corner of the kitchen. It led up to a long, narrow hallway passage, with three doors opening on alternate sides.

The first door had belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Rowe, so Nathan led her straight past that. The second one had belonged to Jack, so this was the room he'd tidied and cleaned out for the arrival of his wife. The final door opened onto Nathan's room, of course, and it didn't seem necessary to show her that one.

"This is your room," Nathan said, opening the door and stepping back.

Sophia's breath caught in her throat. "Oh, it's lovely!" she breathed. "It's so comfortable and pretty."

Nathan blinked. He'd done his best to pretty up the room – he'd collected flowers and deposited them in a vase on the bedside table – but he thought it was simply passable, rather than *lovely*.

What sort of room was Sophia Cooper used to sleeping in?

"I'm glad you like it," Nathan managed. "It's not much, but it's warm, at least."

Sophia walked gingerly into the room, glancing around as if unable to believe she would be staying here. She placed her carpet bag down on the ground and sat on the edge of the bed, hugging the book to her chest.

Nathan cleared his throat. “Well, I’m going to go and start sorting out supper. You stay up here and settle in, and I’ll call you down when it’s ready.”

Sophia nodded, still staring around her.

“Thank you, Mr. Rowe.”

Nathan snorted. “I think we’re well past *Mr. Rowe*.”

Sophia smiled at that. “All right. Thank you, *Nathan*.”

For some reason, hearing his name coming from Sophia gave Nathan a warm feeling in his chest. Not wanting to think too hard about that, he gave a gruff chuckle and closed the door.

## Chapter Five

Sophia woke from the best night's sleep she'd had in a long time. She stretched, yawned, and let herself come to life.

The bed she had slept in was unbelievably comfortable in comparison with her wooden pallet bed at Aunt Laura's. It felt like sleeping on a cloud. There were plenty of blankets, so many that Sophia had peeled off a few of them during the night when she got too warm.

The little room felt like paradise to Sophia. There were neat little patchwork curtains hanging at the windows – which were well-cleaned and free of smears – and the bed, tucked into the corner, smelled fresh and clean. There was a wash basin in the corner with clean water and soap, a mirror hanging over it, and a wardrobe just beside it. Sophia had taken out her few items of clothing and hung them in the wardrobe. She'd been pleasantly surprised to find sprigs of dried lavender in there, newly added, to ward off any musty smell.

There was a tiny writing-desk against the wall, with a small stool. There was even paper, pen, and some ink in the desk – she'd checked. There was a low bedside table next to the bed, with a vase of wildflowers on it. They filled the air with a pleasant scent, and the flowers had been the first thing Sophia had seen that morning.

It was around half-past six, which was at least an hour and a half past the time that Aunt Laura insisted Sophia wake up and start work. Sophia had slept in, but there was still plenty

of time left to get up and get cracking with breakfast. She hadn't heard Nathan around yet.

*Nathan.* Her husband. That felt like a strange thing to say. Sophia was a married woman now.

She sat up, swinging her bare feet over the side of the bed and onto the little rag-rug on the floor there. The floor was well-swept and clean, the room dusted and free of cobwebs, and a few rugs had been scattered around, giving the room a cozy feel.

Strangely enough, this room was much tidier and cleaner than the rest of the house. Nathan had been right – it certainly *wasn't* a hovel, but it did need a good airing, and needed to be thoroughly swept and dusted. Sophia didn't blame him for letting the housework get on top of him. Nathan had a ranch to run, and Sophia knew how much work went into keeping a farm afloat.

Sophia firmly pushed aside those thoughts. She wasn't going to dwell on the past. She was here to work on her *future*.

Sophia dressed quickly, washing in the now cold water in the washbasin, brushing her hair in the mirror and pinning it back in a knot at the nape of her neck. She longed to put her green dress on again – she knew she looked good in that – but it would be wise to save it for best.

Still, Sophia couldn't resist taking the dress out of the wardrobe and holding it against herself.

*This isn't your dress. It's Jazzy's. It should have been hers. All of this should have been hers. You are in her place.*

Sophia hurriedly shoved the dress back in the wardrobe. She took out her burgundy dress, then remembered that it would show off the scars on her wrists – the bruises had faded, but not the crescent cut marks from Aunt Laura's nails – and reluctantly took out the gray dress instead. This dress showed the dirt something terrible, so she'd need to tackle laundry soon.

Sophia opened the door and listened for sounds of movement. There was nothing, so apparently Nathan was still asleep. That was odd – it was now close to seven o' clock in the morning. Didn't ranchers get up early?

*Mind your own business, Sophia, she scolded herself. This man has just given you an opportunity at a new life. A chance to be happy. Don't start by lecturing him about his habits. Don't let Jazzy down. She gave you this life, didn't she?*

Sophia had been surprised at Nathan Rowe. He was much more handsome than she'd dared to hope, and had a mild, thoughtful way about him. Why was a man like that not already married? Of course, there weren't many women in places like this, but surely a man like that would attract attention wherever he went. Why did he have to resort to writing away for a wife?

She hurried downstairs and warmed up the kitchen stove. Nathan had dug out the apron he'd mentioned, a plain brown calico that would do very well. Sophia put on the apron, and while the stove was warming, went outside to locate the chicken coop.

The chickens eyed her distrustfully when she entered but allowed her to rummage in their nests. She came away with a small basketful of eggs. If these chickens were good layers and provided more eggs than the two of them would need, perhaps Sophia could sell eggs to their neighbors. She'd have to ask Nathan first, of course.

He'd said that what was his was hers now, but Sophia knew full well that was not how it worked between men and women. Not legally, and not in the eyes of most men.

There was a bag of chicken feed beside the coop, and Sophia scattered a few generous handfuls for the birds. They fell on their breakfast with enthusiasm, apparently forgiving Sophia for stealing their eggs.

When she returned to the kitchen, the stove was hot enough to start cooking. There was no sign of Nathan, though. Had he gotten up hours ago, and gone out without her?

Sophia hoped not. She needed to show him that she was going to be a good wife, that she was worth this house and this life.

She searched in vain for bread and added *baking bread* to her mental list of chores to be done. There was a little milk left over, and Sophia wondered whether she would milk the cows or whether Nathan would do it. She hoped it would be Nathan. Sophia had never had to milk cows.

There was a bag of oats in a cupboard, and Sophia used a mixture of milk and water to get a pan of porridge going.

A creak on the stairs caught her attention. She turned to find Nathan standing there, rubbing his eyes. His fair hair hung around his face and neck, and he looked bleary and groggy with sleep.

“Good morning,” Sophia said.

“Morning. I’m not usually up at this hour. I’m not sure what woke me.”

Sophia blushed. “It was probably me. I’m sorry, I’ll try and be quieter in future.”

“No, not at all. I oversleep almost every day. James jokes about me wasting every morning in bed. I ought to be up by now,” Nathan smiled wryly. He raked his fingers through his hair, using a length of twine to tie it into a rough ponytail. Sophia realized that she was staring, and hastily turned back to stirring the porridge.

“That smells good,” Nathan said, pulling out a kitchen chair.

“I’m glad. How do you like your eggs? Boiled, scrambled, or fried?”

Nathan blinked. “I don’t have a preference. You collected the eggs?”

“Of course.”

“I usually forget. Were there many?”

Sophia grinned. “Plenty. Do you sell any of the eggs? If the chickens produce like this every day, we’ll have far more than we can use.”

“I’ve never thought of it. James takes some, and I don’t know what happens to the rest. You can sell them if you like.”

“What about the cows? Do I milk them, or will you do it?”

“I will.”

Sophia nodded and continued working on breakfast. She fried eggs while the porridge bubbled, and quickly made up some coffee.

“I spotted some berries growing in a hedgerow nearby,” Sophia said, placing the pot of steaming porridge on the table. “Were they blackberries? If so, I thought we could have them with breakfast tomorrow.”

Nathan was staring up at her as if she were speaking a foreign language.

“If you like,” he said, craning his neck to look at the porridge. “That looks good.”



“I hope so. There wasn’t enough milk left to make it as creamy as I’d like.”

Nathan ladled out some porridge for himself, not waiting for Sophia to serve him. He took a large mouthful.

“This is delicious,” Nathan said, sounding surprised. He helped himself to some of the fried eggs, too. “And these. I can’t remember the last time I had such a good breakfast.”

Sophia wanted to grin with triumph but forced herself to stay cool and modest.

“Well, it’s only porridge and eggs. There’ll be toast tomorrow – I’ll make bread today. I’m going to scrub the kitchen, and hopefully have time to dust and polish the parlor. Oh, then I’ll see if the plants need watering. There’s room for a kitchen garden out there, isn’t there?”

“There is,” Nathan said, mouth full, “But it hasn’t been weeded and cared for in a while. Ma used to maintain it, and when she got ill, we never had time to take care of it. Ma used to grow potatoes, lettuce, cabbages, onions, carrots, all that sort of thing. And the herbs, of course. I think it was a lot of work, though. You don’t need to work so hard, Sophia.”

Sophia gave a small smile. “I’m used to hard work.”

“Aren’t you going to sit down and eat breakfast?”

Sophia paused. Once Nathan’s breakfast had been served, she’d automatically started preparing to clean the pots and

wipe down the counters. She never ate meals with Aunt Laura and Jazzy, and Jazzy was never foolish enough to ask.

*This is my home now,* Sophia thought, with a surge of anger. *Mine.*

“Of course,” Sophia said lightly, as if she’d been planning to do that all along. She pulled out the chair beside Nathan’s and helped herself to a large spoonful of porridge. He flashed her a smile, and it occurred to Sophia that Nathan was even more handsome when he smiled.

*He was never for you, though,* she reminded herself. *Nathan was always meant to be Jazzy’s husband. Never forget that.*

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When Nathan had gone, Sophia threw herself into work like a whirlwind. Once breakfast had finished, she’d panicked, realizing that she hadn’t packed up a lunch pail for Nathan. He’d laughed, saying that he never packed a lunch pail for himself, and his friend James Rudd had started bringing lunch for both of them.

The kitchen was reasonably clean and took only a few hours to get it sparkling. The parlor was dusty, but not dirty by any stretch of the imagination. That was another hour.

And then... and then she was done.

Sophia stood in the middle of her newly cleaned kitchen, looking nervously around. It wasn’t even luncheon. She had bread to bake yet, but that was a task that Sophia enjoyed. At

Aunt Laura's, there was an endless list of tasks that *must* be accomplished every day. Polishing the silver, scrubbing the floors till they shone, wiping the windows inside and out in all weathers.

In her own home, Sophia felt strangely at a loss. Perhaps if she had friends back home, she could write to them. But Sophia had no one to write to.

Well, that wasn't quite true.

Sophia hurried back upstairs and sat down at her writing desk. She took out one of the yellowing sheets of paper and began to write.

*Dear Jazzy,*

*I'm here. I am now Mrs. Sophia Rowe, wife of Nathan Rowe, and I live at Rowe Ranch.*

*This was supposed to be your life, Jazzy. I think you'd have been happy here. It's a beautiful place, and the house is clean, roomy, and pleasant. I made a friend in town – Mrs. Harrison, who is an elderly widow and the kindest woman I've met in quite a while.*

*As to your husband, you would have loved him. Nathan is so handsome! Did you know he was going to be that handsome? He's fair-haired and has blue eyes, and he's very tall and strong. He's kind, too. He complimented my cooking, which is nice. He didn't complain about it being too salty or*

*not salty enough. He just ate everything I gave him and asked for seconds.*

*I know that you would have wanted a kitten once you were here, so I'll try and get one, if I can. I haven't noticed a barn cat, or any dogs. That's a pity. I know how you loved animals.*

*Oh, and we have chickens! You always wanted chickens, didn't you? I went out this morning and collected fresh eggs for breakfast, and it felt so lovely and domestic I just wanted to laugh. You'd be happy here, Jazzy.*

*It feels like something is missing, and of course that something is you. You were never here, Jazzy, but I feel like I brought you with me. I found a lot of herbs in the kitchen garden – which is overgrown and very much in need of care, but not beyond hope – and I'm going to bury this letter under the lavender. You loved lavender. Do you remember picking lavender leaves from our neighbor's garden, then drying them out and brewing them up to make tea?*

*I think I'll make lavender tea from this bush, in memory of you, Jazzy.*

*I wish I could have come to your funeral. But then, part of me is glad that I don't have to sit through Aunt Laura talking about you, when we both know full well that she didn't have the faintest idea who you really were or what you really wanted. Worse yet, Doctor Preston will be there. I know you said that he couldn't have saved you, but I'll never forget how he looked at you in that bed, wasting away, and said that a brisk walk and fresh air would revive you.*

*I miss you, Jazzy. I'm grieving for you in my own way. Nathan knows what happened to you, and I think he misses you, too.*

*I couldn't stand at your graveside, Jazzy, but then, it's not really you there anymore, is it? Your spirit is gone, free and healthy forever, and you can be with me if you want.*

*I miss you, Jazzy. I know I've said that a lot, but it's true. I'll think of you every single day until I die. I couldn't have asked for a better sister.*

*Goodbye. I love you, Jazzy.*

*Your Sister, Sophia*

Sophia read over the letter again, a lump rising to her throat. She wanted to cry, but Jazzy would have hated the idea of Sophia crying and crying and being so miserable. Instead, she folded the letter again and again, until it was a hard little square. She slipped the square of paper into a little drawstring bag and took it downstairs.

Out in the garden, Sophia went over to a wild lavender bush, rioting out of control in a corner. She'd have to neaten up the herbs later.

It didn't take long to dig a small hole underneath the roots of the lavender bush, and Sophia pushed the little bag containing the letter into the hole. She filled in the hole, patting over it so that it was well-hidden. Nobody would know that Jazzy's letter was there. Nobody would disturb her here.

Sophia knelt there for a long time, letting a few tears fall. They soaked into the earth at the base of the lavender bush, and Sophia liked to imagine they might make the herb grow stronger and sweeter. Jazzy would have liked that idea.

## Chapter Six

“Well, what do you think of her?” James asked eagerly.

Nathan clenched his jaw, focusing on his work. They were building an extra stall in the stables, to make room for a new stallion, along with a more placid and friendly mare. The stallion was an expensive horse, and a beautiful one. He would make beautiful foals, which would be worth a lot of money.

Like most beautiful things, the horse was temperamental and suspicious. He needed more space, so they'd decided to build an extra stall, larger than the others, to let the horse settle in.

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked. Evading, of course. James was whip-smart and more intuitive than most people realized, and Nathan had never liked having his private feelings pulled out and looked over. The army had stamped out any remaining tendencies towards softness.

“The new mare, of course. What did you think I meant?” James straightened up, resting his fists on his aching back. “I’m talking about your wife, Nathan. You know, the woman you just married?”

“Oh, yes.”

*I was trying not to think about her.*

Nathan still couldn't quite believe that he was married. Really, truly, properly married. It was all legal, and down in front of the gawping eyes of half the town. He'd never imagined himself getting married, not after his heart had been so thoroughly broken.

And yet, here he was.

James was still looking at him, waiting for an answer.

Nathan shrugged. "Dunno," he said, eloquently, and James rolled his eyes.

"Oh, come on. She's pretty, isn't she? Pastor Sixsmith is suspicious about it all, I think. You know how protective he is of you, and since she kind of lied to us all..."

"She didn't lie to us," Nathan said firmly, hammering nails into a section of wood. "She told us the whole truth about who she was and why she was here, just as soon as she could. If she'd written a letter saying that Jazzy was dead and asking to come in her place, I'd have said no. She made the right decision, coming up without telling me."

James leaned on a long plank of wood, thoughtfully scratching one ear.

"I suppose so. Still, she seems like a bit of a dark horse, doesn't she? Why would she want to marry you if she didn't even know you? At least you and Jazzy had written to each other for a while. It's strange, don't you think? Haven't you wondered about it?"



“No,” Nathan said decisively. “And if you’re curious, why don’t you ask her?”

“I don’t think so. People don’t like you prying into their backgrounds. If she wanted us to know her reasons, I daresay she’d have told us.”

“So, instead, you’re just going to stand here and gossip with me, about my wife?”

James narrowed his eyes. “You’re in a terrible mood today. What, is she a terrible cook or something?”

Nathan thought of the hot, creamy porridge that he’d eaten for breakfast, the hearty helping that had sat comfortably in his stomach, and the promise of fresh, sweet berries tomorrow. It was the best breakfast he’d had in a long time.

“No, she’s a good cook.”

James nibbled on a fingernail. “It’s almost one o’ clock. I think I forgot my lunch pail.”

Nathan almost laughed at that. “You’re not subtle, James.”

“What?”

“You want to taste her cooking.”

“Well, so what if I do? I’ve fed *you* often enough.”

Nathan stepped back and surveyed his work. The new stall was over half-finished, and the stallion was still racing around in the paddock outside, the sun glinting off his rich red hide. It was a fine day, and they had plenty of time to finish up the stall and their other chores. His stomach, unused to a hearty breakfast so early in the day, rumbled hopefully. He imagined Sophia in the kitchen, glancing up with a smile as he entered. The picture made Nathan’s heart skip a beat, and he hastily smothered the sensation. This was a business arrangement, nothing more. He needn’t fool himself as to why she was cooking meals and cleaning his house for him. Perhaps Jazzy had been drawn to him, but Sophia couldn’t possibly be.

“I suppose we’d better go in to eat, then,” Nathan said.

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The smell of baking bread greeted Nathan when he pushed open the door. The table was already set, but only set for two, he noticed.

“Hello,” he said, awkward in his own house, and Sophia glanced up from where she stood at the counter.

“Back for lunch?” she asked lightly. “It’s almost ready.”

“I’m here too,” James spoke up, sounding a little bashful. Perhaps he was regretting inviting himself to lunch.

But Sophia only smiled, gesturing for him to come inside. “Hello, Mr. Rudd. I’ll set an extra place for you. Would you

like some coffee? It's freshly brewed."

James's eyes lit up at the mention of coffee. "Would I ever! And call me James, please. Nobody calls me Mr. Rudd."

"Well, come on in. Oh, would you mind taking off your boots, both of you? I hate to ask, but I just cleaned the floor."

Nathan glanced down at the stone floor, neatly swept and still glistening with soapy water in the corners. It was certainly a lot cleaner than he'd left it.

"Ma always made us take off our boots," Nathan found himself saying, obediently toeing his off. He moved over to the kitchen table and sank down into his usual seat, feeling strangely ill at ease. He was so very *aware* of Sophia, moving confidently around the kitchen, and felt the urge to turn and watch her as she worked.

He didn't, of course. Instead, Nathan stared down at a knot in the wooden table, tracing it with a fingertip.

"Did you find everything all right?" Nathan spoke, after a minute of silence.

"Oh, yes. I had a look at the garden, too. I haven't had much time to work on it, though. I thought I might do laundry today, if there was time. Are there any other chores I should be doing?"

"Not that I can think of," Nathan replied. It was a dry response to a dry conversation. Nathan knew that he wasn't a

great conversationalist at the best of times, but there was something about Sophia that made his tongue heavy and clumsy. There was something guarded about her that he couldn't put his finger on. Did it have something to do with Jazzy's death? After all, they'd been close. Should he ask? Would it make her upset?

Nathan sat where he was, silent, lost in a whirlpool of misery and indecision, until finally James spoke.

"You should show her the new stallion and mare, Nathan," James said, and Nathan could have hugged him.

He glanced up at Sophia, who'd turned to look at him with her eyebrows raised.

"Oh, of course. You'll raise horses here."

"Do you like horses?" Nathan asked. A silly question, but Sophia smiled anyway.

"I do, very much."

"Well, you can name them, if you like," Nathan found himself saying.

Sophia's face brightened. "Oh, that would be lovely! Thank you."

"Come on out after lunch," Nathan said, encouraged, "I'll show you the stables."

“What about the laundry?”

He shrugged. “The laundry will wait, I suppose.”

Sophia beamed. She set the table quickly and efficiently. It was a simple enough meal – ham and cheese, with fresh-baked bread and creamy butter. The remains of a pie-making process sat on the counter, flour and forgotten knobs of dough needing to be swept away.

Sophia took her seat, following Nathan’s gaze. “I thought of making a pie for supper.”

“That sounds delicious,” Nathan managed.

When was the last time he’d had a pie, one that he hadn’t bought from the meal-sellers in town? Their pies were all watery gravy, gristle, and soggy pastry, but they tasted good enough if you were hungry.

“This looks delicious, Sophia, thank you,” James said, eyes fixed firmly on the ham.

She smiled. It was a real, genuine smile, that crinkled her eyes and lit up her face. She really *was* very pretty, not that Nathan should be thinking about her like that. He made a mental note to compliment her cooking more often.

They ate in silence, and Nathan was shocked at how hungry he was. In the bad days, right after everything seemed

to have crumbled away under his feet, he'd had no appetite. He'd eaten because he knew that he needed to, because he'd die otherwise, but there was no joy in it. It tasted like cardboard and ashes in his mouth.

But now he seemed to have reinvigorated his enjoyment of eating. Sophia seemed to be enjoying her food just as much, and it struck Nathan for the first time that she was very thin. Had she been eating properly before this? She'd mentioned a difficult home situation. What had really gone on?

Despite what he'd said to James, Nathan *was* curious. But he was always cautious. This woman was going to share his home and his life, and they knew nothing about each other. He'd built up a fairly good picture in his head of what Jazzy would have been like, but now that speculation was useless.

Better to go carefully, Nathan decided. They might end up being friends. Who knew?

"That was delicious, Sophia," James declared, pushing away his plate. "I'll have to forget my lunch pail more often."

Sophia chuckled, getting up to clear the table. "Well, you're welcome anytime you like. There's always plenty of food," she hesitated, glancing over at Nathan. "If that's all right with you, Nathan, of course?"

"Of course," he echoed. Sophia seemed a little relieved, as if she'd worried about overstepping her boundaries. It seemed that she wasn't entirely comfortable either, despite her seeming right at home in the kitchen.

It was always tempting to sit and lounge around after lunch, with a full belly by a warm fire. But there were chores to be done, and they wouldn't wait, so Nathan got to his feet with a sigh, and James followed. Nathan hesitated by the door, pulling on his boots.

“Aren't you coming, Sophia?” he asked. “To see the horses?”

Sophia wavered. “Are you sure? The laundry...”

“I've gone this many years without fresh laundry every day. I'm sure I can manage a little longer,” Nathan replied. He spoke a little too brusquely, but it did the trick – Sophia smiled.

“Let me change my apron first.”

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The stallion, who had been so very unpleasant and suspicious of Nathan and James, immediately warmed up to Sophia. He allowed her to stroke his velvety nose and feed him slices of apple. She was beaming, smoothing down his glossy reddish neck, and admiring the sandy color of his mane.

“He's beautiful,” she said finally. “And so is she.”

The mare was in the neighboring paddock, looking a little wary of the stallion. She was a dapple, not quite so beautiful beside the striking stallion, but with a pair of vivid, liquid brown eyes that stared out at the world with endless good humor.

Nathan leaned against the fence, trying not to stare. Sophia seemed to have forgotten him altogether, and only had eyes for the stallion. Her hair was slowly coming unravelled from its tight knot, thanks to the stiff breeze that had sprung up, and there was a flush of color in her cheeks that hadn't been there before.

“Got any ideas for names?” Nathan managed.

“I thought of Byron for the stallion,” Sophia said.

Nathan raised an eyebrow. “Like the poet?” When Sophia shot him a surprised glance, he had to smile. “What, surprised that I know who Lord Byron is?”

“No,” Sophia said, unconvincingly.

“Well, it'll suit this foul-tempered horse down to the ground. *Byron*. I thought you'd want to call him Skye or Radish or something.”

Sophia let out a burst of laughter. “*Radish?*”

“Just a suggestion,” Nathan replied with a smile.

“Well, we can call the mare Radish, how about that?” Sophia glanced up at him, smiling, and Nathan felt a horribly familiar heat spread through his chest. He made himself turn away, stamping down angrily on the feeling. He wasn't about to go down that route again – only heartbreak and misery waited at the end.



“I’ve got work to do,” Nathan said, more sharply than he intended.

“Can I help?”

He wavered, torn between telling Sophia to go back to the house, and eager to keep her with him.

Nathan decided on the latter.

“The horses need feeding,” he said finally. “The ones in the stables, that is. You know what to do?”

“Yes, I know,” Sophia wasn’t looking at him, she was smiling softly at the stallion. *Byron*, Nathan reminded himself. He made himself turn and trudge back towards the stables. James was sawing some lengths of wood to finish off their project inside the stables, and Nathan should have been helping him.

He was sure there was a collection of Lord Byron’s poetry somewhere in their bookcases. Maybe Sophia would like to read it. Nathan decided that he would get it out for her later.

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Nathan tiptoed up to the door of the stables, not entirely sure why he *was* tiptoeing. He peered inside, and spotted Sophia immediately. She’d worked quickly – the horses’ feed boxes were all full, and they were munching away happily. Sophia was cooing over the last horse in the last stall, a tall, strong carthorse with a shaggy fringe like a sheepdog, smoothing down its nose.

Nathan glanced over to the open barrel of horse feed, the hand scoop still poking out of it, and his expression darkened.

“What are you doing?” he barked, striding inside.

Sophia flinched, spinning around. “Nathan, you startled me. I didn’t know you were there.”

Nathan ignored her. He pointed at the bucket of feed. “Why are you using that feed?”

She followed his pointing finger, blinking in bewilderment. “What do you mean? That’s the horse feed.”

“It’s the new horse feed,” Nathan snapped. “You’re supposed to use the old stuff first. See, the stuff in the other barrel. It’ll go bad if we use all the new feed first!”

Sophia swallowed, seeming to notice for the first time the second barrel in front of the first one. “Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

“No, you didn’t. How much plainer could I be? The old feed barrel is in front, so why on earth would you open the second one, behind it? Who’s going to buy new feed when the old stuff goes bad and can’t be used? Hm? Are you going to buy more?”

Sophia flinched again, color draining from her face.

It was too much. Nathan *knew* he was too much, too angry. He was being unreasonable, plain and simple, but that old feed barrel was half full, and there was no more money to buy more. Why couldn't she just *think*?

"I said I was sorry," Sophia said quietly.

"Sorry won't feed the horses."

She pressed her lips together, as if biting back a sharp retort.

Behind them came a discreet cough. Nathan glanced over his shoulder to see James standing there.

"It's very easy to get the barrels mixed up, Nathan," James said, his voice quiet but heavy with reproof. "We've all done it. This is Sophia's first time feeding the horses. Don't you think you should go easy on her?"

Some of Nathan's anger drained away, leaving him feeling guilty and very, very silly.

Before he could say anything, Sophia pushed past him, walking briskly to the doorway and disappearing into the sunlight.

"Well, that was badly handled, wasn't it?" James said lightly. "What were you doing, Nathan? Why did you lay into her like that? It's just horse feed."

“I can’t afford to buy more,” he murmured. “Got to use the old stuff first.”

“And did you tell her that? Did you tell her which barrel to use?”

Nathan swallowed, hanging his head.

“No,”

“Thought not.”

Nathan sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “I’d better go and apologize.”

He caught up with Sophia just in front of the house.

“Sophia, wait,” he said, when it looked as though she was going to ignore him and just go inside. Sophia turned, looking up at him with a carefully neutral expression.

“Did I do something else wrong?” she asked calmly. “Something else I can’t pay to replace?”

Nathan winced.

*Ouch. Perhaps not quite so neutral, then.*

“I’m sorry, Sophia,” Nathan murmured. “I get so protective about the ranch, and money is so tight, I... I’m sorry. I should never have spoken to you like that.”

She still had her lips pressed together, and her expression didn’t change. Was she still angry?

“Don’t worry about it,” Sophia said stiffly.

“You can come back out to the stables, if you like.”

Sophia eyed him for a long moment.

“No, thank you. The laundry needs doing.”

With that, she turned on her heel, hurrying back inside the house. The door closed, not quite slammed shut, but certainly closed more firmly than it needed to be.

Nathan groaned, shoulders sagging.

She was still angry, then.

# Chapter Seven

Anger bubbled up inside Sophia, seething like boiling water, looking for a way out.

Oh, it wasn't just Nathan's sharp, unkind words that had hit a nerve. It was every insult Aunt Laura had hurled at her, every unfair accusation and unreasonable task given, every time Sophia had to bite her tongue and submit to a punishment she didn't deserve.

Was it going to be the same here?

*No, Sophia thought. I won't let it be the same.*

He'd apologized, at least, and that was something Aunt Laura had never done. Still, Sophia felt almost sore, as if some unseen line had been crossed, and now, they couldn't go back.

She could have been more gracious about accepting Nathan's apology. He was her husband, after all. She couldn't leave him like she had Aunt Laura.

Sophia stood in the middle of the kitchen for a moment or two, taking in a few deep breaths. She liked to be doing something, and it was a good way to clear one's head. It was easy enough to find chores to do in the kitchen – counters to wipe, dishes to clean, and so on. It wasn't time to put the pie in the oven yet, so when she'd finished, Sophia went towards the laundry room.

“Laundry room” was something of a grandiose word for the little alcove off the kitchen. The copper tub for bathing was kept here, along with the big, round washing tubs. One for hot, soapy water, to get the clothes clean, and another with cooler, clean water, to rinse them out. No mangle, which wasn’t ideal, but there was a sturdy washing line outside.

Sophia didn’t allow herself to think at all as she went through her tasks, filling up the tubs with water, locating the washboard, scrubbing brush, and soap, and lastly discovering the sad pile of dirty laundry in a wicker basket behind the door.

Wonderful.

Sophia groaned to herself, eyeing the pile. It would take her all afternoon to get through this, and she hadn’t even considered when she’d get the bedsheets done. Did the bedsheets need changing? Should she ask Nathan, or just take it upon herself?

Sophia glanced up and found herself staring at her own reflection in a dusty, cracked mirror, propped up on a shelf at eye level along with other bits and pieces.

Except it wasn’t her face.

Her face was thinner, her skin a worrying shade of gray, with lavender circles around her eyes. Her eyes were lighter than they should have been, more blue than green, and her dark hair was thin and greasy. An eyebrow quirked up, and Sophia recoiled.

It was Jazzy. Jazzy's face was staring back at her.

She blinked again, squeezing her eyes closed, and when she opened them again, the specter of Jazzy was gone. Sophia was staring at her own face again, startled and a little dishevelled, but definitely *her*.

Sophia clutched a grubby shirt to her chest as if for comfort, rocking a little under the wave of misery that swept over her.

Jazzy was gone. This would never be Jazzy's home. By now, she would be buried in the cold ground in that miserable old churchyard, presided over by an unpleasant pastor with craggy eyebrows and a penchant for delivering sermons about people Knowing Their Place.

Sophia sank to the ground, closing her eyes against the prickling sensation of tears.

If Jazzy had been here instead of Sophia, everything would have been different. Jazzy would probably have picked the right barrel of feed, and even if she hadn't, she'd have accepted Nathan's apology with a smile and a laugh, and it would all have blown over in a moment. Nathan would have warmed up to her right away. Pastor Sixsmith wouldn't have been suspicious of her, and protective of his young friend.

It was all just another reminder that this was not really Sophia's home and Sophia's husband.

It was Jazzy's.



One hot tear made its way out from under Sophia's eyelashes, tracing a tickling path down her cheek. She wiped at it furiously, sniffing hard and forcing herself back to her feet.

There was no point in sitting here and crying. Her friend, her *sister*, wasn't coming back. She'd never take up residence in the home that was supposed to be hers, never marry the man who was meant for her. She'd wanted Sophia to go instead, and Sophia was determined to make the most of it.

She needed to stand up for herself, to be firm. This was *her* house now as much as it was Nathan's. She intended to work hard and be a good wife, and in return, she expected to be treated well. The ghost of Jazzy might follow her through her life, but Sophia found that she didn't mind that. She and Jazzy had been inseparable in life, so why should death be any different?

Jazzy would surely laugh if she saw her now.

*Aren't you usually the practical one, Sophia?* Jazzy would joke, nudging her in the ribs. *The laundry's not going to do itself.*

"No, it certainly won't," Sophia said aloud, then glanced around to make sure nobody was there to hear her talking to herself. She scooped up the rest of the dirty laundry and was careful not to glance back at the cracked old mirror.

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Sophia didn't flinch at the unpleasant squeal of the door hinges. She made a mental note to oil them later and smiled

politely up at Nathan. No James this time, and Sophia was a little disappointed at that. She was warming up to Nathan's friend, and he seemed like a kind, fun young man. He'd make a comfortable third to their awkward meal together.

"Excellent timing," Sophia said. "The pie's nearly ready."

She noticed that Nathan was toeing off his muddy boots by the door without being asked.

Well, that was a start, at least.

"Smells delicious," Nathan said, and Sophia had to suppress a grin of triumph.

"My aunt used to hate the smell of chicken pie," she found herself saying. "She'd fly into a rage if I cooked it."

Nathan snorted. "No offence, but she sounds awful."

"Oh, no offence taken."

"I wouldn't object to the smell of anything that someone was taking the time to cook for me. If I'd complained about the smell of a pie that my ma made for me, she'd have smashed it over my head."

Sophia chuckled.

“Well, I was tempted, I won’t lie. Oh, before you sit down, I have your laundry for you. I thought about putting it all away, but I don’t know where to put things in your room. You can show me, if you like.”

Sophia picked up the basket of clean, dry laundry. It had dried quickly in the afternoon, thanks to a brisk, warm breeze and a strong mid-afternoon sun.

Nathan blinked down at the laundry, almost surprised.

“I didn’t think you’d get it all done this afternoon.”

“I only just finished,” Sophia admitted. “Where do you want me to put it?”

Nathan seemed to wake up, and immediately took the basket from her.

“Oh, I’ll put my own things away. Thank you, though.”

Sophia was left in the kitchen, staring at the steaming, golden pie on the counter, listening to Nathan’s footsteps upstairs. She was hungry, and it was a relief to know that she could sit down and eat right now, instead of waiting in the scullery for Aunt Laura and Jazzy to finish eating, tormented by the delicious smells.

Nathan returned and flashed a nervous smile. They took their places, and Nathan bounced up again to slice the pie. He served Sophia the bigger slice, much to her surprise.

“I really am sorry about today,” he murmured. “I don’t know what came over me. If it makes you feel better, James scolded me about it all day.”

Sophia smiled weakly. “Please, think no more of it.”

Nathan pressed his lips together. “No, it was wrong. You were right to be offended. I... I do that, sometimes. I get angry over the most stupid things, and it’s cost me many a friend. I don’t particularly want it to cost me my wife, too.”

Sophia almost choked on a mouthful of pie. She swallowed and cleared her throat.

“Well, I’m really not angry, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

He nodded. “I’ll try and work harder on my temper.”

“We all have a temper,” Sophia agreed.

*Some of us had to work very hard to control it, though, otherwise we’d suffer the consequences, she thought.*

They ate in silence for a minute or two, although Sophia felt that something had melted in between them, like a thin wall of ice.

“They encouraged it in the army, you know,” Nathan said suddenly. “My Ma would never have let me carry on like that at home, not when she was alive. But then we all joined the army, and they tend to encourage you to be a bit of a brute. Serves them better, you see.”

“We?” Sophia queried. “You and your father?”

“Yes, and my brother.”

Sophia was on the brink of asking what had happened to them but stopped herself just in time. The sadness in the house and Nathan’s loneliness spoke for itself.

“I’ve heard that war changes people,” Sophia said, because she felt like she ought to say something.

“I don’t think it changes them. It just brings out certain qualities. If you’re a good man, it can make you a great man. But more often, it makes a good man a bad man, and a bad man a terrible one. No heroes on the battlefield. Only the survivors and the dead.”

Nathan felt silent, as if he’d said too much. Sophia racked her brain for things to say, anything at all that would take that awful look off Nathan’s face.

In the end, she didn’t have to. Nathan suddenly seemed to wake up, and the despairing look disappeared out of his eyes. He glanced at Sophia and forced a self-conscious little laugh.

“Sorry, don’t mind me. You can tell I’ve been here alone for a long time, can’t you? It’s nice to have someone to talk to over supper.”

“Yes, it is,” Sophia answered, surprised at how strongly she agreed with that. “I used to eat in the scullery, and it was always so drafty. My sister – Jazzy – always wanted to sit with me, but her mother insisted she sit in the parlor after dinner. I was always too cold to enjoy my food.”

A crease appeared between Nathan’s brows. “You had to eat alone in the scullery? That’s awful.”

She’d said too much. Sophia cursed herself. She shrugged and said nothing, hoping that Nathan would take the hint and stop asking questions.

He did, thankfully.

“Do you like poetry?” Nathan said, changing the subject abruptly.

Sophia blinked. “Yes, I do.”

“Well, there’s lots of poetry books in the library. Well, it’s not a library exactly, just a few bookshelves. There’s something by Lord Byron there. I thought you might like that, what with your name for the stallion and all. James thinks that Byron is a fine name for a horse, by the way.”

“What about Radish?”

Nathan chuckled. "I think he likes Radish better."

Sophia had to smile at that. "Do you mind if I borrow books from the library? I can't remember the last time I sat down with a good novel."

"No, of course not. They're your books now, of course."

A warm feeling spread through Sophia's chest. Her books. Her house.

*I really don't mind sharing them with Jazzy, though,* she thought, smiling.

"Well, I'd love to take a look."

"Come, I'll show you them now," Nathan said, getting to his feet.

"Can you give me a moment to clear away the supper things and tidy up?"

Nathan paused, glancing around. "Well, I'll do that."

Sophia blinked. "You're going to do the dishes? Oh, no. That's my chore, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "Yes, but you spent all afternoon cleaning the clothes I've left to sit miserably in the washroom for

longer than I care to remember. I'll do the dishes. It's the least I can do."

That warm feeling in her chest intensified. It was pleasant, but Sophia couldn't help feeling the first pricks of warning.

Wasn't she just opening herself up to be hurt more than ever before?



## Chapter Eight

Sophia awoke the next morning with a newfound feeling of hope. True to his word, Nathan had cleaned up the supper things and left the kitchen neat and tidy. She'd chosen a book of Byron's poetry and a novel with an interesting title and spent a few pleasant hours reading in the parlor. Nathan sat along with her, but didn't seem to want to make constant, idle chatter. He'd stoked up the fire and they'd sat companionably in their respective armchairs, reading.

They'd gone to bed early, with Nathan staying up a little later to lock up and blow out the candles. She enjoyed going to bed whenever she liked – in the past, Sophia had always had to wait up for Aunt Laura to go to sleep. Since Aunt Laura didn't have to get up early in the morning if she didn't want to, she often stayed up past midnight, sometimes into the early hours of the morning.

Sophia, of course, had to get up at the crack of dawn, and woe betide her if she slept in.

If she was honest, Sophia would have to admit that she missed Jazzy's chatter and entertaining gossip in the parlor, despite the comfortable silence. However, it was a more comfortable evening than she'd enjoyed for a long time. Sophia had kept stealing glances over at Nathan, at his strong, handsome profile focused on his book. He might have something of a temper, but that wasn't exactly unusual – and he was *handsome*.

Whenever those thoughts came crawling into Sophia's mind, she hastily pushed them down and averted her eyes to

the page of her book. Theirs wasn't that kind of relationship. She ought to remember her place.

She slept well, and breakfast in the morning was pleasant and easy. Sophia felt *hopeful*.

As if on cue, that was when the shouting started.

She'd been putting away the breakfast dishes, mentally calculating which tasks to tackle next. Sophia had just been wondering whether she'd have time to potter around in the garden – Jazzy's garden, she'd mentally christened it – when she heard raised voices from outside.

At first, Sophia could only hear that someone *was* shouting, not the actual words. She leaned forward, opening the kitchen window, and Nathan's voice clearly drifted to her ears.

“For the last time, James, that's not how we do it! I won't tell you again, and don't you dare argue with me!”

Nathan sounded furious, much angrier than he'd been yesterday over the horse feed incident.

James replied, every bit as angry and clearly holding his own.

“Oh, for goodness' sake! You can't stand it when I'm right, can you?”

Sophia conducted a brief debate with herself. She could close the kitchen window and get on with her chores, and just hope the two men sorted it out among themselves.

Or...

Sophia slung a shawl around her shoulders – it was colder today than it had been yesterday, and the wind was getting up – and hurried outside.

It was fairly easy to find Nathan and James. They were just past the horse paddocks, at the edge of one of the pastures, and expansive stretch of land with a fenceline climbed beyond sight into the hills.

The two men were toe to toe, red-faced and furious. James's hands were on his slim hips, lips pressed tautly together. Nathan's arms were folded across his chest, the swell of his biceps straining at the fabric of his shirt. A muscle twitched in his jaw, flick-flick-flickering.

Sophia blushed, a little shocked at herself for noticing such a thing.

She cleared her throat, loudly, and they glanced towards her.

“What's going on?” Sophia asked lightly.

Nathan scowled, avoiding her eye. “Nothing.”

“Well, it was a very loud nothing. I could hear you both back at the house.”

“It’s not *nothing*,” James snapped. “Nathan here is just resolutely stuck in the past.”

“Oh, for...”

“He’s not willing to try even one bull of the newer, hardier varieties bred for the mountains. I’ve been reading some agricultural journals,” James added, his eyes lighting up a little.

Nathan growled, actually growled, under his breath. “I don’t see what’s wrong with the breeds we’ve always had. And I have the final say, remember?”

James clenched his jaw. “The more animals who survive the rough terrain and hard winters, the more money we get. It doesn’t take a genius to grasp the benefits. I’ve explained it all, again and again.”

Nathan snorted. “It’s not really your concern, is it?”

James turned away, raking his hands through his hair in frustration.

“Do you see?” he said, appealing to Sophia. “Do you see how stubborn he is? He’s too overbearing to relinquish even the tiniest bit of control, and he’s only hurting himself. These new breeds are *better*, Sophia. I wouldn’t suggest them if I

wasn't entirely sure. The old breeds just don't do as well out here. I can't understand why he won't just *listen*."

"You can start by listening yourself, then," Nathan barked. "I said *no*. Why are we still discussing this?"

James turned on him, narrowing his eyes. "You know, you're treating me just like you treated Michael. I keep hoping that you'll change, but maybe that's crazy. Friendship doesn't seem to mean anything to you."

Nathan blanched at that. Sophia longed to ask who Michael was, but it was clear that now wasn't the time. The name seemed to ring a bell in her head, but she had no time to think about it now.

"You said you read it in an agricultural journal, James?" Sophia said, carefully stepping between the two men. "Could you fetch that journal? Maybe if Nathan could see the article you're talking about, he'd feel better."

James blew out a heavy breath. "I doubt it," he said, wearily. "But I'll fetch it anyway. I'm done for the day."

"It's barely mid-morning," Nathan muttered.

James glowered at him. "Like I said. I'm done for the day."

He turned on his heel and marched away, his shoulders drawn up high and tight. The argument had clearly shaken him.

Sophia glanced back at Nathan. The anger had mostly faded out of his face. It was just like when he'd snapped at Sophia – he'd gotten angry, said things he regretted, and now it was too late to take it back. He watched James go, guilt and irritation warring on his face.

“Well, you’ve seen me at my finest, now,” he muttered.

Sophia sighed. “I don’t know a lot about agriculture, but James seems very experienced. Agriculture is changing, and I suppose it must be very easy to get behind.”

Nathan sank down heavily onto an upturned tree stump, resting his elbows on his knees. After a moment’s consideration, Sophia laid a consoling hand on his shoulder.

She felt him flinch under her touch, but he didn’t pull away. His shoulder was warm and firm, and Sophia felt a surprising urge to move closer to him.

“He’s right,” Nathan murmured. “He’s right, but I... I don’t like change, Sophia. I have to work myself up to it. Getting things sprung on me like that always rattles me. I like every day to be the same. Maybe I’m getting left behind, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Sophia crouched down beside him, careful not to let the hem of her skirt trail in the mud. Her hands were still sore from yesterday’s laundry.

“James is trying to help you,” Sophia murmured. “It’s hard, sometimes, to accept help. It’s harder still when the world is going by without you. But give him a chance, won’t you? He’s a loyal friend, as far as I can tell.”

“He is,” Nathan admitted. “The best.”

“Well, there you are. You can trust him. You *should* trust him.”

“I suppose I’ll have to apologise.”

Sophia shrugged. “Perhaps, but I think the best apology you could give James is to agree to try out one or two of the bulls he’s recommending.”

Nathan snorted at that. “James certainly does love to be right. It’s annoying how frequently he *is* right, too.”

“Jazzy was like that,” Sophia found herself saying. “She was so clever, and so intuitive. She had a knack of knowing what people were thinking.”

“That must come in handy,” Nathan remarked, with just a hint of bitterness. “I find myself at a loss in most social situations.”

Sophia bit her lip. “Yes, it’s difficult.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You find social situations difficult? I find that hard to believe.”

“And why would you find that hard to believe?”

A flash of color spread across Nathan’s cheeks. “Well, you’re pretty, and clever, and well-spoken.”

“You’re handsome, and clever, and well-spoken,” Sophia countered. “The truth is, I... I didn’t have many friends back home.”

*I had no friends, except for Jazzy.*

Nathan bit his lip. “I’m sorry. It must have been lonely.”

Sophia swallowed. “It was.”

She didn’t elaborate. The few friends Sophia’d had when she was left to Aunt Laura’s care – mostly school friends – soon forgot about her. As she grew older and started to realize that her life was going to be an unpaid, unappreciated servant in Aunt Laura’s house, Sophia stopped trying to make friends. Aunt Laura treated her like a servant, so everyone who visited her home followed suit.

One can only be rebuffed so many times before it gets exhausting, and Sophia was permanently exhausted.

But she didn’t want to share this with Nathan, even though he was looking at her expectantly, as if he were waiting for her to say something. It just sounded too silly, too self-



pitying. This was to be Sophia's new life, and she was concerned about not making a mistake this early on.

So, Sophia only cleared her throat, and smiled nervously up at Nathan.

“Who is Michael, by the way?”

Just like that, Nathan's expression closed. It slammed shut like a heavy, iron-studded door, and Sophia knew she'd made a mistake.

“James shouldn't have mentioned him,” Nathan said shortly. “He's no one for you to worry about. An old friend, that's all.”

*Not just an old friend, Sophia thought. Someone you drove away. Something happened that you're still sore about.*

Sophia got to her feet, smoothing out her skirt and apron. She frowned at a smear of mud on the hem of the latter. More laundry.

“Right. Well, I have chores to get on with,” Sophia said, conscious that the wall of ice was rapidly building between them again. “I'd better go back inside.”

Nathan nodded, dropping his gaze to inspect his own hands. He had large hands, work-roughened and powerful. Sophia found herself tracing the lines of his arms. His thick forearms were bared, shirt sleeves rolled up above his elbow. There was a sprinkling of sweat on his face, and his hair was

escaping from its ineffective tie. He had the longest hair Sophia had seen on a man for quite a long time. In the city, long hair on men was somewhat out of fashion.

But Nathan's hair was beautiful. In the sunlight, it glimmered like spun gold. Right now, tendrils of hair escaped and hung around his face, giving him a strangely dishevelled look that was really quite attractive.

Sophia cleared her throat loudly. Too loudly. Nathan glanced up at her, surprised.

“Are you all right?”

Sophia blushed. “Oh, yes.”

“It sounded like you had something in your throat.”

“No, not at all. Um, will you want a bath later tonight?”

There was a heartbeat of silence between them.

“Yes, but don't worry,” Nathan said carefully. “I... I can bathe myself.”

Sophia wondered if it were possible for the ground to swallow her up, if she wished hard enough for it.

“No, I just meant that I'd fill the tub in the washroom. And I'll serve supper later than yesterday.”

“Right, I see,” Nathan shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, please. That would be very helpful.”

“Excellent,” Sophia said, immeasurably relieved that the conversation was over and that she could head back to the house. She did just that, spinning on her heel and marching just a little too quickly towards the distant eaves of their home.

She couldn't have said what it was that made her look back. Human nature, perhaps? But look back was exactly what Sophia did. She glanced over her shoulder and found Nathan staring after her. When their eyes met, they both hastily averted their gazes.

However, there was a nagging little thought at the back of her mind that wouldn't go away.

Where had she heard the name *Michael* before?

# Chapter Nine

The nightmares were starting again.

Nathan woke an hour before dawn, his heart thudding and sweat pouring off him, despite the chill of his room. His pillow and sheet were soaked. He considered stripping them off and giving them to Sophia to wash, but that felt a little unkind. She'd only been here a few days. The poor woman hadn't even had any chance to settle in yet.

Nathan sat up, not bothering to light a candle. He knew the gloom of his room at night far too well. He'd spent too many sleepless nights in here, inspecting the dim ceiling, the paler gray square of his window, and the dark shadows thrown by his furniture. Sometimes, when he only half awoke from his nightmares, the shadows turned into grotesque things, monsters with guns and bayonets and knives, coming for him.

He shuddered, raking a hand through his loose hair. True to her word, Sophia had set up a deep, warm bath for him in the washroom, and there was stew and bread for supper, with an apple pie she'd baked earlier. It felt good to wash away the dirt and sweat of the day. And, of course, Nathan felt even better for smoothing things over with James.

Sophia was right – an admission that James's idea was best was really all that was needed. Of course, now James wouldn't stop crowing about it. Nathan couldn't find it in his heart to blame him.

He closed his eyes, trying to block out the sights and sounds of a bloody battlefield. The screams, the guttural war cries, the sounds of guns and cannons blaring.

Then the silence, after it was all over.

It didn't work. It never worked. A small part of Nathan, a part that he never really looked at, knew that he would never get over the memories. The nightmares might fade, but it wasn't as if he could wake up and assure himself it was just a nightmare.

These weren't nightmares. This had really happened.

*No heroes on the battlefield, only survivors.*

Nathan could hear Jack's voice in his head, high and exuberant.

*We're going to be heroes, Nathan. Heroes! Everyone will cheer when we come home.*

He'd been so sure. Jack, like Nathan, had entirely believed the lie they were sold about how glorious war would be.

Well, it wasn't. It was a bloodbath, and one you'd never forget. A whirlwind of impassive commanders issuing orders, young men crying for their mothers, and the endless rattle of bullets and cannonballs. A layer of mud and blood covered everything, even in Nathan's memories.

He had been given a medal, some glint of gold and a flash of colored ribbon that had seemed far, far too heavy when it was pinned onto Nathan's chest. He'd thrown the medal in a drawer and never looked at it again.

Nathan could only ever hear the screams of the dying, the horrors of the battlefield. He remembered trawling through a miry field, sifting through dead bodies to find Jack and his pa. After a while, all the gore and corpses didn't bother Nathan anymore, and that was every bit as horrifying as the battle.

No one should ever feel desensitized towards death.

At least the constant, grinding monologue of, *It would have been better if I'd died with them*, had eased up. Nathan felt a little better these days, and with Sophia here...

Nathan neatly nipped off that train of thought. Things were very new with Sophia, and he didn't want to scare her off. Having her here felt... well, Nathan wasn't quite ready to put a word on it. But it was nice, having Sophia here.

*So long as you don't lose your temper with her*, he thought, wincing.

Nathan got up when he heard Sophia moving around, then going downstairs to the kitchen. If she was surprised to see him awake so early, she didn't let on.

"Morning," Sophia said, flashing him a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

“Oh, yes,” Nathan lied. “Do you always get up this early?”

Sophia had her back turned to him, and he could have sworn the lines of her shoulders tensed up.

“It’s a habit of mine,” she said airily, turning back to face him with a smile. “I’m used to getting up at this time.”

“Well, would you like me to make coffee?”

“If you like.”

They worked in silence, preparing breakfast as the sun rose over the horizon. Nathan privately thought that the window in the kitchen must have been designed to let in the light – it was the perfect angle to watch the sun rise.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Sophia said, jolting him out of his reverie. “The sunrise, I mean.”

“You must see it every morning, getting up so early.”

Sophia shook her head. “There were no windows in the scullery.”

That seemed like a strange thing to say. What, was she confined to the scullery all the time?

Nathan didn't comment, of course. There was a light, airy atmosphere in the kitchen between the two of them, and he was afraid that one false move, or one careless word would destroy it all.

It was very important, somehow, that Nathan should earn Sophia's good opinion. Why, he couldn't have said. Something visceral inside him wanted to please her, wanted to make her happy.

Perhaps Pastor Sixsmith had been right when he'd said that Nathan ought to be married. Although, this was hardly the traditional marriage Pastor Sixsmith had likely envisioned.

"The porridge is ready," Sophia said suddenly, turning away from the window. "Are you ready to eat?"

"Starving," Nathan said, with perfect sincerity.

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"I know you had a nightmare last night."

Nathan froze, stuck in the act of scraping the last of his porridge out of the bowl. "What?"

Sophia glanced up, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not a fool, Nathan. I could hear you calling out and tossing and turning."

"I'm not a child. I don't have nightmares."

"Nightmares aren't childish, believe me."



She was right. There was nothing youthful or childish about the dreams that dogged Nathan's sleep. He shuddered to even remember some of them.

Nathan was quiet for a minute or two before answering, and Sophia didn't press him for a reply.

"I dream about the war," Nathan said, his voice so hushed it was barely louder than a whisper. He glanced up, half-afraid to see disdain on Sophia's face. Or worse, pity.

But she only looked sad.

"You must have seen awful things," Sophia said quietly. "I can't even imagine."

"No, nobody can," Nathan replied, giving a little mirthless laugh. "You go in a young, naïve boy, expecting to be a hero, expecting it all to be glorious and almost fun, and then it's ... not."

*Not* was a pretty weak way of describing the most horrific things Nathan could ever imagine a person enduring. He was grateful when Sophia didn't press him for details. Some people were almost morbidly interested in the horrors he'd seen, wanting details of gory deaths and horribly failed campaigns. They *wanted* to hear about the panic and fear, and what men were sometimes forced to do to survive.

It made Nathan feel sick. The porridge, which was delicious and creamy, now sat heavily in his stomach, like a

handful of rocks.

“I’m trying my best, you know,” Nathan blurted out. “With us, I mean. You and me. I... I’m not used to having another person here. My temper is worse than it’s ever been. I wasn’t always so gruff and unfriendly. I won’t lie to you, Sophia – I’m not the same man who went off to war. I’m trying, but it’s just so hard sometimes.”

Sophia bit her lip. Her hand was lying on the table, only a few inches away from where Nathan’s lay. Just a little further forward, and their fingertips could brush together. He could set his hand on hers, feel the warmth of her skin.

He didn’t, of course.

“Well, I didn’t know the man who went away to war,” Sophia said quietly, “So I can hardly compare. As I said, I can’t imagine the horrors you endured, but I’ve seen what war can do to a person. I understand, Nathan, better than you think. I know that you’re trying, and I appreciate it. I mean that. It means a lot to me, knowing that you’re trying to control your temper and be a better man.”

“It’s a slow process,” Nathan said, flashing a lopsided smile. The movement felt odd on his face. When was the last time he’d smiled properly? “But I hope you aren’t ready to leave me just yet.”

She chuckled at that. “No, I think I’ll give you more than a few days, don’t worry.”

Nathan drew in a deep breath. “I’m glad you’re here, Sophia.”

Her smile faded just a little. “So am I, but I... I can’t help thinking that this is Jazzy’s place. I see her everywhere.”

Nathan shrugged. “Maybe you brought her along with you. I don’t mind. There’s plenty of room.”

Sophia shot a quick, surprised glance at him, and there was something in her eyes that Nathan couldn’t quite interpret. The next thing he knew, Sophia’s hand was on his.

He froze, for the second time in about five minutes. Her hand was rough, as you’d expect from a woman who worked at household chores all day. There was the strength of a laundress in her hand, but the long and elegant fingers of a pianist. Her skin was warm and dry, and Nathan’s skin tingled in response to her touch. Nathan found himself staring at her hand on his, unable to look away.

“You’re a good man, Nathan,” she said softly. “Remember that, when the nights are long, and you can’t sleep, and when you feel as though you’ll never be yourself again. You’re a good man.”

Nathan swallowed hard, unable to fight back the tide of emotion rising up inside him. He tried frantically to fight it back – he’d kept it all bottled up tight, secured with a thick lock. That was for the best, undoubtedly. Nothing good would happen when Nathan opened his little box of feelings.

There was something he wanted to say, something dancing on the tip of his tongue. Sophia was steadily returning his gaze, waiting for him to speak.

Then the door flew open with a dramatic crash, the uncoiled hinges shrieking, offended.

Sophia and Nathan almost jumped out of their skins, both whipping back their hands to their chests.

Nathan spun around and fixed James with a glower. James, oblivious to the chaos and fright he'd just caused, was diligently wiping his boots on the doormat.

“Morning,” he trilled.

“Don't you knock?” Nathan snapped.

James shrugged. “I saw you through the window, I know you were just having breakfast. It smells delicious, by the way.”

“Would you like some, James?” Sophia asked kindly.

“Don't, that's what he's here for,” Nathan growled. “He's hinting for food.”

“That I am,” James replied proudly.

Sophia smiled, shaking her head. “There’s plenty. Please, sit down, James. I’ll fetch you a bowl and some coffee.”

“Boots off,” Nathan said firmly, as James tried to tramp across the kitchen in muddy boots.

“You’ve got a letter, by the way, Nathan,” James said off-handedly, settling into a seat.

“A letter? It’s early for that. I didn’t hear the postman.”

“It looked like it was hand-delivered. I picked it up from the porch, actually,” James explained, setting down a neat white square on the table, pushing it towards Nathan. “Oh, Sophia, this looks amazing!”

Sophia began to tell James how she made her porridge extra creamy and tasty, and James dug in enthusiastically. Nathan heard none of it.

He stared down at the innocent little envelope. There was no address on it, no writing beyond a simple *Nathan Rowe* on the front, in smooth, swirling handwriting.

Nathan knew that handwriting.

He heard Sophia clear her throat and glanced up to see her staring questioningly at him.

“Who’s it from?” she asked.

Nathan swallowed hard. “Oh, it’s nothing important. Excuse me for a moment.”

# Chapter Ten

Nathan got up, carefully not looking back at the other two. He knew he was acting oddly, but all he could think about at the moment was that wretched letter. That *wretched* letter. He had recognized the handwriting at once, of course.

Only one man wrote with swirls and swoops like that, and Nathan hadn't heard from him in quite a while.

They hadn't parted on good terms.

He hurried into the parlor, closing the door behind him. Blood was pounding in Nathan's ears with a deafening rush, and he was grateful for the cooler air in the parlor.

He drew in a deep breath, then ripped open the creamy envelope. Inside was a scrap of paper, little more than a note. The edges of one side of the paper were torn, as if it had been carefully ripped away from a larger sheet, but the writing was just as elegant as ever.

*Nathan,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. Perhaps you've heard that I am back in town, perhaps you haven't. Anyway, I shall get straight to the point. I'd like us to meet up. We have something important to discuss.*

*A debt, to be precise. No doubt you have questions, and I am more than happy to provide the answers. I'll contact you*

*later with a time and a meeting place, but I decided to send this little note to re-establish contact.*

*You and I have unfinished business to deal with. Better to put these things to bed, don't you think?*

*Regards,*

*Michael Jasper*

*P.S. Congratulations on your marriage, by the way. No need to introduce me to your dear bride – I've already had the pleasure of meeting her. You chose well, if you don't mind my saying.*

Nathan stared at the letter, as if staring might change its contents.

Michael. Michael Jasper was back in town. Of course, Nathan hadn't known that. If he'd known, he... well, what would he have done? There wasn't much to do about it.

Offer an apology, perhaps? Nathan was clearly very bad at apologies.

He read the letter slowly, one last time. *Unfinished business* was an ominous phrase, and Nathan had absolutely no idea what it meant. The overall tone of the letter was distinctly menacing. *Why?* Michael had always had a flair for drama, so perhaps that was it.



The postscript sent chills down Nathan's spine, too. When would Michael have met Sophia? He surely hadn't come to the ranch. Michael knew where it was, of course, but Nathan or James would have noticed. Either that or Sophia would have mentioned an uninvited guest.

Lack of sleep and plenty of stress were combining to give Nathan the beginnings of a headache, one that would probably blossom into a pounding ball of pain behind his eyes by the end of the day. He sank down onto one of the armchairs with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Perhaps he should go into town and find Michael. Their farm had been sold years ago, as far as he recalled, so perhaps he was staying in an inn or boarding house. Then they could meet face to face and talk over whatever it was Michael wanted to *put to bed*, as it were.

Somehow, though, Nathan had a feeling that if he did go searching for Michael, he wouldn't find him. Michael had a remarkable knack of disappearing off the face of the earth when he didn't want to be found. Perhaps that was why Nathan had never run into him in the army, even though they'd joined up at roughly the same time, from the same small town.

Perhaps he was misreading the whole thing. Perhaps Michael just wanted to make amends and rekindle old friendships, and he, Nathan, was just far too paranoid.

That was the better option, but Nathan didn't believe he was lucky enough for that.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and Nathan flinched.

“Who is it?”

The door creaked open, and Sophia peered in.

“I thought I heard you come in here. James is just polishing off the last of the porridge. Are you coming back to the table? There’s more coffee.”

Nathan forced a smile. The idea of eating or drinking right now nauseated him. “I don’t think so, no. Thank you, though.”

She nodded but stayed hovering in the doorway.

*Go away, Nathan thought silently. Please, just let me work through this myself. You don’t want to get in on this particular secret.*

“Who was the letter from?” Sophia asked quietly.

Nathan clenched his jaw. “Michael Jasper. You don’t know him.”

*Although apparently, he knows you.*

Sophia took a step into the room, a frown appearing between her brows.

“I know, I don’t think I know anyone in town besides James, Pastor Sixsmith, and Mrs. Harrison, but...”

“But what?”

*Too sharp, Nathan, too sharp. Mind that temper.*

“The name rings a bell,” Sophia admitted, seemingly oblivious to Nathan’s rising temper. He knew full well that he had no real right to be angry. It was another knack Michael had always had – he could rub a person up the wrong way quite easily, and he took pleasure in doing it, too. He used to drive their schoolteacher to distraction, and fairly persecuted the neighboring farmers.

No doubt Michael as a grown man had discovered newer, more insidious ways of getting into people’s heads and under their skin.

“Does it?” Nathan heard himself saying. “Because he says that he knows you.”

Sophia did look surprised at that. “What? What do you mean?”

Nathan waved the letter in the air. “He said that he’s already met you.”

“Well, I don’t recall meeting him. I do remember the name, Michael Jasper, although I can’t for the life of me remember where or how. Did I see him on the way into town? Was he on the train? I’m sure...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nathan interrupted, getting to his feet. “I really need to get on with my chores. Tell James to stop stuffing his face—we need to get some work done.”

Sophia folded her arms, not moving from the door.

“You’re in a bad mood.”

“And you’re not helping.”

“We had a whole conversation yesterday about you and your temper.”

“Sometimes a man needs to indulge in a little anger.”

Sophia laughed aloud at that, which was a fair reaction, to Nathan’s mind.

“Oh, please. You’re not a fool, Nathan, so don’t act like one. This letter has upset you, it’s plain to see. Why won’t you tell me what’s going on? I’m not asking to read the letter...”

“Good, because I wouldn’t let you. I won’t go reading your personal correspondence if you don’t read mine.”

Sophia sighed. “I’m familiar with the basic concepts of privacy. I’ve lived with a person who read all my letters and raked through all my things, and I’d never do the same to you. I’m your wife. We’re supposed to share worries and burdens. I’m not interested in gossip—I just want to know why you’re upset. I might be able to help.”

“You can’t. I don’t even know what’s going on.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

Nathan privately cursed himself. Sophia had a way of wiggling the truth out of him. She asked innocent questions, and he gave himself away. But what had gone on between his family and Michael’s wasn’t something he cared to explain to Sophia. Wife or not, she was little more than a stranger.

“Look, I really don’t want to discuss this now. Excuse me, I need to get past.”

Sophia didn’t move. “Nathan, please...”

“Oh, can’t you just leave damn well alone?” Nathan shouted. “It’s not as if you don’t have your own wretched secrets, and I haven’t poked into them. I knew more about Jazzy than I do about you, and you seem keen to keep it that way.”

Sophia’s eyes widened, and Nathan’s heart sank. He’d done it again.

How many times was she going to forgive him for this?

The house was suddenly very quiet. With a stab of shame, Nathan realized that James, sitting at the kitchen table, would have heard every word of their argument.

It was hardly an argument, though, was it? Sophia was being calm and kind, trying to be a good wife and help her husband with his problems. Nathan, on the other hand, was acting like a spoiled child, sticking out his lower lip and refusing to tell anyone what was wrong.

*Nicely done, Nathan. Very mature. The sort of husband every woman dreams of.*

“Sophia...” Nathan began lamely, but Sophia turned on her heel and walked away. He heard her hurry up the stairs, and her bedroom door closed firmly.

“Well, that was nicely done,” James said, from his perch at the kitchen table. Nathan walked tiredly out, slumping into his usual seat. The remains of Sophia’s porridge were congealing in her bowl. She hadn’t even finished her breakfast.

“Don’t, James,” Nathan said wearily. “I’m really not in the mood.”

“Who’s the letter from?” James asked. “I’ve got an idea already.”

“Michael.”

The name rolled into the middle of the kitchen table, heavy and ugly.

“Oh,” James sat back in his chair. “I haven’t seen him for a while. He left me in no doubt as to what he really thought of

me, last time we met. I didn't even know he'd survived the war."

"He says he wants to meet," Nathan murmured. "I don't know what to think about that. Michael's not the sort of man who goes around building bridges."

"No, he's the sort of man who puts explosives under them," James said affably. "Let's not talk about Michael. Let's talk about your wife, who seems to be a very nice woman and actually appears to like you, for some strange reason. You, on the other hand, seem keen to mess everything up. Why are you doing that, Nathan?"

Nathan considered going to his room and flinging himself into bed, like he'd done when he was a child, burrowing under the bedclothes and closing his eyes tight. It had always reassured him then. Back then, Jack had assured him that hiding under the covers was a sure-fire way to escape whatever monsters lurked under the bed or in the closet or lingered in the dark corners of the room.

But now Nathan was older, and he knew that the nightmares would be waiting for him in bed. Monsters could get under the covers quite easily.

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. It was coming loose again, hanging around his neck. He really should get it cut soon.

"There are things she's not telling me," he said eventually. "She's not here because she wanted to marry me, not like Jazzy. She's here because she had nowhere else to go. You

must see how that changes things. She didn't choose me, James. I was her only choice."

James bit his lip. "There's no reason why you can't be friends. You might even grow to love each other."

*Me? Nathan wanted to laugh. Who's going to love me, and all the ghosts I drag behind me? At least Sophia only has one.*

"I want her to be comfortable and happy, but it feels as though there's something between us. I want to ask about her, but she always evades my questions," Nathan admitted. "It's all going wrong. I don't know what to do, James."

James was quiet for a long moment. Nathan didn't interrupt. He let his friend think. Nathan knew that he was lucky to have someone like James for a friend, someone who was kind and clever and so quick to forgive.

It was more than he deserved, really.

"Well, I can't give you advice on marriage, Nathan," James said finally. "Are you really at such a loss? Can't you just talk to her?"

"It goes wrong every time. She's putting on a mask, and I don't know what to do about it. Convince her to take it off? Reason with her? Wait for her to get comfortable with me? I can't believe that I thought finding someone to marry would be the hard part. All those novels that end when the hero and heroine marry have led me astray, I think."



James chuckled. "I know someone you could ask."

Nathan groaned. "Me too. I suppose I'd better visit him today. He gets snippy if I don't go to see him reasonably regularly."

James got to his feet, leaving his empty porridge bowl for Nathan to clear. "Well, I'm going to get on with the ranch work. I suggest you go and tell Sophia you're going out. Married couples are supposed to talk about things like that."

"So I hear," Nathan murmured unhappily. "Let's hope she hasn't knotted her bedsheets together and escaped from the window."

# Chapter Eleven

The landing was famously creaky. When he was younger, Nathan had been able to make his way to the stairs from his room without giving himself away by a single squeaky floorboard. Jack had figured out the way, and it meant that the two boys could sneak downstairs for a midnight feast without waking their parents.

That was a long time ago. Nathan had forgotten the way to get across the landing by now, and his feet were too large and heavy anyway. That meant that he had no leisure to stand in front of Sophia's door and collect himself. She'd hear him coming, and it would simply look odd if he stood there like a fool.

"Sophia? Are you all right?" Nathan said, not daring to reach for the door handle.

"I think I have a headache," came the quiet reply. "Don't come in."

"I... I wasn't going to. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going out this morning. I'll be gone a few hours."

"All right."

Nathan wavered, trying to think of something else to say. Something meaningful.

Another weak apology felt silly. Surely a person could only apologise so many times before it stopped meaning anything.

Then Sophia spoke again from inside her room.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about Jazzy anymore.”

Nathan swallowed. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I know. But I don’t want to talk about her.”

Nathan bit his lip. “All right.”

There really didn’t seem much else to say, so Nathan turned and retreated down the stairs. He had a strange hope that Sophia might open her bedroom door and say something to him, but she didn’t. There was silence from upstairs, and when he came downstairs, James had gone, so it was quiet down there, too.

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Pastor Sixsmith was out in his front garden, pruning his roses, when Nathan arrived. He was stripped down to his shirtsleeves, cuffs rolled up to reveal brawny, tanned forearms that could have belonged on a man half his age.

He straightened up as Nathan dismounted, tying his horse to a post.

“Morning,” Pastor Sixsmith remarked. “Not like you to drop in so early, Nathan. Can I assume that something is

wrong?”

Nathan flushed. “Not wrong, exactly, but I think I need your advice.”

Pastor Sixsmith nodded. He brushed the dirt off his hands and began to briskly gather up his gardening tools.

“Right, well, let’s go inside and have a nice hot drink, and you can tell me what’s wrong. My roses will have to wait another day.”

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Nathan sat in silence at the too-small kitchen table, watching Pastor Sixsmith bustle about, getting tea and cookies ready. The cookies had probably been baked by some sweet, devoted parishioner. Pastor Sixsmith was a popular man, and lived on a steady diet of meals, pastries, and various sweets prepared for him by his congregation.

“Why are women so complicated, Father?” Nathan blurted out.

Pastor Sixsmith chuckled to himself. “If I had a dollar for every newly married man who asked me that question, I’d be rich. Unfortunately, I’m never able to give them the answer they want to hear. They want me to tell them that women are so very complicated and it’s not their fault if their wives nag or are dissatisfied. Sometimes it isn’t, but more often than not, the truth is a little harder to hear.”

“And what’s that?”

“Women aren’t complicated, my boy. No more complicated than men. If you were to ask me why *people* are complicated, I would come up with a list of reasons. I’m not entirely sure why young men who want to be married think that women all think the same. They don’t. They’re individuals, and often the ‘complicated’ behavior that young men bemoan is simply ordinary human behavior. A man complains that his wife nags him, because their roof is leaking, and he hasn’t fixed it for six months. Can he not understand why she’s unhappy? A man who treats his wife coldly and even cruelly at times, refusing to show any sort of love, tenderness, or consideration, complains that she doesn’t welcome him home on an evening, when he’s tired from work. Does any of this sound complicated to you?”

“I suppose not,” Nathan admitted.

Pastor Sixsmith turned around, the tea tray in his hands. He set it down gently and settled down into his own seat with a tired sigh.

“Ah, it’s good to rest my old legs. I hope you’ll forgive my blunt speech, Nathan. I never mince my words with you.”

“I don’t mind,” Nathan said, and he meant it.

Pastor Sixsmith took a light sip of his tea, closing his eyes in bliss.

“A particularly fine blend, this. A gift from Mrs. White. I have no idea where she got it. Now, Nathan, can I assume that there is some issue with Sophia?”

Nathan winced. “We had an argument. Another one.”

“Oh, dear. Can I ask the circumstances?”

“My temper caused the circumstances, I’m afraid. I’ve snapped at her a few times. I received a letter today that worried me a little, and she wanted to know what it was so she could help me with my problem. I snapped at her again. I mentioned all the secrets she’s kept from me, and I said something about the woman I was meant to marry. Jazzy, that is. That seemed to hurt Sophia more than all of the rest,” he glanced up at Pastor Sixsmith. “I know that you don’t like Sophia.”

“I don’t dislike her,” Pastor Sixsmith said firmly. “I had a sense when I first met her that she was hiding something, and I was right. The initial shock faded quickly, though, and in truth, she seems like a decent young woman. She seems clever and kind, and hardworking – is she hardworking?”

“Yes, very.”

“Well, those are three good qualities. She’s an attractive young woman, and while looks count for very little, it’s still nice to have a pretty wife. She seems forthright and determined to make the best of her life here. I think on further acquaintance, I will come to like her very much indeed.”

Nathan smiled weakly. He was surprised to feel a weight lift off his chest. It mattered to him that his mentor liked his choice of bride. Pastor Sixsmith meant a lot to Nathan, and it would be a blow to learn that he disapproved of or disliked Sophia.

“I’m glad you like her,” Nathan said lamely.

Pastor Sixsmith chuckled. “It’s not my opinion that matters. Do you like her? Now, be honest with me, Nathan.”

Nathan sighed. “What would you say if I told you I didn’t like her at all, that I hated her? What advice would you possibly give me then?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that true?”

“No.”

“Well, good. In that case, by the way, I would advise you to find things in common and work on building a friendship. Only fools think that friendship doesn’t matter in marriage. Now, what *do* you think of her?”

“I like her,” Nathan managed. It felt like a paltry way of describing what he felt. Nathan wasn’t sure that he *could* describe what he felt. He was drawn to Sophia more than he could ever have believed possible. It was if the first flash of her green eyes had bewitched him, and he couldn’t stop *thinking* about her. Every flare of his temper was a humiliation and hurt him almost as much as it hurt Sophia.

Or perhaps Sophia didn’t care if he disliked her.

That was another miserable thought.

Pastor Sixsmith eyed Nathan carefully, as if he knew exactly what Nathan was thinking.

“I’m glad,” he said, carefully replacing his teacup. “As to your argument, my advice is this. Sophia has set out clear boundaries. She doesn’t wish to discuss her past, and she doesn’t wish to discuss her friend. You must respect her wishes, do you understand? So many young men think that with the right combination of words and actions, they can make a young lady say or do whatever they want, like pulling strings on a puppet. That is folly.”

Nathan nodded. “I understand that.”

“Sometimes, the only thing to do is to wait. Perhaps she’ll choose to share her secrets with you, or perhaps she won’t. I know that you have your fair share of secrets, dear boy. Did you unburden yourself to Sophia during your first meal together?”

“No,” Nathan conceded.

“No, you kept those things to yourself until such a time as you’re ready to share them. Don’t you think that you should offer Sophia the same courtesy?”

Nathan nodded, biting his lip. He had his fingers wrapped around his teacup, his large hands too big and rough for the delicate, clean china. He hadn’t taken a sip yet. The steam was still curling up from the liquid, filling the kitchen with a sweet, spicy aroma.



“I like her,” Nathan said softly, so softly that he was surprised Pastor Sixsmith’s old ears could hear. “I like her more than I should, I think.”

“And what is that supposed to mean? More than you should?” Pastor Sixsmith prompted gently.

“For her, this is her only choice. I don’t know the details of why she left home, or why she took up her friend’s correspondence bride opportunity, but I know that it was bad. She has nowhere else to go, I think. She doesn’t love me. She didn’t want to marry me. I shouldn’t bother her with... with any feelings.”

There was a long moment of silence. Pastor Sixsmith drained his teacup and poured himself another.

“I think you are too hard on yourself, Nathan,” he said quietly. “I think you are projecting your own fears and insecurities onto Sophia. Why should she not like you? It’s regrettable that she had no other choices – this sometimes happens to young women, which is a shame. But she has a fine husband in you.”

“Not so fine if I keep losing my temper.”

“You can get the mastery over that,” Pastor Sixsmith said firmly. “Sophia seems to be a good woman, one who will respect you and care for you – assuming you offer her the same courtesy in return. That’s fair, don’t you think.”

“Of course.”

“Another question I am asked quite frequently,” Pastor Sixsmith continued, leaning forward over the table, “Is the secret to marriage. Men and women alike seem to think there is a recipe to a happy marriage, and one can follow the instructions as if one were baking a cake, and everything will work out perfectly. I daresay you don’t need me to tell you that it isn’t true.”

Nathan gave a half smile. “I almost wish it was.”

“Marriages, like people, are impossibly complex, and come in every combination a person could imagine. There is no secret ingredient, no sure-fire result, no guaranteed recipe for success. It is hard work, Nathan. The secret to a happy marriage is mutual respect, along with taking the time to get to know each other. That’s hardly a *secret*. It’s like learning a skill. You don’t learn it overnight. It takes time, and even when you first grasp the skill, you’re likely not very good at it. It takes more time to become a master of that skill, and there’s always more you can learn.”

“I... I think I do treat her with respect,” Nathan said hesitantly. “Sometimes I feel as if she does like me, but... well, I think she’s always thinking of her friend. As if she’s usurped her friend’s place.”

Pastor Sixsmith nodded sagely. “I think you keep forgetting that poor Sophia is dealing with grief. It’s a fresh wound. Think of how you feel about the deaths of your dear parents and brother. It hurts, doesn’t it, even now?”

“Yes, it does,” Nathan answered mechanically, ignoring the sickening feeling in his chest that always came along with

happy memories of his family.

“Even now,” Pastor Sixsmith repeated. “Sophia’s loss is so very raw. Everyone experiences grief in different ways, but you must be patient with her. Patient and respectful. Affection will come soon after as you build a friendship. From there on, well, who knows?”

He reached out to pat Nathan’s hand, and Nathan began to feel a little better. Pastor Sixsmith had that skill, the skill of making people feel better, as if everything would be all right in the end.

“Thank you, Father,” Nathan murmured. “I... I feel a little better prepared now. I suppose I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into when I got married.”

Pastor Sixsmith chuckled. “No one ever does. Now, are we going to get started on these cookies? I’ve already had one or two this morning, and they’re frankly delicious.”

## Chapter Twelve

Nathan was out a long time. He didn't come home for lunch, although James shuffled hopefully onto the porch. He didn't sit and eat with Sophia – it probably wouldn't be appropriate with Nathan away, but she made up a little lunch pail for James, and that seemed to make him happy enough.

Sophia ate a plain lunch of leftover stew and the rest of the bread from last night, alone. She should have been used to eating alone. She'd eaten just about every meal alone since she'd moved into Aunt Laura's house.

Somehow, it felt worse to eat alone here. This was a family home, designed for people to sit and talk and laugh together, all sharing the same meal.

Aunt Laura's house had been a stiff, cold place, elegant and expensive but not welcoming in the least. The dining room was well decorated, but uninviting. The smooth, glossy dining table that Sophia polished daily was beautiful, but the chairs were hard and unforgiving, designed to make a person sit up straight and talk about proper opinions and socially approved gossip.

A person could eat a refined meal at that table and not worry about being alone. Here, however, the quiet seemed to hem in on a person, close and constricting.

*I wish Nathan was here.*

Once the thought was formed, it was all Sophia could think about. She suddenly noticed how quiet and remote her new home was and imagined all the terrible things that could befall her. Murderers, bandits, sudden illness. Even plain and simple accidents.

Strange how she'd never felt unsafe at Aunt Laura's. Not from the house, anyway, even when the knives and kitchen implements were hooked on a grill above her head. Aunt Laura was the danger in that house, not the knives and hot pans.

There was something about Nathan's presence that made her feel safe and at ease, temper or not. Some of her stinging hurt and anger at the way Nathan had talked to her this morning had faded away. Hard work and a task at hand was a good way to clear your head.

When Sophia finally heard the familiar squeak of unoiled hinges downstairs, she had to resist the urge to go running to the front door in relief.

"I'm upstairs," Sophia called. "Just dusting the bedrooms."

"Oh. They'll be a bit too thick with dust, sorry," Nathan replied.

That was the understatement of the century. Sophia could have written her name on most of the surfaces in the spare room, and Nathan's room. She'd only given his room a cursory polish, resisting the urge to look around and rifle through things. He deserved privacy in his own home.

The third bedroom was worst of all. Cobwebs hung thickly from the ceiling, blurring out the corners of the room. Sophia suspected that the velvet curtains on the window were supposed to be red, but with age, sunlight, and a generous layer of dust, they'd turned an orangey sort of pink. The bedspread was covered in dust, a graveyard for handfuls of dead insects and curled-up spiders. The sheets would all need washing, that was for sure, and it would be a mammoth task.

*Later, Sophia told herself. No one's coming to stay anytime soon.*

The creaking floorboards on the landing heralded Nathan's presence. He glanced into the third bedroom, where Sophia was giving the glossy furniture one last polish, and his sandy eyebrows shot up towards his hairline.

"Well, you've done a good job in here, and no mistake," Nathan said. "It looks like a different room."

Sophia allowed herself a brief, self-satisfied smile. The furniture was dusted, the curtains and bedspreads shaken out – not washed, but a good shaking and beating was the next best thing – and the floors were well-swept. She'd pried open the old window to let in some air – and let out the dust and musty smell – and even added an old rug she'd found in a corner, to brighten up the place.

"It's a pretty room," Sophia acknowledged. "It'll do for if we have guests, I thought."

“Guests,” Nathan repeated slowly. “Never thought of having guests over. Don’t tell James, he’ll invite himself over every night of the week.”

Sophia chuckled. “Well, I’ve not cleaned the sheets yet, so he’d be sleeping on the floor.”

She shook out her apron, mentally ticking over the tasks yet to accomplish. Most things were done, and Sophia had intended to treat herself to some time in the garden. Jazzy’s garden.

Nathan was still standing in the doorway, shuffling his feet.

“I really am sorry about this morning,” he murmured.

Sophia glanced away, biting her lip. “Please, think no more of it.”

“I went to talk to Pastor Sixsmith, and he gave me a good rollicking for it,” Nathan added, rubbing the back of his neck. “If that makes you feel better.”

It did, rather.

Sophia smiled to herself. “Well, I suppose marriage isn’t always fun and games, is it? We’re both learning together.”

“I agree,” Nathan said, visibly relieved. “I’ll keep trying, Sophia. I promise.”

Sophia found herself drawn in by his steady, clear gaze, unable to look away. There was something endearing about his honesty, something about *I'll keep trying, I promise* that made her heart flutter more than it should.

Sophia cleared her throat, turning away to dust a bedside table that didn't need dusting at all.

“Well, that's good to hear. Thank you, Nathan. Supper will be ready at the usual time. Is that suitable for you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

It was a subtle hint for Nathan to get going, and he took it. When Sophia heard the front door close again downstairs, and Nathan's heavy boots clomp away across the porch, she stopped dusting. She stood where she was, twisting the duster in her hands and chewing her lip.

Why did feelings have to be so complicated? Sophia seemed to find herself drawing away from Nathan at one moment, and irresistibly drawn to him the next. Sometimes, it felt as if he were the sort of man that she could fall in love with.

*No, no, Sophia chastised herself. You're not the one he wanted to marry. This isn't supposed to be your home. Remember what you're doing here. Show a little respect to Jazzy, can't you?*



She busied herself with chores for the rest of the afternoon and stayed out of the garden.

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The squeak of one of the landing floorboards jolted Sophia out of a pleasant sleep. She blinked, her eyes slowly adjusting to the dark in her room. She couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour or two.

Was Nathan moving around? Or worse – were they being burgled?

The thought of thieves sent a pang of fear through Sophia's chest. She licked her lips and forced herself to speak.

“Who's there?”

She didn't see the doorhandle turn in the dark. The hinges of *this* room were well oiled, and Sophia barely even realized that the door was opening until she spotted a sliver of candlelight from the landing. The spasm of panic that rolled through her was intense, until Sophia remembered that no thief would carry around a candle.

Nathan's pale face, silhouetted from below by the flickering flame, appeared in the doorway.

“It's me, Sophia. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.”

Sophia let out a sigh of relief. She pulled the covers up below her chin, a little self-consciously.

“You frightened the life out of me, Nathan. What is it?”

Nathan was in his nightclothes, a voluminous nightshirt that was too large even for his bulky frame, and made him seem smaller and paler. His hair was loose, falling unheeded around his shoulders.

“I... I couldn't sleep, and I wanted to talk to you. Can I come in?”

Sophia hesitated, but only for a second.

“Of course. Come... come in.”

Nathan shuffled into the room, setting down his candle on the bedside table. He lowered himself onto the end of her bed, and Sophia felt the mattress dip under his weight. His feet were bare, and Sophia wondered whether he was cold. It did get chilly in these parts at night, and drafts whistled through the house with a vengeance.

“What is it?” Sophia prompted.

“I just have a lot that I want to say to you, and questions I want to ask. I find that I don't have the courage to say them during the day. There's always a hundred excuses as to why I should wait until later to ask. It's silly, really.”

“I don't think that's silly,” Sophia said quietly. “We're strangers to each other, you and I. Friendships don't appear overnight, do they?”

But even as she spoke, Sophia knew that wasn't true. She and Jazzy had loved each other from the moment they set eyes on each other. They'd sworn to be best friends forever after only a few hours.

But then, Sophia and Jazzy had been young. There was something about getting older that stripped away your trust and open heartedness.

Or perhaps it was just cold, hard experience.

Nathan sighed, raking a hand through his hair. With it loose, the silky strands filtered through his fingers, falling smoothly back down around his face and neck. The faint candlelight brought out lights of gold and silver in his hair, giving him an ethereal sort of look.

Sophia forcibly made herself focus. Now wasn't the time to wax all moony over Nathan's hair. Something was bothering him.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her voice low. "Something's wrong, I can tell."

Nathan looked straight at her for the first time.

"Are you happy here, Sophia?"

Sophia was shocked into answering honestly and immediately, which surprised her just as much as it did

Nathan.

“Yes. I am.”

He bit his lip. “I thought I’d be better at being a husband. I really did. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“It takes time to adjust to a new set of circumstances. Having another person in your home – a stranger, at that – is difficult enough as it is, without even considering the baggage we both have. You aren’t going to do things perfectly straight away, Nathan. Neither of us are.”

“I’m not the husband you dreamed of,” Nathan said, matter-of-factly. It wasn’t a question; it was a statement.

Sophia sighed. “I never dreamt of a husband at all, Nathan. Growing up in my aunt’s house, I never had any real opportunities. She hated me, you know. Resented me. I was little more than a slave, and if she’d turned me out, I would have had nowhere to go. She’d have made sure that I never got another job, and who would have married me? I never met a man I liked, or really any men at all. Except the grocer, butcher, and milkman, of course. I never imagined a house like this. I never imagined a man like you, because I’m not in the habit of dreaming about things that I’ll never get to have. I haven’t had dreams for a long time.”

Nathan had watched her steadily while she spoke, never interrupting. It was hard to work out what he was thinking from his face. When she’d finished, Nathan nodded slowly.

“That must have been difficult. I know that my childhood was a good one, so I can’t really complain. My hardships came later. You strike me as a strong person, Sophia. Maybe all that you went through made you strong.”

Sophia thought this over. “Perhaps you’re right. I never really thought of it like that.”

“Is she still alive, your aunt?”

Sophia nodded. “She was when I left. She has no idea where I’ve gone, and I never intend to tell her. I know that some people might argue that she’s the only family I’ve got, but I don’t care.”

“People say that blood is thicker than water, but that’s not true,” Nathan murmured. He dropped his gaze into his lap, where he was twisting his fingers together. “I’m sorry about barging in like this, Sophia. I think I woke you up.”

“I don’t mind,” Sophia said quietly. “I like talking to you. You and I, we have to start right from the very beginning. It makes sense to start with the basics.”

Nathan smiled weakly at that. “Thank you for being so understanding. I’m lucky to have you, Sophia.”

“I think I’m lucky to be here. Do you often sleep badly?”

She received a nod in reply.

“Is it the nightmares?”

Nathan glanced away and was quiet for so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer.

“Yes,” Nathan finally admitted.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Nathan raised an eyebrow. “Talk about my nightmares?”

Sophia leaned forward, wrapping her arms around her knees, still tucked under the covers. The chill of her room was starting to wiggle its way into her bed, and Sophia felt goosepimples break out over her skin.

“When I was young and I had nightmares,” she confided, “Jazzy and I would talk about them. I'd creep up to her room, or she'd come down to the scullery, and we'd talk about the nightmares we'd had. It helped to face it, somehow. Often, the nightmares didn't seem quite so frightening when they were out in the open.”

“The scullery?” Nathan repeated, and Sophia flushed.

“Yes,” she muttered. “The scullery.”

He didn't push any further, and Sophia was grateful for that.

“I understand what you’re saying,” he said eventually, “But the problem is that my nightmares aren’t all made up. They’re real. It’s harder to make real horrors seem small and dull.”

Sophia bit her lip. “I suppose so. I’m sorry, Nathan.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Nathan got to his feet, reaching for the candle. There was only a little stub of the candlestick left, and the flame guttered wildly when he picked it up.

“Do you think you’ll sleep now?” Sophia asked.

Nathan nodded. “I hope so. I’m sorry if I bothered you, Sophia. I don’t think that either of us will know what to make of this in the morning.”

Sophia hesitated. “We could just call it a dream. What do you think?”

It was hard to tell with the deep shadows and flickering, guttering candlestick, but Sophia was sure that Nathan flashed a brief smile.

“I think that would be the best dream I’ve had for quite some time.”

Sophia settled back on her elbows, leaning against her pillow.

“A dream it is. Goodnight, Nathan.”

This time, he did smile. He had a handsome smile, one that lit up his face and brightened his eyes.

“Goodnight, Sophia.”

With that, Nathan slipped silently away, like a ghost, taking the light with him. He closed the door softly, and darkness came creeping back in.

With her eyes used to the candlelight, Sophia found herself faced with a wall of blackness. Somehow, it didn't seem quite as upsetting as before. She leaned back, pulling up the blankets to her nose, and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

What an odd conversation. Sophia had a feeling that she'd wake up in the morning and half wonder whether it *had* been a dream.

Still, there was something about the cover of night that tended to loosen a person's thoughts and tongue. Things could be said in the night that wouldn't quite come out during the day. There was something magical about the time when everyone else was asleep and the world was quiet.

Sophia was sure that Nathan was being honest with her. But was he simply trying to make the best of a good situation, or did he want something more from their marriage? Affection, perhaps, or friendship?



Despite Sophia's buzzing mind, sleep closed resolutely back in. The last thoughts she was conscious of before she drifted into sleep were as confusing as they were persistent.

*Now what?*

# Chapter Thirteen

Nathan didn't remember going to sleep. But the heavy knocking on his bedroom door suggested otherwise. He flailed, forcing himself upright, caught in a tangle of bedsheets.

“What is it?” he slurred.

“Breakfast is ready,” came Sophia's crisp, efficient voice.

Nathan blinked, trying to make sense of it all. He glanced towards his window, the curtains not pulled together all the way, and realized that the morning was well along. It was probably past eight o' clock. He'd overslept, and yet felt no better for it.

“I'll be down in a moment,” Nathan babbled, trying to untangle himself from the bedclothes. Sometime during the night, he'd clearly managed to tie himself and his bedsheets up in knots of Gordian proportions.

He hadn't dreamt, at least. No nightmares. No sheets soaked with sweat, no panicked awakenings in the middle of the night, when every shadow and corner could hold a vengeful enemy soldier.

Nathan heard Sophia's footsteps retreat along the landing and let himself flop back onto his pillows. For once, Nathan wasn't relieved at the break of day. Usually, he was shaky and miserable by the time the night ended, and eager to get out of

bed and get on with his work. Today, though, Nathan could have easily slept for hours more.

Was that a good thing? He hoped so, even though it felt like he'd barely slept an hour last night.

Nathan washed and dressed quickly, noticing for the first time the smell of frying bacon and eggs from downstairs. He hoped Sophia's marvellous breakfast hadn't been simmering miserably in the pan while she waited for him to wake up.

He hurried downstairs and found Sophia working at the kitchen counter. A quick glance at the stove reassured Nathan. The bacon looked fresh, the eggs only just starting to cook. There were two places set out on the table – Sophia clearly hadn't eaten yet.

"I hope you didn't wait too long for me," Nathan murmured, feeling a little guilty. "I can't think why I slept in so long today."

Sophia cast him a quick, sharp glance that Nathan couldn't interpret.

"I didn't wait long. You must have needed your sleep."

"Yes, but I know how early you get up. You haven't eaten for hours."

Sophia smiled absently. "I'm not hungry. No James today?"

“Obviously not. Apparently, he’s decided to make his own breakfast for once, the lazy good-for-nothing,” Nathan said affectionately, settling down at the table.

“Oh, I don’t mind James eating with us,” Sophia said, turning back from the stove to ladle rashers of bacon and rich, yellow-yolked eggs onto their plates. “He’s very pleasant.”

“He used to share his lunch with me all the time,” Nathan admitted. “He’s kind, and generous. We should make him welcome here whenever he wants to come in.”

Sophia settled down into her seat. Not her usual seat, which was opposite Nathan, but the one directly adjacent to him. Nathan wasn’t entirely sure what to think of this move. Of course, he knew that while his family had always kept their own particular seats, it didn’t really *matter*.

It was as if Sophia had moved closer. It felt more comfortable, somehow.

Nathan cleared his throat, flashing a nervous smile at her.

He kept running the events of last night over and over in his head. He shouldn’t have gone into her room so late at night. Even if he couldn’t sleep, *Sophia* could. Besides, she’d clearly thought he was a robber.

But there was no denying that Nathan had slept well and soundly afterwards, with no nightmares. He felt as though he’d

finally managed to say things to Sophia that he'd been longing to say since she'd arrived.

He hadn't told her all of it, of course. He hadn't talked about the feelings that kept surging up inside him, powerful and horribly familiar. He hadn't mentioned falling in love.

"I'm sorry about last night," Nathan said suddenly.

Sophia, in the process of slicing up her fried bread, raised a slim dark eyebrow at him. "You mean our strange dream?"

Nathan had to smile at that. "Yes, the dream. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"You didn't," Sophia said, and it sounded like she meant it.

"This is just more complicated than I thought our marriage would be. It's a marriage of *convenience*, after all. The thing is, I think we can really be good for each other, Sophia. We can be friends, if we work at it."

It was a good speech, if a short one. Nathan had never considered himself eloquent. Jack was the talker in their family, the one who always had plenty to say, and who was never at a loss for words. Nathan was the strong, silent one, if the two brothers had to have a type. He'd been entirely content to stand behind Jack and let him do the talking.

Of course, that was no longer an option, and Nathan still couldn't adjust to it.

Sophia was quiet for a long time. Nathan wasn't sure what he'd expected from her by way of a reaction. Agreement, perhaps? A joke, or off-hand comment?

"Friends?" she repeated, her voice carefully neutral.

"Yes, friends," Nathan said, encouraged. "We could be friends. Good friends, I think. We could both do with a good friend, don't you think? I mean, when I saw you clean out the guest room made me realize that. Apart from Jack, I can't think of anyone I could invite to stay. Can you?"

Sophia swallowed. "No, I can't."

There was something in her voice, something tense, that hinted to Nathan that something was wrong here. He searched her face, but there were no clues.

"Excuse me for a moment," Sophia said, smiling thinly.

She got up, and to Nathan's surprise, went straight out of the front door. It seemed odd to him, but he concentrated on eating his breakfast. Five minutes passed, then ten, and Sophia still didn't return. Nathan finished his breakfast, and a resigned glance at the clock confirmed that if he wanted to get any work at all done this morning, he'd need to leave now. He couldn't wait for Sophia anymore.

Her breakfast lay cold and congealed on her plate, entirely forgotten. Nathan got up to clear away his own dishes and stopped short. Through the kitchen window, he could see

Sophia standing over by the chicken coop. She was standing still, the wind whipping her skirts around her legs. Her shoulders were hunched, and her face was angled away from the house.

With a jolt, Nathan realized that she was crying.

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“So that was exactly what you said?” James asked dubiously.

Nathan nodded, concentrating on his task. A section of one of the paddocks needed reinforcing, and they were building a taller fence. The new stallion, Byron, had proved to be a tremendous jumper, easily clearing the current fences.

That meant that the hard work of digging the trenches for the fence posts fell right in the middle of the day. Nathan was sweating profusely, his hair drenched, the collar of his shirt damp already. He didn't want to ask Sophia to run him another bath tonight. She was already upset, and Nathan knew that it was his fault. He couldn't understand why, though. She'd seemed happy enough when he first came down.

“Let me review the facts,” James said, leaning on the handle of his shovel. “You said that she, like you, was miserable and friendless and alone, but with a lot of hard work and effort you could learn to tolerate each other. That's what you said, yes?”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “I said we could be good friends. Don't try and twist my words, James. I'm not in the mood for it.”

“You’re never in the mood for it. And yes, friendship is certainly the only thing any woman could ever want from marriage.”

Nathan straightened his aching back, letting James take a turn at digging.

“I know what you’re getting at, James, and I don’t appreciate it. She’s not in love with me. I don’t expect her to be. It’s a marriage of convenience, that’s all.”

“Yes, well, I can’t imagine that she likes having that pointed out to her. Did you go over to her, and ask why she was crying?”

Nathan shook his head. “I was worried I’d make it worse.”

“So, when you get home tonight, you’ll just pretend that it never happened.”

Nathan bit his lip. “Probably.”

James hit a stone with the tip of his shovel. It made a teeth-grating scraping sound, and James swore. He pried out the stone and tossed it aside, adding it to the ever-growing pile of rocks. They always kept the rocks—there was usually something they could use them for. The large ones could make low walls, and the small ones were often used for odd bits and pieces around the ranch. Nathan had learned the hard way not to let anything go to waste.



“You’re keeping her at arms’ length, Nathan,” James said, resuming digging.

“Pastor Sixsmith told me I should respect her and her boundaries.”

“And so you should. But there’s a balance. Respect her boundaries, treat her well and courteously, but you have to try to get close to someone. We aren’t children anymore. We aren’t thrown together for hours on end only to come out as best friends forever. It’s harder for adults, you know. Making friends isn’t easy and falling in love tends to complicate friendships more than you can imagine.”

“I’m not falling in love with her,” Nathan replied automatically.

James stopped digging and wiped away a sheen of sweat from his forehead. He glanced up at Nathan, eyebrows raised. “You know, you’re a terrible liar.”

Nathan flushed. “I’m not lying.”

“Well, you’re clearly attracted to her. You’re drawn to her. You *like* her. You seem to enjoy spending time with her. How do you think love starts? Did you think it was like a lightning bolt from above?”

Nathan bit his lip. When he’d set eyes on Sophia for the first time, so pale and tired but determined, back straight, chin raised, gaze direct, it *had* felt as though he’d been struck by a lightning bolt.

He didn't feel ready to share this with James, though. If James thought that Nathan was in love with Sophia, he'd be tempted to *meddle*. James loved to meddle, and that would only end badly. Sophia was just starting to settle in. Nathan didn't want to push her further away.

"I'm just trying to do what's right for Sophia," Nathan insisted. "I want to give her time to settle in."

James narrowed his eyes. "There's more to it, Nathan. There's something you're not telling me. Come on, out with it. We've talked about you bottling up everything you think and feel inside. It doesn't end well, does it?"

Nathan took a moment to gather his thoughts, to prepare what he wanted to say. James, for all his flaws, was well acquainted with Nathan's slow, thoughtful ways by now, and he waited patiently for Nathan to speak.

"You didn't go to war, did you, James?" Nathan said finally.

James bit his lip. "No, I didn't. A lung problem, the doctor said. At the time, I was miserable, but now, seeing how you are, I'm glad I didn't go."

"You're lucky," Nathan murmured. "It changed me into a brute. I've always had a temper, but then, most men and women have a temper. I don't know what war did to me. Or rather, I do know, but I don't like to think about it. It unlocks something inside you, some sort of monster that wants to destroy everything in its path. Once it's out, you can't put it

back in. It's like there's two of me – the old Nathan, and Captain Rowe. The kind, friendly boy who loved his family and loved his ranch, and a heartless killer who's got a medal that he doesn't deserve.”

Nathan took a breath, closing his eyes and willing the sounds of cannon fire and screaming to die down in his ears. It did, after a few minutes. The horror always faded away, but then it always came back again, too.

“I'm sorry, Nathan,” James murmured. “But that Captain Rowe – the killer – that's not you. Not really. That's what you did to survive.”

He shrugged. “I still did it, didn't I? I killed people, James. If you only knew the things I saw, the things I let happen, you'd be sickened by me. I'm sickened by myself.”

“That's the difference between you and a real monster,” James said firmly. “What you saw and did sickens you. You hate it. You did those things because it was that or die, is that right? Well, a true monster wouldn't regret doing those things. It wouldn't make him sick – he'd love it. He'd mull over it. He'd be proud of it. You hide away your medal like you hide your scars.”

Nathan bit his lip, hard enough to taste metal in his mouth.

“Sophia doesn't know who I am,” he murmured. “Not truly. I should never have sent away for a correspondence bride at all. I thought I was ready.”

“Pastor Sixsmith thought you were ready,” James pointed out.

“No, he thought it would help me. He was just trying to help, I know that, but it was selfish of me. All I thought about was what I could provide physically. A nice home, a pleasant life, kindness, that sort of thing. I never thought about what sort of husband I’d be. Turns out I’m a bad one.”

James shook his head. “You’ve only been married a few days, Nathan. It takes time. You need its full measure to get closer to another person. Just because you’ve been hurt before doesn’t mean you’ll be hurt again. You are *not* a monster; you have to believe that. Sophia can help you be a happier man, a better man. She *wants* to help you, I think.”

Nathan shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. I need to keep my distance from her until I can be a better man myself. It’s not her responsibility to change me.”

“No,” James shrugged, “But she might want to help. Let her come along for the ride.”

While Nathan was thinking of how to react to this latest comment, they heard the sound of a horse approaching. The men turned to see a skinny, scruffy boy riding an even scruffier mount. Nathan vaguely recognised a boy from town, probably one of the Urquhart family. They had ten children and counting, all but one of them boys.

“Hello, son,” Nathan greeted. Out of breath, the little boy handed a folded square of paper to Nathan.

“Some fellow gave me half a dollar to bring you that,” the boy said, his voice shocked and tremulous with the prospect of so much wealth.

Smiling to himself, Nathan dug in his pocket for a few cents, and handed them to the boy.

“Well, thank you for your service. Can you wait for a reply?”

“The fellow said there wouldn’t be a reply,” the boy said, beaming down at his reward. He clucked at his horse and rode off without another word, dust rising at each of the horse’s footfalls.

“A hand-delivered note,” James remarked, resuming his work. “How exciting.”

*Exciting* was not the word Nathan would have used. He unfolded the paper to reveal a simple note, written in familiar, elegant handwriting.

*Meet me in an hour at the stone bench under the old tree.  
You know the one. I’ll be waiting.*

*Don’t be late.*

*Michael Jasper*

Nathan folded the note again with shaking hands, stuffing it in his pockets. An hour. That didn’t leave him any time to

get changed. He'd have to go and meet Michael like this, stinking of sweat and covered in dirt.

“I have to go somewhere,” Nathan said. “Can you finish this?”

James gave a theatrical, put-upon sigh. “I suppose so. Can I eat supper with you tonight?”

“I don't see why not. I won't be long.”

Nathan didn't wait for a reply. He turned and hurried towards the stables, mentally working out which of his horses could be quickly saddled and fast enough to make it to the meeting spot.

What did Michael want?

*I'm about to get my answer,* Nathan thought grimly.

For some reason, his guts were clenching in anxiety. He had a feeling that this wasn't going to be a simple catch-up conversation.

But then, with Michael, nothing was ever simple, was it?

## Chapter Fourteen

The old tree was a huge, gnarled old oak, perched on the top of a low, flat-topped hill. It had been a popular playing place for boys and girls when Nathan was young. Nowadays, children played elsewhere. A stone bench had been commissioned and placed by a mysterious patron, who insisted on having it dedicated to the men who'd lost their lives in the war. Flowers appeared at regular intervals every year, obviously memorials for those who'd lost sons, fathers, brothers, husbands.

The place had a sad air to it now. Maybe that was why the children today didn't want to play there.

Nathan rode the horse he'd chosen – Radish, in fact, who turned out to be fast and strong as well as placid – up to the peak of the hill, then let her munch grass at the edge.

He'd spotted the figure hunched over on the stone bench earlier. The man didn't budge as Nathan approached, turning something over and over in his fingers. Nathan sat down heavily beside him, and neither man spoke for a few moments.

Nathan took the opportunity to size up his old friend. He had the same wild curls and deep, dark eyes that he'd always had, but his face was skinnier than it should be. It made him look older. It was hard to tell under his well-tailored suit, but Nathan suspected that his frame was rangy and scrawny, too.

Being thin had never suited him. He looked better and more comfortable with a soft layer of fat, and a smile on his

face.

“Hello, Michael,” Nathan murmured. “Long time no see.”

Michael sat in silence for a long moment, showing no signs that he’d heard Nathan. The silence was just starting to get uncomfortable again when Michael let out a heavy sigh, leaning back. He held up the thing he’d been fiddling with – a shiny dime piece, bright with rubbing.

“Do you remember this, Nathan?”

Nathan stared at the dime piece, trying to make his memory work. It was just a dime piece.

“I... I don’t.”

“You gave it to me,” Michael said, flicking it up in the air. The coin spun, light glinting off it, and he snatched it back neatly, effortlessly. “I wanted something from the sweetshop. I don’t even remember what, but I’d lost the few cents my Ma gave me for sweets.”

“Sherbet,” Nathan said, realization dawning. “It was sherbet. You loved sherbet, and when I saw how disappointed you were, I gave you my dime piece.”

Michael gave a brief half-smile. “Ah, you do remember. You never had much of a sweet tooth. To be honest, I lost my taste for sherbet a long time ago. Yes, you gave it to me, and I promised I’d give you a dime piece back.”



“Well, it’s not the exact same dime piece I gave you,” Nathan said, trying for a joke.

This time, Michael didn’t smile. “Oh, but it is. When I told Ma what happened, she said that we should give you your money back. She insisted. We went down to the sweetshop and exchanged a handful of cents for the dime. I know it was the same one, because I remember a nick in the side. See?”

Michael held up the coin, indicating a slight scratch in one of the sides. Nathan stared at it, bewildered.

“Right. I see. And you kept it, all these years?”

“I certainly did. And now I’m here to repay my debt. Take it.”

He shoved his fist roughly at Nathan’s chest, letting the dime piece fall. Nathan grabbed clumsily at it, catching it before it hit the hard-packed earth at their feet. He clutched the coin, feeling the warmth from Michael’s hand seep into his palm.

“I... I see,” Nathan stammered. “Thank you.”

This was strange, of course, but perhaps it was important to Michael. Maybe this was the start of renewing their friendship. Either way, it felt rude to refuse the dime piece.

Michael leaned forward again, resting his elbows on his knees and staring up at the sky.

“I hear you got married.”

“Yes, you mentioned that in your letter. I... I’m glad you reached out to me, Michael.”

Michael gave a slow chuckle. “You are?”

“Of course, I am. We were friends, weren’t we? Best friends. I miss you, you know.”

“I’m sure,” Michael said, sounding as if he were no such thing. “She’s a pretty girl, your new wife. A good bargain, I’d say. What’s her name?”

His careless way of talking about Sophia rankled with Nathan, but he bit back his irritation. If he wanted to make amends, he’d need to let things go. Michael could probably have ferreted out information about Sophia in town, and probably already had, but that wasn’t the point.

“Sophia,” Nathan said. “She is pretty, and a very nice woman. I’m glad I married her.”

“That’s nice. Well, I suppose you don’t want to start your married life with a debt hanging over your head, so let’s get down to business. I’m a busy man, and I have places to be.”

Just like that, the atmosphere of the conversation changed. Nathan's smile faded, and he blinked, confused.

"I... I don't understand. I know you said you have something important to discuss, and I rather got the feeling you thought I should know what it was, but I really don't."

Michael looked Nathan full in the face for the first time, and Nathan recoiled from the bare anger he saw there.

"Oh, don't play dumb, Nathan. It doesn't suit you."

Nathan felt the familiar anger bubbling up again, the temper that was so quick to show itself these days. He swallowed it down and tried to compose himself.

"I really don't know what you're talking about. Please just tell me what you mean. I'll do just about anything to straighten things out between us. You're my friend."

"Anything?" Michael sneered. "How about paying back the money you owe me?"

Nathan was sure he must have misheard. He stammered about something about not hearing it properly, and Michael repeated what he'd said. He spoke loudly and harshly, biting out the words as if Nathan was exceptionally stupid.

Nathan smoothed a hand over his hair, noting with annoyance that it was fighting its way out of the knot he'd tied it in.

“Michael, I think you’ve made a mistake. I never borrowed any money off you. Is that what the dime was all about?”

“I’m not here to dance around the subject,” Michael snapped. “If you don’t remember, I’ll refresh your memory.”

Nathan thought hard, trying to imagine some occasion when he would have borrowed money from Michael. Nothing came to mind. Oh, they’d lent each other a few cents here and there, and one of Michael’s older friends had once given the boys a dollar, but aside from that, Nathan had never borrowed money that wasn’t his.

His parents had instilled that into him. They had never taken out a loan on the bank, even when times got tough. They didn’t gamble, and Nathan didn’t either, although the pressure to do so in the army was strong. When the nights were long and cold and the days were tense yet boring, the temptation to pick up a few cards and lose yourself in a game was alluring indeed.

But he’d stayed strong. For all the ranch’s flaws, there was no debt.

“Let me set the scene,” Michael spoke up, eyes fixed on the scenery again. The heat of the day was setting in, creating a haze on the horizon and Nathan was uncomfortably aware that he was dirty and sweaty, and probably smelled bad. He sat as far away from Michael as he could.

Michael didn't seem to notice. His eyes glazed off, like they had when the boys were children and Michael told them stories.

He'd always had a knack for stories. Especially ghost stories, the type of stories that the children were forbidden from telling but told each other anyway.

"Your ma was ill," Michael continued, and Nathan shivered. "It was a tough winter that one, wasn't it? Anyway, she was ill. Doctor's visits are expensive, aren't they? Medicine even more so."

Nathan found himself back in those few horrible months, listening to his mother waste away in the room upstairs. He remembered his father's gray, desolate face, and Jack's palpable fear. His father had never really recovered.

Nathan remembered thin soups and stale bread, and sometimes not even that. He remembered clawing through the house for a few forgotten cents, anything to buy something to eat, even if it was a hard, stale heel of bread from one of the women who ran boarding houses. He remembered the doctor coming again and again, and little glass bottles of viscous green liquid, served three times a day to his mother with a tarnished silver spoon. There were pills, too, great heavy things that she couldn't swallow at all near the end.

How much had that medicine cost? Five dollars a bottle? Ten? More? Nathan couldn't even remember how many bottles they'd needed. Mrs. Rowe was sick for six months and passed away just as spring came.

“I remember,” Nathan said, his lips feeling numb. Michael was getting at something here, and it was making Nathan feel ill.

Michael kept clenching his hands into fists, tighter and tighter until his knuckles stood out white. Then he'd release them before clenching them again.

“Where do you think your pa got the money for medicine and doctor's visits?” Michael said quietly. “He came to us one night. I remember it, even though I wasn't allowed in the room. It was a cold night, pitch-black, with snow in the air. It had started falling by the time he left. He went into the study with my pa, and I listened at the door. Mr. Rowe wanted money to buy medicine. He promised to pay it back, but he needed a lot. Hundreds. I've got it written down somewhere, down to every dollar, nickel, dime, and cent. Because my pa gave him the money. He didn't even need much convincing. My pa and yours were close friends, just like you and me used to be.”

Michael took a breath, closing his eyes.

“Can you guess what happened next?” he didn't wait for a reply, which was just as well, because Nathan didn't have one. “We fell on hard times. Very hard. My pa asked for the money back. Your mother was long dead by then. Bit of a waste, wasn't it? All of that medicine, and she died anyway.”

“Some of it was pain relief,” Nathan heard himself say.

Michael shrugged. “Well, your pa didn't have the money, simple as that. So that bank took away our land, bit by bit. We

had to leave town when they took our house, do you remember that? That money we gave you was our savings, all we had. We lost everything because of you.”

Nathan swallowed hard. His throat felt like sandpaper. “Michael, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I can’t imagine how you’ve suffered.”

“No, you can’t,” Michael said sharply. “My pa died destitute, and yours died a hero. Do you think that’s fair? The war gave me a chance to reinvent myself. I wasn’t much of a farmer, but it turns out I’m a good soldier. I might look skinny, but I’m strong, and I’m ruthless. I came back with a handful of medals, and now I know *exactly* what I’m capable of. It’s strangely liberating, you know.”

“Where is this going?” Nathan asked, a feeling of dread creeping over him. He didn’t like the glitter in Michael’s eyes.

“Can’t you guess? I want my money back. The money my pa gave your family was meant to be my inheritance. I want it paid back. Every penny, plus interest. And I want it back as soon as possible.”

Nathan drew in a breath. “My... my father’s dead, Michael. It was his debt.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still feeling the effects of his debt, so why shouldn’t you repay me? You inherited everything else, so you get the debts, too.”

Nathan raked a hand through his hair, loosening it further from the knot. He didn't need to calculate anything to know that he didn't have the money for what Michael was asking. Hundreds of dollars. Hundreds and hundreds, he'd said. Right now, Nathan was barely breaking even. Byron and Radish had been an investment, and an expensive one. With Sophia tackling the housework, cooking, and other chores, Nathan could concentrate more on the ranch, which would be better in the long run, but right now things were far too tight.

"I don't have the money, Michael," Nathan admitted. It didn't seem like a good idea to lie or hedge. "Not hundreds of dollars. Certainly not interest."

Michael's face hardened. "Not my problem."

"Look, Michael, I'm so sorry that this happened to you. I can't give you money now, but you can stay with us for a while if you need a place to stay. The spare room..."

Michael leapt to his feet, so suddenly it made Nathan jump.

"I don't want your pity," he spat. "Or your condescending charity."

Nathan flushed. "I didn't mean to be condescending."

"I want my damn money, Nathan. I owe money to some men who don't play around. I've waited long enough."



Nathan got to his feet, not enjoying having Michael tower over him. There was something unpleasant and twisted in Michael's face, and it worried Nathan.

"I am truly sorry, and if I had the money, I swear I'd give it you, I would. I'd give you as much as I could. But I really don't have anything."

"So, now what, then?" Michael snapped. "You think that's the end of it? You think you get to just say that you don't have *my* money and walk away?"

"I don't know what you want me to do," Nathan said, temper rising again. "I'll help however I can, but it can't be money. I barely have a handful of dollars left over at the end of every month at the moment. We're struggling."

"See, you can't give that sort of excuse when you owe money. Your creditor doesn't give a rat's ass about your sob story, about your tight budget, or the fact that you're too lazy to go out and earn money. He only wants to be paid, and if you don't oblige, you'll face the consequences."

Nathan jerked back at Michael's harsh tone.

"Don't talk to me like that."

"I'll talk to you however I please," Michael spat. "How long will it take you to get the money?"

Nathan had to clench his teeth and take in a few deep breaths before he replied. It was like talking to the wall.

“I don’t have the money now, and I can’t imagine that I’ll get it anytime in the next year. Or the year after that, to be frank. I told you; times are tight.”

Michael stared at Nathan for a long moment. There was something odd in his eyes, and it took Nathan a moment to realize that it was hate.

That hurt more than any of the obscenities that Michael had hurled at him. This was his old friend. The three of them had gone racing around together, he and Michael and James, getting into mischief and making memories.

“I’ll get my money from you, one way or another,” Michael murmured. “You’ll be sorry. I’m going to make you pay, Nathan Rowe. Your pretty little wife is going to regret ever saying *I do*. I can’t get to your pa now, but I can sure as hell get to you. I’d watch your back, if I were you.”

# Chapter Fifteen

It wasn't surprising that Nathan found himself at Pastor Sixsmith's gate again.

On the hill, under the old tree, he'd stood staring down at Michael, eyes wide, struggling to comprehend what had just happened. As always, Michael was exactly two inches shorter than Nathan.

Some things never changed, then.

Michael sneered.

"Close your mouth, you'll catch flies," he'd said, shouldering roughly past Nathan. He went striding down the hill, no horse in sight, and was swallowed up by the nearby forest. Nathan vaguely remembered following that path when he was a boy, the three of them together. They'd gotten lost in those woods more than once, the feelings of panic and dread almost overwhelming, until they finally glimpsed the sky and open fields beyond the trees and gone running gratefully towards safety.

Nathan found himself waiting for that feeling of relief again.

It didn't come, of course.

He moved mechanically over to Radish, who was eating grass without a care in the world and hauled himself up into

the saddle. He hardly remembered the ride back, only that he found himself at the gate to Pastor Sixsmith's well-tended little front garden.

The earlier warmth was starting to fade away as the afternoon drew on. It was still comfortably warm, but the wind was getting up, and ominous clouds scudded over the sky.

The door to Pastor Sixsmith's cottage was a low one, so that the man – and most of his guests – had to stoop to step inside. The door was painted a cheery red color. Nathan was staring at it when the door opened, and Pastor Sixsmith himself peered out.

“I thought it was you, Nathan,” he said easily, not seeming at all perturbed by the fact that Nathan had been staring into his house without moving. “Come on inside. I'll brew up some tea.”

It was a well-known fact that if you spent any time at all at Pastor Sixsmith's house, you'd get at least two cups of tea and probably some pastry or goodie that he had lying around. At the moment, the idea of eating or drinking made Nathan queasy.

He went inside, though, and sat heavily down in his usual seat.

Pastor Sixsmith leaned back against the narrow kitchen counter, tilting his head.

“Something’s wrong,” he announced. “And you’re going to tell me what it is. Not Sophia, I don’t think. Am I wrong?”

Nathan bit his lip. “No, it’s not Sophia. Although I’m still as terrible as marriage as I am at everything else.”

Pastor Sixsmith frowned. “I don’t like that sort of talk, Nathan. You know that. We tend to say awful, cruel things to ourselves, things we’d never say to anyone else, certainly not our own friends.”

“I don’t want a lecture,” Nathan snapped, then bit down on his tongue, hard, heat rushing into his face.

Pastor Sixsmith narrowed his eyes. “Well, well, you don’t often take that tone with me, boy.”

Nathan dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry, Father,” he mumbled.

“Come on, then. Out with it,” Pastor Sixsmith said, setting down the tea-tray in front of him. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Nathan swallowed hard and blurted it out. “Michael Jasper is back in town.”

Pastor Sixsmith’s eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. So, he hadn’t known. Nathan was surprised at that. Pastor Sixsmith was a terrible gossip and seemed to know everything that went on in the town as soon as it happened. If he didn’t know that Michael was back in town, that was

significant. Either Michael had only just arrived, or he'd taken pains to stay hidden.

Nathan thought that it was the last one.

“Well, I wasn't expecting that,” Pastor Sixsmith said slowly. “Michael was an angry young man, I remember that. From what I heard, he did very well in the army. Well, I suppose that depends on your definition of *very well*. He was an efficient soldier, I mean. A very efficient one.”

The way Pastor Sixsmith said that last sentence indicated that he didn't think that being an efficient soldier was much of a recommendation – quite the opposite, in fact.

“I haven't heard from him in years,” Nathan murmured. “I didn't think I *would* hear from him again.”

“I wrote to him, when he first left town. Letter after letter. He never replied,” Pastor Sixsmith said, matter-of-factly. “I stopped writing and assumed that he would prefer to cut contact. Sometimes that's the right thing for a person, but I've always worried about Michael.”

“Did you know that the Jasper family lent my family money for Ma's medicine?” Nathan burst out. He'd intended to work his way up to that in conversation, to talk his way around the subject, and try and get a sense of how much Pastor Sixsmith really knew.

The old priest paled, and took a few moments before he answered.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Yes, I did know. Your father came to me and asked for my help. He asked to borrow money from me, and if I’d had it, I would have given it to him. I believe I gave him ten dollars or so, which of course barely covered a week’s medicine. I assumed that he would ask Mr. Jasper next – those two were close friends. Mr. Jasper had lost his wife some years previously, so I knew that he would be sympathetic.”

“Mr. Jasper gave Pa all the money he had,” Nathan murmured. “Hundreds and hundreds, Michael said.”

Pastor Sixsmith shot him a sharp look. “You talked to Michael Jasper?”

Nathan nodded. “He sent me a message yesterday. That was the letter Sophia and I argued over. She seems to think she’s met Michael somewhere, and Michael said that he’d met her. Or seen her, I can’t remember which. She doesn’t remember him very well.”

“And what did the message say?”

“He wanted to meet me. He wanted to discuss something. I couldn’t think what it was, and today I met up with him and he told me. He wants the money back that his father lent to mine. It’s not an unreasonable request, I suppose, except that I don’t have the money. He wanted interest, too.”

Pastor Sixsmith was quiet for a moment, steeping his fingers and resting his elbows on the table. Their cups of tea were getting cold, the steam gradually fading away to nothing.

“I was not privy to the details of the transaction between Mr. Jasper and Mr. Rowe,” Pastor Sixsmith said slowly, “But I do know that Mr. Jasper would have been keen to help his friend. I’m sure he wanted his money back, but he would have had no intention of making money out of it.”

“Michael said that Mr. Jasper asked for it back when they got into trouble with the bank, but Pa didn’t have it. So, that was that I suppose.”

Pastor Sixsmith sighed, scratching his head. “This is a troublesome case. I don’t believe that Michael is unreasonable in asking for his money back, but it was not a formal agreement, it was something between friends, and you don’t have the money. While it’s upsetting that he came back here only to ask for money, I don’t believe that you’re obliged to pay him, if you don’t have the money to hand.”

Nathan pondered this for a moment. “I think... I think he might have threatened me.”

Pastor Sixsmith’s gaze sharpened. “Tell me everything that passed in your conversation. All of it, as accurately as you can. I suspect that the Michael Jasper that left with his father all those years ago is not the Michael Jasper who returned today.”

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The story was more difficult to tell than Nathan had expected. He was unpleasantly surprised to realize that every one of Michael’s words had burned itself into his memory, complete with his hateful facial expressions and the anger in his voice.



“I don’t understand how he could hate me so much,” Nathan murmured. “We were friends, weren’t we?”

“A combination of distance, injustice – perceived or otherwise – and bitterness can sour a friendship,” Pastor Sixsmith said. “Michael blames your family for his own misfortunes. More to the point, he blames *you*.”

“Why me? I had nothing to do with it!”

Pastor Sixsmith shrugged. “It was your father, who of course is now beyond Michael’s reach. Your mother, who died despite the medicine, and your estate that is thriving – more or less – while he, Michael, struggles.”

“He said that he owes money. Do you think he’s in danger?”

“I suspect he might be. After all, Michael has clearly been seething about this perceived injustice for years. Why bother coming back and demanding his money now? Why go about it in such an unfriendly, harsh way? I know you said he became angrier when you told him you couldn’t pay, but all of his actions towards you since he came back to town have been aggressive. This is a man spoiling for a fight. Why now, though?”

Nathan drew in a breath, closing his eyes. It was obvious. It was so obvious. It almost seemed strange that Pastor Sixsmith didn’t see it, but of course Nathan spent large portions of every single day ruminating on it.

“The war,” he murmured brokenly. “Michael went to war, just like I did. An efficient soldier, you said. He said that he’s learned what he’s capable of, and he seemed happy about it. He was *glad* to know what he could do when it was necessary. When I learned what I was capable of, I was shocked. I felt sick. I hated myself, and I still do. I wish I’d been one of those men who refused to fight, or someone like James who couldn’t.”

“You did your duty,” Pastor Sixsmith pointed out. “It wasn’t pleasant, but it was what was required of you. I can tell you that James felt very guilty over not being able to fight.”

Nathan shook his head. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I’m glad that James didn’t go. I know him, and I know what the war would have done to him, even if he’d survived.

Pastor Sixsmith was frowning now, chewing his lower lip. Outside, the scudding clouds that Nathan had spotted earlier had congregated in the sky, blotting out the sunlight and darkening the inside of the kitchen. Pastor Sixsmith didn’t get up to light a candle or lamp. Candles and oil for lamps were a little beyond his parish’s ability to give. They were generous with food and favors, but candles were expensive – even smelly old tallow ones – and there was never enough oil to be bought in the general store, even if you had the money.

Pastor Sixsmith had once confided to Nathan that he often went to bed when it got dark, simply to avoid wasting a candle. It was reminder that Pastor Sixsmith practiced what he preached. No lavish dinners or luxurious cottages for him. He lived simply and gave what he could to those who needed it more.

Michael had never liked him, come to think about it. Nathan frowned, remembering how Michael used to imitate Pastor Sixsmith's gait and poke fun at the things he said during sermons. Nathan and James hadn't liked that, but they'd laughed away, because Michael was their friend and children could be cruel sometimes.

"Nathan? You seem very far away," Pastor Sixsmith said, waking Nathan up out of his less-than-happy memories. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," Nathan said, picking up his lukewarm tea and downing it in one gulp. The tea had stewed too long, and tasted cold and bitter. Unpleasant, but he swallowed it anyway.

"You look like you have something to say."

Nathan drew in a deep breath, wishing he had something to eat or drink to take away the taste of the bitter tea in his mouth.

"I think I know how Michael feels. I know how I felt, coming home from war. I was dealing with grief, I felt shocked and angry at myself and what I'd done, and I could still see blood and death whenever I closed my eyes. I still can, to be frank. But then we were all expected to come home, where everyone is so very civil and polite, and we're hailed as heroes without actually being allowed to tell anyone what we did, or what we were told to do. It's... it's jarring. Have you ever fought in a war, Father?"

Pastor Sixsmith shook his head. “The Bible says that a person must not kill, Nathan. As a preacher of God’s Word, I cannot kill.”

“Well, I’ve killed people,” Nathan said, ignoring the way the words made his stomach lurch. “I regretted it, I had nightmares about it, but it doesn’t make the person less dead, does it? I hated myself, but I think Michael was secretly proud of himself. He’s come home to a civilized world – or so they tell us, at least – and it’s suffocating. He’s reminded of all the injustices he’s faced. He might have done well in the army, but the war’s over now. No more pay, no more battles, no more chances to prove your worth. Your medals are only good for wearing to dinner parties, in the hopes of getting compliments. You have to work again. Nobody cares about soldiers once the war is over.”

Pastor Sixsmith sighed. “That’s a harsh way of looking at things, Nathan.”

“But is it wrong?”

“No,” the old priest acknowledged. “It’s not wrong.”

“I think that’s what tipped Michael over the edge. He’s not a rancher, I know that. He said that, too. Their land and house are gone, along with his family and old friends. And then he thinks about me, who has the money he thinks should be his. Or rather, he *assumes* I have the money. We spent whatever Mr. Jasper gave us on medicine. There was none left by the time Ma died. We had to build her a cheap old pine coffin.”

“I remember,” Pastor Sixsmith said, smiling thinly. “I don’t think Mrs. Jasper would have minded. You were all there, all her friends and family, so I think that she would have been happy.”

He poured out another cup of tea. Nathan watched the amber liquid swirl around the bone-white interior of the teacup. They were fine china teacups, one of the few luxuries that Pastor Sixsmith allowed himself – good teacups and good tea. But Nathan could still taste the bitterness of the last tea and wasn’t eager to take another sip. He twisted his fingers together in his lap, aware that the day was dragging on and Sophia would be expecting him home soon.

Should he tell Sophia about this? Would she understand? Perhaps she’d pity Michael, whose inheritance had melted away through no fault of his own.

Perhaps. Perhaps Nathan really was in the wrong.

“What should I do?” Nathan heard himself say. “I really don’t have the money.”

“Well, I don’t believe that Michael can compel you to pay. There’s likely not even any record of the loan. If you have any spare money, or if you come into money in the future, I know that you’ll do what’s right.”

“Of course, I will.”

“But in the meantime, I shouldn’t worry. There isn’t much Michael can do. I’m not sure whether your friendship can be

salvaged, Nathan, but I'm not about to discourage you if you want to try. Do you know where Michael is staying?"

Nathan shook his head. Pastor Sixsmith carried on, talking about how he might find out where Michael was staying, and what help could be offered to Michael.

But Nathan kept remembering the look on Michael's face, the way he'd shouldered past his old friend more roughly than was necessary. Michael had never been one to bluff. He wasn't the most truthful of boys when they were growing up, but if he promised something, he would carry it out. Always.

His parting words echoed round and round in Nathan's head.

*I can't get to your pa now, but I can sure as hell get to you. I'd watch your back, if I were you.*

Nathan shuddered. Oh, yes, this was far from over.

## Chapter Sixteen

The wind was getting up now, and Sophia fought against the damp, billowing sheets, trying to fix them onto the washing line. It was a perfect day for washing the bedding.

She'd cried enough, and there was only one tried and tested way to dry tears — work. So, Sophia had attacked the bedsheets, trying to forget how Nathan had gently but firmly explained that theirs was a marriage of *convenience*.

There was no reason that should have upset her so much. This was always the arrangement. She had no right to expect more of him, after all.

*He was meant to be Jazzy's husband*, Sophia reminded herself.

Nathan still wasn't home, and Sophia was trying not to worry. He was a grown man, after all. Perhaps he'd just decided to visit the local saloon before coming home for the day. Sophia frowned, not entirely liking the thought of Nathan, red-faced and laughing, smiling at saloon girls and chuckling at bawdy jokes.

*It's none of your business*, Sophia reminded herself fiercely. *It's not that kind of marriage. He can do what he likes.*

Even so, she kept scanning the fields for movement, and before too long, she saw it.

Sophia had just pinned the last pillowcase to the washing line when she spotted a figure moving slowly up the path towards the house. She froze, craning her neck. It was Nathan, trudging doggedly from the stable, head bowed and shoulders hunched. A thrill of happiness and awareness rushed through Sophia's body, and she was seized with the sudden, mad desire to go racing down to meet him.

She did no such thing, of course.

Nathan glanced up, and met Sophia's gaze. He lifted a hand in greeting, and Sophia smiled.

There was a tense, worried expression on his face, but it was hastily wiped away. Maybe it was her imagination. He hurried towards her, glancing behind him as if he were afraid that someone might be coming up the path after him.

"Can you shoot?" Nathan asked bluntly.

Sophia blinked. "Shoot? Like, shoot a gun?"

"Yes, of course."

She shook her head. "I never learned."

Nathan pursed his lips. "I see. Well, do you want to learn? It's a good skill to have out here in the countryside."



Sophia hesitated. She imagined herself, competently holding a pistol or shotgun, levelling it at some distant target. She couldn't imagine herself shooting an animal, but it *would* be a good skill to have.

“All right,” Sophia said. “I'd like to learn. Let me finish hanging out the washing first.”

“I'll help, so we'll get done quicker,” Nathan said, snatching up a damp sheet from the basket.

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Sophia fidgeted from foot to foot, hefting the unfamiliar weight of a heavy old shotgun in her hands. It wasn't loaded, but Nathan had given it to her to hold, so she could “get used to the feel”. He'd gone down the field a little way, and was setting up old tin cans, glass bottles, and scraps of fabric stretched out between sticks to make a colorful, square target.

Sophia had never even held a gun before. Aunt Laura had kept a pretty little pearl-handled pistol in the drawing room, “for protection,” but the closest Sophia had ever gotten to the weapon was when she dusted it.

Nathan finished setting up the targets and came jogging back up the field.

“Done,” he announced unnecessarily. “Can you see them all right?”

“I guess so,” Sophia said nervously. The targets seemed very far away all of a sudden, and very small. “Isn't there anything smaller I can use first? Like a pistol?”

Nathan shook his head. “Afraid not. I do have an old Colt pistol somewhere, but it’s more likely to jam than shoot. Best to start with a shotgun – they’re good for hunting, and there’s a lot of power there. Good for self-defence, if not as accurate as smaller guns. Here, give it to me, I’ll show you. Watch what I do.”

Nathan took the gun from Sophia. He opened the gun, showing her where the ammunition would be loaded. Once the gun was loaded, he lifted it expertly to his shoulder, sighting down the barrel.

“See where the butt of the gun goes? Here against my shoulder, and I keep my other hand *here*, and my finger on the trigger. Don’t put your finger on the trigger unless you mean to shoot,” Nathan said, glancing over at her. His eyes were intent, focused on his task, and an odd shiver went through Sophia.

“I see,” Sophia replied, her mouth dry.

Nathan’s eyes, suddenly more vivid and sharp than they had been before, turned to look down the barrel of the gun again. He pulled the trigger, and a tremendous *bang* split the air. Sophia flinched back despite herself, her hands flying up to cover her ears. A smoky smell filled the air, stinging her nostrils.

“Loud, isn’t it?” Nathan said, chuckling. He lowered the gun and pointed at the nearest target. He’d chosen the closest one, the fabric stretched out between two sticks, and Sophia spotted a tear in the center of the fabric.

“You’re a good shot,” Sophia said.

“Practice and patience, that’s all it is. You’ll be a good shot too, when you’ve worked at it for a bit. Want to try?”

Sophia was a little shocked to realize that she *did* want to try. Lugging around shotguns and shooting things went squarely under the judgment of *unladylike behavior*.

Nathan loaded the gun again without another word, handing it over to Sophia.

“Stand where I did, and hold it like you saw me do,” he said. “Don’t ever point a gun at anyone, even if you think the safety’s off. And like I said, don’t put your finger on the trigger unless you’re ready to shoot.”

Sophia nodded obediently, and lifted the gun to her shoulder, just like she’d seen Nathan do. She was more prepared for the weight of the weapon now, and Nathan had made it look easy.

“Careful, now,” Nathan murmured, stepping so close beside her that his chest brushed her shoulder. “There’s going to be a hefty recoil on this. If you hold it like that, it’ll crack your jaw when you shoot.”

He reached out, pushing the butt of the gun a little further down in Sophia’s shoulder. His hand curled over hers, adjusting her fingers into a stronger position to steady the gun. His hand was warm and firm, rough from farm work. Sophia

was already nervous about firing a gun for the first time, and the unexpected touch made her stomach clench and do somersaults.

“Recoil?” she echoed, her voice thick and strained.

“Aye, the gun kicks back when you fire,” Nathan explained, stepping back. His eyes were on the gun, and to Sophia’s relief, he didn’t seem to have noticed her tension. “It’s more than you’d expect. Pick a target and brace yourself.”

Sophia nodded tensely. She eyed down the barrel, choosing the same target that Nathan had. Curling her finger around the trigger, Sophia held her breath and pulled.

The air split with a tremendous report, making her ears ring. The barrel of the gun jerked up in the air, and the butt cracked hard against her shoulder. Sophia staggered and dropped the gun.

Nathan snatched it up before it hit the ground. Sophia drew in a breath, blinking hard. She expected him to shout, or to end the lessons there.

Then she realized that Nathan was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Sophia demanded, her own voice sounding strange and distant in her ears. She didn’t have to look to know that she hadn’t hit the target.

“Nothing, nothing,” Nathan chuckled. “When we finish practice, I’ll tell you how my first shooting lesson went.

Here's a hint – it went terribly. I fell over.”

“I didn't hit the target,” Sophia mumbled.

“No, you didn't. Neither did I, when I first started to learn. Nobody does -that's why we practice. I think the shot went off into those trees over there. That's why I picked this field – no one comes around here. I didn't expect you to do well on your first shot.”

Sophia shook her head, trying to get rid of the ringing in her ears.

“You made it look so easy,” she mumbled.

Nathan grinned, nudging her gently. “Practice and patience, right? Do you think I hit my targets the first time I shot a gun?”

Sophia had to smile at that. “No, I suppose not.”

“We'll try a few more rounds, then. Just so you can get the feel of it. How did you feel about it?”

“It was loud.” Sophia winced, rubbing at her ears. “And more powerful than I expected. But I think I know what I did wrong, why the barrel jerked up like that. I wasn't holding it right.”

“And your feet weren't braced enough. I'll get you some cloth plugs to put in your ears while you're shooting, how

about that? Here, I loaded it again for you, but you'll have to load it yourself tomorrow. With a little practice, you'll be a crack shot, I guarantee it."

Nathan handed over the gun. Sophia took it, and a smile broke out over her face.

*I just fired a gun for the first time, she thought. Aunt Laura thought I was too stupid to do anything, but Nathan thinks I can do it.*

She *had* done it, even though she hadn't hit her targets. A feeling of pride welled up inside Sophia. The gun was warm from use, and she was already getting used to the weight.

Sophia carefully slid her feet into the stance that Nathan had told her, lifting up the gun and leveling it again. Was she aiming it right? Nathan hadn't talked a lot about aim. Maybe that was just something that came with practice.

She fired again, and while the barrel didn't jerk up as sharply as it had before, Sophia staggered backwards again. Her feet slipped out from under her, and she landed flat on her backside.

"Are you all right?" Nathan asked, stepping forward to offer her a hand and pick up the gun.

When she nodded, he let out a warm, rumbling laugh. His hair shimmered gold in the afternoon sun, and his face was lit up and smiling.

*He's got a nice smile*, Sophia thought, and something warm and soft uncurled inside her. She broke into a grin, and took his hand, letting him pull her onto her feet.

He looked even more handsome right then. It wasn't a tight-lipped, polite smile, but a wide, toothy grin that reached his eyes. Sophia had the strangest feeling that she could look at him forever when he smiled like that.

"I'm fine," Sophia said, grinning. "Although it's not polite to laugh at a lady falling over."

"I do beg your pardon," Nathan said, making a mocking bow. "You got closer to the target this time, by the way."

"I did?" Sophia said, perking up. "I wasn't even watching where the bullet went."

"You should, you know. Guns are dangerous things. I don't think you need me to tell you that. Come on, let's try again. You're a natural, I just know it."

"All right," Sophia said, eager to try again. She took the gun and levelled it against her shoulder. How should she plant her feet to save herself from being knocked backwards?

Then Nathan was at her side again, chest brushing her shoulder, hair tickling her neck. "Like this," he murmured, hands sliding over her waist to make her tilt herself.

Sophia swallowed hard, trying not to concentrate on the sensation of warm palms sliding over her ribs. It ought to have

been a pleasant sensation, but it very much wasn't.

Aunt Laura had once thrown a saucepan at her and cracked one of her ribs. On cold days, it still twinged when Sophia breathed in deeply, feeling the tight, sharp pain in her side.

“You should tie your hair back better when you shoot,” Nathan advised. “Helps you focus more. Trust me, I learned that the hard way.”

Then his fingertips were at her temples, tucking a loose tendril of hair behind her ears.

Sophia's throat clenched. In an instant, she was back in Aunt Laura's kitchen, a forgotten pie burnt and smoldering on the counter. The kitchen was full of smoke.

Aunt Laura was screaming something, her face twisted with rage. Her hand flew out, curved like a claw, and her fingers clamped together in Sophia's hair. Sharp fingernails scraped across Sophia's scalp, drawing blood, and Aunt Laura pulled with all her might.

Sophia could hear herself screaming in her own head, and she could feel the raw, painful bald spot near her temple, and the knot of her own hair clutched in Aunt Laura's fist. She'd meticulously combed her hair over the bald spot for months.

Sophia didn't realize that she'd loosened her grip on the gun until it slipped out of her hands, and Nathan caught it neatly.



He glanced over at her, frowning.

“Sophia? What’s the matter? You’ve gone white as a sheet.”

Sophia tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. She lifted her hand to touch the spot on her scalp but stopped herself just in time. The hair was grown back, she knew that, but if she thought too hard about it, she could still remember the pain.

“I’m sorry, but I really should get on with supper,” Sophia blurted out.

Nathan blinked, confused. “Did I do something wrong? What’s the matter?”

She shook her head hard, already turning away.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Sophia said firmly, glad that her voice didn’t shake. “I just have work to do, that’s all.”

She walked towards the house, head down, breath coming hard. She’d go to her room and take some time to collect herself before she got started on supper.

Nathan didn’t follow her.

## Chapter Seventeen

It was one of those dreams where you ran and ran but got nowhere. Sophia's breath was coming hard, her lungs burning, every muscle aching and screaming, and yet she couldn't seem to make it across the parlor.

The parlor wasn't a large room. It was cold and austere, with uncomfortable, carefully selected furniture, and doilies and crocheted covers on just about every available surface. And yet the door always seemed so far away, no matter how Sophia reached out for it.

She had a feeling that if she could just get out of the door, she would have a chance. Outside the parlor door was the hallway, and at the end of the hallway was the front door and freedom.

Aunt Laura was right behind her. Sophia *knew* that she was there, even though her stiff neck wouldn't let her turn and look. She couldn't tell whether Aunt Laura was running after her or just standing there, but she *knew* that the woman meant her harm. If Aunt Laura caught her, something terrible was going to happen.

“Where do you think you're going, dear?” Aunt Laura said, her voice scratchy and full of venom. “Oh, I don't think so.”

Then a hand clamped down on Sophia's shoulder, and she flailed wildly, screaming and screaming, although she couldn't

make a noise. Everything went dark, and the hand pulled her backwards, down into somewhere dark and awful.

“Sophia. Sophia!”

Sophia woke with a scream on her lips, her throat hoarse and her mouth dry. She shot bolt upright, kicking out at her assailant.

Nathan leapt up from where he was sitting at the edge of the bed, backing away and holding out his hands to show that he meant no harm.

“Easy, easy,” he murmured, as if soothing a nervy horse. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Sophia sucked in great lungfuls of air. She felt as though she’d been holding her breath for goodness only knew how long. Her forehead and neck were wet with sweat, and her hair stuck to her skin. She was fully dressed and seemed to have been lying on top of her bed, although the sheets had managed to tangle themselves around her ankles.

With a rush, the memories came back. Sophia remembered coming home from the impromptu shooting lessons, her temple still throbbing with the memory of pain, and she’d gone up to her room.

“I didn’t mean to go to sleep,” Sophia managed weakly. “I just wanted to rest for a while before supper.”

Supper! With a sinking heart, Sophia realized that her room was dark. The curtains were still open, revealing the moon streaming in. Nathan must have brought along a lit candle, which he'd placed on her bedside table. There was a tray there too, with a bowl of cold stew and some bread, along with a few slices of ham and a cold cup of coffee.

"I'm so sorry," Sophia gasped. "I didn't mean to sleep through supper. Why didn't you wake me?"

She swung her legs out of bed, smoothing down her crumpled skirts in an attempt to hide her humiliation. Sophia didn't have many tasks here. She only had to cook food, wash clothes, and keep the house. None of that had been particularly overwhelming, and yet Nathan had gone without his supper because she'd been napping.

"It's all right, it doesn't matter," Nathan soothed. "I thought you needed the sleep. I went ahead and cooked supper, and I brought some up to you. I only woke you because..." he hesitated, eyes darting nervously around, "Well, I was worried. You'd slept for so long, and I was afraid that you were ill."

Sophia swallowed hard. "Not ill, just lazy," she said crisply. "I'm sorry, Nathan."

"It doesn't matter," he insisted.

"What time is it?"

"Half an hour till midnight."

Sophia's cheeks burned. That was well past Nathan's usual bedtime. He must have stayed up later to make sure that she was all right. "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry," Nathan said firmly. "You haven't done anything wrong. You're not a maid, you know. You're my wife."

*In name only*, Sophia thought suddenly, but quickly banished the thought.

"I don't even remember falling asleep," she admitted.

"You must have needed it." Nathan hesitated, sinking down onto the edge of Sophia's bed again. "What happened today, during shooting practice..."

Sophia bit her lip, looking away. She remembered flinching away when Nathan had brushed her hair behind her ear. He hadn't meant anything by it, she knew that, but her temple still throbbed with the memory of Aunt Laura's cruel fingers. It was one of the woman's favorite punishments – dragging Sophia around by her hair and pulling chunks out.

How would Nathan react if she told him? He'd probably be sympathetic, but there'd be a wariness there afterwards, wouldn't there? He wouldn't try and touch her again, not even as a casual brushing of hands. Would he look at her curiously, wondering what she'd said or done to invoke her aunt's wrath?

"Like the pastor," Sophia murmured aloud.

Nathan frowned. “What do you mean?”

Sophia swallowed, and the words started to spill out.

“I once told the pastor in my hometown that my aunt had punished me. She’d told me to dust the parlor, but I was so busy cooking the food she wanted for dinner that I hadn’t had time. She came home, and it wasn’t done, and she flew into a rage. She threw a saucepan at me, and there was still some hot water in the pan. It burnt my arm rather badly. I was lucky, really. If the water had been hotter, or it had hit me differently... well. I told the pastor, and he said that it must have been an accident, that my aunt was a good Christian woman and would never have meant to hurt me. He said that if I’d done as I was told, it would never have happened. I left feeling as though I’d done something terrible. I’m sure that he told Aunt Laura, too. He said that I was lucky, and I could have starved on the street. He said that I ought to count my blessings every night and be grateful to my aunt for saving me.”

There was a brief silence. The weak candle didn’t give off much light, and shadows flickered and swelled around the room. Sophia kept her eyes down on her hands, fingers twisting together in her lap.

She should have kept her mouth shut.

“Oh, Sophia,” Nathan whispered. “I’m so sorry. That’s... that’s terrible.”

Sophia shrugged. “He was right, in a way. Things could have been worse.”

“That means nothing,” Nathan said, almost angrily. “It could always be *worse*. Does that mean that we never suffer, or should never feel miserable or hard done by? That pastor sounds insufferable.”

Sophia gave a weak smile. “Oh, he was.”

“Pastor Sixsmith would never have stood for something like that. Oh, I could tell you stories about him.”

Sophia glanced up, eyeing Nathan. He didn’t seem shocked or disgusted by her story. If anything, he seemed angry – but not at her.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “For understanding.”

Not entirely sure what she was doing, Sophia reached out carefully, intending to lay her hand on Nathan’s shoulder.

Before her fingertips could make contact, however, Nathan flinched away, jerking himself back. Sophia sucked in a breath and pulled her hand back to her chest, feeling bewildered and foolish all at once.

Nathan stared at her for a long moment, eyes wide and fearful.

“I’m sorry,” he managed. “I... it’s an old wound, you see.”

“Can I see?”

Sophia wasn't sure where those words had come from. She didn't remember forming the question in her mind. In the quiet, otherworldly gloom of her room at night, however, the idea didn't seem quite so ridiculous.

Nathan held her gaze for what seemed like an eternity. He swallowed, and Sophia tracked the movement along his throat.

“It's not pretty,” he managed.

“I don't care.”

For a few heartbeats, neither of them breathed or spoke. Then Nathan dropped his eyes, giving one short nod.

“It's this one,” he said unnecessarily, tapping his upper left arm.

Sophia shuffled a little closer. He was wearing a worn old linen shirt, crumpled and loose, and the top two buttons were already undone. Her heartbeat pounding in her ears, Sophia undid a third button, loosening his shirt enough to pull it back over his left shoulder.

The scar was just below his shoulder, on his upper arm. Golden-brown skin gave way to whitish, ugly knots, the scar tissue twisted and clumped together, forming a rough, wobbly line almost from Nathan's armpit to the back of his arm. She could see how the skin around it was taut and twisted. The wound was deep and must have cut right down to the bone.



“What happened?” Sophia said, her voice barely louder than a breath.

“War,” Nathan replied shortly, and his voice was hard and angry. “I went with my father and brother, and I’m the only one who came back.” He reached up with his other arm, prodding ungently at his scar. “This was a bullet wound, needless to say. I lost a lot of blood, and it was the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced. Not just the injury, you know. The surgeons afterwards were worse, prodding and poking and pouring things on it. It was agony. I was terrified that an infection would set in. It’s high up, you see, the injury. An amputation is possible, but it’s more likely the infection would spread too far before I could lose my arm.”

Sophia sucked in a breath, trying not to imagine the fear of pungent rot and gangrene, hardly daring to peek under the bandages at your own limb.

“But you survived, at least.”

“Not because of the surgeons,” Nathan said. “There were a few women who offered to help, since the medics were overwhelmed. They were nurses, you know. The surgeons and even some of the soldiers made fun of them, but let me tell you, one of those nurses saved my life. She kept the wound clean, put some sort of poultice on it to prevent infection, and then stitched it up much better than the surgeons had done. I owe that woman my life, and I didn’t even get a chance to ask her name.”

Sophia gently pulled the shirt up over the scar. Nathan did up his shirt buttons with trembling hands and smiled weakly at

her.

“So, there you are. That was one of the scars the war left with me. One of the most visible, I’d say.”

“You were brave,” Sophia said, but Nathan shook his head.

“Not brave, just lucky. My father and brother weren’t lucky, but they were every bit as brave, strong, and clever as me. I was feverish for a while after that battle. Then I woke up and realized I might die anyway, and that my father and brother were dead. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder what?”

Nathan shrugged. “Why was I the one that survived?”

Sophia opened her mouth to speak but found that there wasn’t anything she could think of to say. What *could* you say to that?”

Then the moment was gone, and Nathan was looking away, clearing his throat.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he said, indicating that the subject was closed. “But now you’re awake, you should eat something. The stew was hot when I brought it up. The stove might still be warm — you could heat it up again if you like.”

Sophia's stomach rumbled audibly, and she winced. Nathan smiled a little at that.

"I guess that's the answer to my question," he chuckled.

"I'll be back," Sophia promised, not entirely sure why she was promising that. "I'll eat up here, and we can talk. If you want, of course."

Nathan seemed a little taken aback. "I'd like that," he said. "I'd like that a lot."

Sophia smiled, that warm feeling blossoming in her chest again. She snatched up the tray from her bedside table, and hurried downstairs, her stiff limbs protesting all the way.

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Sophia walked carefully upstairs, balancing the tray in her hands. The stew was tepid at best, and she'd poured herself a mug of milk instead of another cup of coffee, but she found herself eager to get back up to her room.

Nathan would be waiting for her there.

Sophia had watched his face when he talked about the war, about his injury, about losing his father and brother. She'd seen anguish there, misery, anger, naked emotion.

What had he seen on her face when she was talking about Aunt Laura?

Sophia nudged open her bedroom door and stopped short.

Everything was as she left it, with the candle still burning on her nightstand. But now, Nathan was lying on his side in the middle of her bed, legs tucked up underneath him.

He was asleep. His face was slack and peaceful, and the perpetual line between his brows was gone, for once. He was breathing steadily and deeply.

Sophia smiled to herself, setting down her dinner tray carefully, so as not to wake him.

*How on earth am I going to get into bed?* she thought.

There were worse problems to have, weren't there?

## Chapter Eighteen

Nathan woke with a start, and glanced around, bewildered. For one thing, it was far too late in the morning. Sun streamed in, and not the delicate grayish light of dawn. No, this was the full morning sun.

And, of course, he was not in his own room.

Nathan sat bolt upright, a flash of panic running through him. He recognized the room immediately, of course. This was Sophia's room. He was asleep on Sophia's bed.

Nathan dropped his face into his hands, groaning aloud. He remembered it now. Sophia had gone downstairs to heat up her food, and Nathan had sat on the bed, waiting for her. He didn't remember falling asleep, although at some point he must have pulled up a blanket over himself and taken off his shoes, setting them neatly beside the bed.

Or perhaps Sophia had done that.

There was no sign of her, of course. Nathan bit his lip, embarrassed. The poor girl had probably slept downstairs in the parlor, or on the floor, rather than share her bed with him

*I had no right to do that, Nathan scolded himself. I probably made her uncomfortable.*

He lifted his hand to his left shoulder and noticed with surprise that the usual dull ache he felt on a morning there was

gone. Perhaps it was because he'd slept in a different bed, or perhaps... Nathan held his breath, remembering how Sophia's cool, gentle fingertips had danced over his scar.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, determined to think no more of it. Regardless of what Sophia had thought about his scar, he'd probably undone all the good he had achieved by selfishly falling asleep in her bed. Shoving his feet into his boots, Nathan laced them up tightly, tugging a bit too firmly on the laces. Glancing around the room, he unexpectedly caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the washstand and froze.

He looked a sight, and no mistake.

Nathan's hair was loose, hanging in unbrushed tangles around his face and sticking up at odd angles. He wasn't as pale and sickly as he'd looked before, but there were still dark circles under his eyes and that unsightly frown line between his brows. Nathan lifted a hand, pressing on the line between his eyebrows as if he could rub it away.

*I don't know any other men or women my age with one of these,* he thought miserably.

He needed a wash, that much was clear, and there were scruffy-looking patches of stubble growing on his cheeks.

*Time for a shave, then. What must Sophia think of me, looking so dirty and ungroomed? She always looks tidy. She always looks breathtaking.*

That last thought came from nowhere. Nathan firmly put it aside. He got up, straightening the sheets before he left. The house was quiet, and a quick glance downstairs told Nathan that he was alone — Sophia was already out, starting on her chores. James would already be working on the ranch, probably preparing a few jibes for when Nathan finally arrived.

*Well, James is going to have to wait, Nathan thought grimly. I need a shave.*

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Some time later, Nathan eyed his reflection speculatively. Before the war, before his life had been turned on his head, Nathan had been comfortably aware that he was a good-looking young man. Not vain, of course — his parents made sure that their sons understood that good looks meant very little — but still, he'd liked the way he looked.

Afterwards, during the bad times, Nathan hadn't been able to summon up the energy to even glance in the mirror for days on end.

His face had changed, of course. His eyes were a little more sunken than before, and there wasn't an ounce of fat on his face or frame. It made Nathan look older, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

Still, his hair was clean, well-brushed, and neatly tied back. He'd shaved and washed, and altogether looked a lot better than when he'd woken up that morning.

He drew in a deep breath, meeting his own eye in the mirror.

“You’ve got an apology to make,” he told himself firmly.

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Sophia glanced up as Nathan approached. She was standing in the middle of the chicken coop, scattering feed for the birds. She smiled, and Nathan’s heart skipped a beat. He remembered her hands on his shoulder, how she came close enough for him to feel her warmth, and he sucked in a breath, forcing himself to concentrate.

“Good morning,” Nathan said.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

He coughed awkwardly. “I’m... I’m so sorry for last night. I never meant to fall asleep in your bed like that. It wasn’t appropriate.”

Sophia looked away, scooping up another handful of chicken feed. Nathan couldn’t see her expression.

“It’s all right,” she said lightly, her voice giving nothing away. “I left some porridge in the pot for you. I can make you coffee, too, if you like?”

“I’d better get on with work. James will be wondering where I am.”

Sophia smiled. “Oh, I told James you were still asleep. He wanted to go and wake you up, but I wouldn’t let him. You



were tired, and there's no harm in sleeping in a little later than usual."

Nathan smiled wryly. "James must have been disappointed. Anyway, I, um, well, I brought these for you."

He withdrew his arm from behind his back and offered the bunch of flowers in his hand.

They looked a little straggly and unimpressive now, not at all like the colorful, vibrant wildflowers that Nathan had carefully gathered from the fields behind the house. He noticed with horror that he'd plucked up the roots along with the stems. What an idiot.

But Sophia's eyes widened. She gasped, setting aside the chicken feed and scrambling out of the coop.

"Oh, they're beautiful! Thank you, Nathan. I love flowers!"

He beamed. Flowers were the right choice, then. Nathan had known too many women — one woman in particular — who turned up her nose at flowers, or sweets, or anything that wasn't expensive and difficult to obtain.

Sophia took the flowers, and their fingers brushed. The contact sent tingles along Nathan's hand, lingering long after the flowers and Sophia's fingers were gone.

She lifted the bouquet to her nose, breathing in.

“They’re perfect, Nathan. Thank you.”

“Shall I get a vase to put them in?”

Sophia blinked. “A vase?”

“I thought we could put them in the middle of the kitchen table. Unless you wanted them in your room, of course?”

Sophia broke into a smile. “Oh, I see what you mean. No, I don’t like the idea of keeping flowers inside. They just die, and its always so sad. No, I wanted to plant these in the garden. They should sprout quite quickly, and then we’ll have a lovely bed of wildflowers to enjoy.”

“That sounds like a good idea, actually,” Nathan said, surprised. It seemed entirely natural for him to follow Sophia into the garden.

He could see at once that she’d done an excellent job. There were traces of his mother’s herb garden beginning to thrive again, along with new plants and flower beds. There was lots of work to be done, still, but Sophia was already breathing new life into the garden.

*Not just into the garden,* Nathan thought.

“Shall we plant them over here?” Sophia called, indicating a far corner of the garden. “They can spread out and

go wild here, without getting into the vegetables or the herb boxes.”

She took a grubby old apron out from the shed, tying it around herself to save her dress, and knelt carefully beside the patch of earth, scraping out a hole with her bare hands. Nathan picked his way through the garden and knelt beside her.

“Will they really sprout here?” Nathan asked uncertainly, eyeing the bunch of flowers lying beside Sophia.

“Oh, yes. I’ve done it before. Flowers and plants like this are so very hardy. Can you believe that some people call them weeds?”

Nathan froze. “Weeds? Are these *weeds*? Did I just pick you a bunch of *weeds* as a bouquet?”

Sophia shot him a laughing glance. “Some people say so, but they’re wrong. Who decides what’s a weed or what isn’t? These plants are so beautiful that you thought they were flowers. Look at them – they’re colorful, perfect, and delicate. They smell beautiful, and they’re strong. I think they’re beautiful, and they’re every bit as lovely as the finest, nurtured roses, don’t you think?”

Nathan chuckled to himself. “Well, as long as you don’t mind. I don’t think I know any other woman who’d be happy with a bunch of weeds.”

She reached for the flowers, then hesitated.

“The letters!” she murmured, scrambling to her feet. Before Nathan could ask what “the letters” were, Sophia was hurrying back towards the house, wiping off her grubby hands on her apron.

He sat back on his heels, inspecting the flowers. Perhaps they would be considered weeds. He’d seen Pastor Sixsmith pulling out plants that looked like these from his rose beds, but really, weren’t they just as pretty as the roses?

Sophia returned a few minutes later, clutching three or four tiny white envelopes. She flushed at Nathan’s questioning expression.

“They’re letters for Jazzy,” she admitted, her voice low. “I... I know she’ll never read them, but part of me hopes that somehow she knows what’s in them. Does that make sense?”

Nathan thought of the long, rambling letter he’d written to his father and brother, soaked with his own tears and blood. He’d sat up one hellish night with the nurse who’d saved him, writing a goodbye letter to two men who would never, ever read it.

“It does make sense,” he said. “What are you going to do with them? Bury them?”

Sophia nodded. “Jazzy always wanted a fine garden. She wanted me to make sure I had a fine garden, too. She loved plants – I think I got my love of plants from her, actually. So, I buried a letter beneath a plant out here in the garden, when I first came here. I know it’s silly, but it helps me remember her.”

Sophia gently placed the letter in a freshly dug hole, and Nathan helped her replace the earth, holding a single flower in place while they did so.

“I don’t think it’s silly at all,” Nathan said quietly, and Sophia smiled at him.

“Thank you,” she said, so softly that he thought he might have imagined it.

The two worked quietly for a few moments, positioning and planting each individual flower. The end result was a little underwhelming, or so Nathan thought. There were a dozen spindly, flimsy flowers, drooping out of the soil.

He wrinkled his nose. “Are you *sure* they’ll take?”

“They might. I hope so,” Sophia said cheerfully, dusting off her hand. “You watch and see.”

“I look forward to it. The garden looks beautiful, by the way. My mother would be thrilled with what you’ve done.”

Sophia beamed, a dimple appearing in her cheek. Nathan had noticed how well she reacted to praise. He thought nothing of it — his parents had been quick to praise their sons, and free with their kind words and encouragements. Sophia always seemed taken aback by it.

There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek, and on impulse, Nathan reached over to brush it away. When the pad of his thumb touched her cheek, Sophia flinched, scrambling away from his touch. She leapt to her feet, her face white.

“I’m sorry!” Nathan said at once, getting to his feet, but Sophia had already regained her composure.

*She doesn’t like to be touched when she doesn’t expect it, he thought. I must remember that.*

Sophia cleared her throat, glancing away. The moment was gone, and a sort of awkwardness sprang up between them.

A stern voice that sounded rather like Pastor Sixsmith rang in Nathan’s head.

*For heaven’s sake, boy, let the girl breathe!*

Nathan smiled weakly at Sophia. “I should get on with my chores,” he said.

She gave a tiny, relieved smile, and Nathan turned, striding away from the garden and towards the courtyard. His mind was whirring, trying to absorb what had just happened between him and Sophia — both good and bad.

He’d felt something for her while they were planting Jazzy’s letters and Nathan’s flowers. Something that felt suspiciously like love.

*It starts off all nice and lovely to begin with, Nathan thought bitterly, But then the pain begins.*

He wasn't sure what made him glance over his shoulder back at the house, but he spotted the figure standing on a high ridge immediately. The hills clustered in around the ranch house, and there was a silhouetted figure was standing by the tall trees on top of the hills. Somebody was clearly looking down at the house, into the garden and into the courtyard.

Not James – Nathan would recognize his friend immediately, even at this distance. He paused, squinting against the sun.

“Hello?” he called, his voice carrying. The air was still, and he knew that whoever was on the ridge would be able to hear him. They didn't move or react in any way.

“Who are you? What are you doing?” Nathan demanded, starting to feel angry and unsettled.

When the figure still didn't move, Nathan had had enough. He started to run towards the hill. However, when he raced around the house, he lost sight of the ridge, just for a moment.

Naturally, when he saw it again, the figure was gone. Nathan climbed the hill anyway, but there was no sign at all that anyone had even been there.

## Chapter Nineteen

“Really? *Never?*” Nathan asked, laughing.

Sophia rolled her eyes at him, shaking her head and smiling.

“No, never. Believe it or not, my aunt’s priority wasn’t to take me to the circus every year,” Sophia said, helping herself to another bread roll. She’d baked them only that morning, and they were hot, fresh, and delicious. The sun was going down outside, and the two of them were enjoying a quiet meal together.

It had been four days since Sophia had planted Nathan’s flowers in the garden, with Jazzy’s letters at their roots. Already, the plants were starting to perk up and spread out, much to Nathan’s surprise.

They were Sophia’s favorite plants in the garden so far.

Since then, a rumor had begun that the circus was coming to town. Sophia had heard about circuses, of course. She’d seen the colorful tents, and even seen the bright caravans and lumpy carts trundling by. But she’d never been inside one.

“Well, we didn’t go *every* year,” Nathan chuckled. “We weren’t made of money. But we would go as a family sometimes, and it was wonderful. I loved it, even though I was an adult. I felt sad about all those animals, locked away in cages, though.”



Sophia snorted. “I have to agree with you. I always thought it was unfair, all those animals living their lives in cages. I’m sure they aren’t treated well.”

“Yes, but I’m not sure that lions and elephants and terrified horses painted to look like zebras running all over the countryside would have been the right answer.”

Sophia chuckled. “No, that’s a good point. Well, when is this circus supposed to be coming, then?”

“I’m not sure. Soon, I think. News travels slowly in these parts,” Nathan mopped up the gravy on his plate with the last piece of bread and paused, the dripping bread halfway to his lips. “We should go,” he said.

Sophia paused. She loved the idea of attending a circus. When Aunt Laura had taken Jazzy and left Sophia at home, Sophia had crept out after them. She hadn’t been able to get in without a ticket, and of course she had no money to buy one. Instead, she sat outside the colorful tent, listening to the music and laughter of the audience. She hurried back when everyone started to clap and clap at the end, and just made it into the kitchen before Aunt Laura returned, with an excited Jazzy in tow.

Later that night, Jazzy had described everything in detail, and Sophia could almost picture it all in her mind. Sometimes, it felt as though she *had* been there.

“It’s a little frivolous,” Sophia said unwillingly. “Can we really spare money for circus tickets right now? I’d love to go,

but our money should really be spent on more important things.”

Nathan tutted. “I’m sure I can scrape together a dollar or two. Come on, Sophia, I insist. You’re going to the circus. We’ll both go. Maybe *I* want to go to the circus, did you ever think of that?”

He spoke lightly, and Sophia knew he was joking. Perhaps if he’d said that when they’d first met, she would have thought he were serious, or that he was angry at her.

When had she started to learn to read him like that?

Was it a good sign? Sophia thought so.

“All right, we’ll both go, then,” Sophia said. “It’ll be nice to have something to look forward to.”

Nathan grinned. “It’ll be nostalgic, going to the circus again. I hope it’s as fun as I remember.”

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, the silence seeming peaceful rather than oppressive. Sophia couldn’t help but compare the comfortable silence here against the cold, miserable quiet of the scullery at Aunt Laura’s house.

“I haven’t been since my brother died,” Nathan said suddenly. “I came home alone, and the circus came that very summer. I thought about going. James wanted me to go – I think he thought it would cheer me up – but I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear the thought of it.”

He kept his eyes fixed on his plate, swirling the piece of bread round and round in the gravy.

“I’m sorry,” Sophia said quietly.

He shrugged. “These things happen, don’t they? What about you, then? Why didn’t you go to the circus?”

Sophia swallowed hard. “I think you already know,” she said lightly. “Aunt Laura... well, I suppose I’d better start at the beginning.”

“Go on,” Nathan prompted gently. “You’ve been on the brink of telling me something since you arrived, but it’s never happened. You can tell me anything you want, Sophia. Not if you don’t want to, though.”

Sophia set down her fork, swallowing hard. “I do want to.”

He waited, not pushing her, simply waiting for Sophia to speak. She drew in a deep breath and started.

“My mother died when I was young. It’s the strangest thing, but sometimes I can’t even remember her properly. That hurts, you know. I don’t have any pictures or keepsakes from her, and when I imagine her, it’s like I’m seeing a painting with the face blurred out,” Sophia closed her eyes. “I’m forgetting her. It feels like I’m letting her down.”

“It’s not your fault,” Nathan said quietly. “You were quite young, weren’t you?”

Sophia nodded. “I went to live with Aunt Laura. She wasn’t really my aunt, but she and my mother were good friends at one time, so I’d always called her that. Afterwards, she insisted on me calling her “Aunt Laura” so people would think that I was just like one of the family.”

“Was she a woman who cared a lot about appearances?”

Sophia scoffed. “Oh, yes. At first, I was so relieved that I was going to stay with Aunt Laura, instead of being packed off to an orphanage. The relief didn’t last long, I can tell you. She was pleased with herself, at first, but then she realized that she would need to feed me, clothe me, educate me. She regretted taking me in very quickly, I think, but couldn’t come up with a way to get rid of me without looking unkind or unchristian. I’d only been there for a few months before Aunt Laura told me I’d need to do chores to earn my keep. I didn’t mind, of course. I did chores at home. But Aunt Laura meant that I was to do *everything*. All the cleaning, all the cooking, all the laundry. It was hard, but I managed it. I knew that Jazzy was too ill to help much, anyway.”

Sophia broke off abruptly, staring down at her plate. Unbidden, the memory of Jazzy and her lopsided grin surged to mind, and a tidal wave of misery came sweeping through her.

*I’ll never see Jazzy again. I missed her funeral. I’ll likely never visit her grave. She’ll be all alone in the cold earth, with no one but Aunt Laura to remember her.*

“You miss her, don’t you?” Nathan said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

Sophia nodded mutely.

“We were like sisters. She *was* my sister,” Sophia said fiercely. “I remember the first time Aunt Laura flew into a real rage with me. I’d been there for less than a year, and I’d already realized that I was going to be an unpaid maid. It was a thankless task, and I already disliked Aunt Laura, but it was still better than an orphanage. I didn’t realize then that I’d end up trapped. Anyway, I don’t even remember what I did. Maybe I missed a spot when I was scrubbing the floors, or maybe I forgot to dust a shelf. Aunt Laura screamed at me. I felt that was unfair, so I tried to stand up for myself, to explain and apologise. She slapped me across the face, then threw me in the scullery. She said I would sleep in there like an animal, if I couldn’t behave like a lady,” Sophia sighed. “I didn’t think she meant it, but of course I was wrong. I missed luncheon, and then I missed dinner and supper. I was so hungry. But Jazzy hid some of her food from dinner and snuck it into me. We sat together in the dark, and I ate it, and she talked to me.”

“Did Jazzy ever stand up to her mother for you?”

Sophia sighed. “She tried, but you must remember that Jazzy was ill. She was so weak, and she couldn’t raise her voice. She couldn’t bear loud noises or shouting towards the end. If she tried to argue for me, Aunt Laura simply ignored her. Jazzy was too weak to fight,” Sophia bit her lip. “But she planned to bring me with her, when she came out here to marry you. She was going to help me escape.”

“You said that you were trapped,” Nathan pressed. “What did you mean by that? Couldn’t you leave? Surely this Aunt Laura couldn’t keep you there.”

“Probably not,” Sophia shrugged. “But where on earth would I go? I had no family, and no friends. Aunt Laura was a pillar of society in the part of town where we lived. If I left, she’d make sure that my name was mud, and I know that everyone would believe her. I’m not qualified to do anything. I don’t have any real skills, or any contacts who might help me find a job. I had no money. Nothing in that house belonged to me, Aunt Laura made that quite clear. I was trapped, Nathan. Completely trapped.”

Nathan moved his hand across the table as if to take hers. Without thinking, Sophia shifted her hand back, then flushed. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“No, I’m sorry, Sophia. I didn’t think. I... I’ve noticed that you don’t like to be touched,” Nathan said gently. “I shouldn’t have been so careless.”

Sophia was horrified to realize that her eyes were filling with tears.

“When she got really ill, I didn’t dare hug Jazzy. Even the slightest pressure could hurt her, and I wasn’t willing to risk that. The only time Aunt Laura put her hands on me was when she wanted to hurt me. I suppose I’ve just come to expect that. I truly do like spending time with you, Nathan. You’re a good man, and I feel safe with you. I’ll... I’ll work on it, I promise.”

Nathan shifted, moving up the table to crouch beside her. He placed one hand on the table, inches from Sophia's, but not touching.

“None of this is your fault,” he said fiercely. “You aren't broken. There's nothing wrong with you. I love your company, too, and it doesn't matter if you never feel comfortable with being touched or having people close to you.”

Sophia smiled weakly. “That's kind of you to say, Nathan.”

“You are happy here, aren't you?”

Nathan's eyes were serious and intent, as he waited for Sophia's reply.

*He really cares, Sophia realized with a jolt. He cares whether I'm happy here or not. He wants me to be happy.*

The tears welling up in Sophia's eyes started to fall then, heavy, hot salt drops rolling down her cheek, unheeded, and dripping off the edge of her jaw.

“Sophia?” Nathan asked, visibly horrified.

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. “Oh, don't worry, these aren't sad tears – at least, I don't think so. Of course, I'm happy here, Nathan. How could I not be happy? I can't remember the last time I felt so secure, or so at home. This is a wonderful place, and sometimes I can't quite believe how lucky I was to come here and find it.”

*And find you*, Sophia thought dizzily, although those words didn't seem to want to come out.

Nathan reached up, gently brushing away the tears from her cheeks with the pad of his thumb.

“We’ll be good together, you and I,” he said. “We needed each other, I think. I’m not going to pretend that your being here wasn’t the best thing that happened to me, either.”

The kettle perched on the stove started to sing, interrupting the moment. Nathan mumbled a curse, getting to his feet and moving over to the stove, pouring out two cups of tea.

It was then that Sophia realized that Nathan had touched her face to wipe away her tears, and she’d never flinched back or shied away. She hadn’t imagined Aunt Laura and her hard-hitting fists. It was just her and Nathan.

*This is a good sign*, Sophia thought. *A very good sign.*



# Chapter Twenty

The next day, the circus came to town.

Nathan had expected it to be smaller, somehow, and more diminished. After all, things were rarely as impressive and colorful as you imagined as a child.

Well, he was wrong about the circus.

It was a welcome distraction from all the worries weighing on Nathan's mind, too. The business with Michael was still bothering him. If it was just a debt, the whole thing would be much simpler, but it was a debt between friends, from Michael's father to Nathan's, to save a dying woman.

*It didn't work, though,* Nathan reminded himself, with a pang of misery. The simple fact was that Michael wasn't unreasonable in asking for his money back.

But Nathan didn't have it.

And then there was the figure on the hill. Nathan had lain awake for hours that night, racking his brains to think of who it could be. Was it Michael? That seemed likely, but what if it was someone else? Why would Michael be watching the house? Whoever it was, their figure had filled Nathan with a cold sensation of dread.

He hadn't told Sophia. He'd meant to, he really had, but somehow their comfortable, easy supper together hadn't

seemed like the right time to bring up something so ominous. Would Sophia feel nervous about being alone in the house or courtyard with a mysterious stranger sneaking about the place? If she saw the figure again, would she do something silly, like try and confront them?

It gave Nathan a headache, but by the time the sun came up, he'd almost made up his mind – he'd tell her the whole truth. About Michael, and about the figure on the hill. He fell asleep shortly before dawn, and that was where things started to go wrong.

Nathan woke up blearily some hours later, when the sun was high in the sky. He went downstairs, cursing himself at oversleeping again, to find a light breakfast left out for him on the table, and a note from Sophia telling him that she'd gone off to market.

*I'll tell her when she gets back,* Nathan told himself, tucking into the cooling breakfast. It was just porridge, kept slightly warm on the stove, with a small bowl of fresh, washed berries. It was delicious, and Nathan congratulated himself on his luck once again.

Sophia arrived home at about lunchtime, with a basket full of dry goods and a spring in her step.

“You'll never believe it,” she said, practically vibrating with excitement. “The circus is here.”

“Already?” Nathan said, surprised.

“Yes, the wagons all rolled in this morning. They’re setting up the tents and things on the outskirts of town. Everyone’s talking about it, and everyone says that they’re going to go. They aren’t selling tickets till tomorrow,” Sophia paused, glancing hopefully up at Nathan. “We are still going, aren’t we?”

Nathan grinned. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

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Sophia was right – the whole town seemed to be coming to attend the circus. The circus didn’t open until nightfall, having spent the whole day and the day before setting everything up.

“I was going to ask where they’d set up,” Nathan murmured, walking arm in arm with Sophia down the main street of town, “But that feels like a silly question.”

Sophia giggled. In the distance, they could see the colorful, striped peaks of canvas tents, and a strong glow of countless candles and lanterns, lighting up the twilight sky. There was a general hubbub of chatter and excitement, and the pair joined the steady stream of people heading towards the tent peaks.

“I hope there’ll be room left for us,” Sophia said, standing on her tiptoes to peer over the heads of the crowd.

Nathan glanced down at her, and felt that familiar churning in his gut, butterflies migrating from his stomach up into his chest. She looked so excited, face lit up eagerly, keen as a child.

He squeezed her hand in the crook of his elbow, just lightly.

“There’ll be room,” Nathan murmured. “You’re going to love it, Sophia, I promise.”

She looked up at him, eyes full of something unreadable that tugged on Nathan’s heart, sharp and distinctive as if there was a hook twined inside him, connected to Sophia.

His breath stuttered, and he opened his mouth. To say what, Nathan couldn’t have said, but of course he never had the chance. The crowd surged forward, finally spying the entrance, so Nathan and Sophia were carried along with them.

Sophia gave a shriek of excitement, clinging on tighter to Nathan’s arm, and they hurried on past the rough boundary fence of splintered old wood, posts shoved hastily and haphazardly in the earth, indicating that from here on in, the circus began.

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In the blink of an eye, Nathan was a child again, on a visit to the big city with his family. There were countless smaller tents, all sturdy canvas and set up hastily, some selling food, others selling other entertainments. They passed a fortune-teller’s tent, with a heavily veiled and cloaked woman wearing what looked like greasepaint on her face to make herself look older, standing in the doorway, crooning at the passing people, offering to tell their fortune. A few people from the main crowd broke off and moved toward her, all eager for a slice of their own future ahead of time.

There were food tents, selling peanuts, pies, cake, simmering fried things that Nathan couldn't identify, little sugar cookies, and gingerbread. Delicious smells wafted out from those tents, mingling with the smell of smoke, straw, and other mysterious scents that seemed unique to a place like this. Hard-packed earth was smooth under their feet, and there was light everywhere, banishing almost every shadow. This wasn't a place to skulk or sleep – this was a place where a person could truly come alive.

“What's that place?” Sophia asked, and Nathan squinted over in the direction she was pointing.

There was a long, low tent with a pointedly darkened entrance, with a portly man lounging by the door, twirling a drooping mustache and grinning at passers-by. The sign read, *Hall Of Freaks and Human Oddities*.

Nathan frowned. His parents hadn't allowed him to go into those tents, curtly explaining that they were cruel places that exploited the most vulnerable people in society. He'd never understood until he and Jack had snuck in together. They'd had their fill of misery and the manufactured grotesque after that.

“Not that one,” Nathan said, and was relieved when Sophia nodded, turning away.

“It doesn't sound like an enjoyable place to visit,” she said, “And the tickets were far too expensive to get in.”

He chuckled. “Thrifty as always, Sophia.”

Without discussing it, the two of them had let themselves be carried along with the crowd towards the big tent. A man in a velvet waistcoat and top hat took their money and handed them a pair of tickets at the door.

“Enjoy yourselves, sir and madam,” he said, flashing a secretive smile which seemed to imply that he knew something about them, “And do leave all of your preconceptions about circuses at the door.”

Nathan had to smile at the platitude, and escorted Sophia inside.

He knew more or less what to expect. The Big Tent was, as the name implied, huge. The canvas ceiling loomed high, high above their heads, and wooden boards were arranged in rough seats in a circle all around the canvas walls, leaving a large space of hard-packed earth in the middle. The tent was already half full and filling up fast. Nathan shouldered his way through the crowd and found himself and Sophia a pair of seats with a good view of the ring below.

“It didn’t look this big from the outside,” Sophia murmured, her voice hushed. She was glancing up at the high ceiling with awe.

Nathan chuckled. “That’s circuses for you.”

“What are those platforms up there for?”

He squinted up at the high platforms set near the ceiling of the tent, reachable only by a thin, frail-looking ladder

leading up to the plain squares of wood.

“I suppose we’ll find out,” Nathan said neutrally.

The music started up only a few minutes later, sweet fiddle strains and a steady drumbeat, and then a man strode confidently into the center of the ring, arms upraised, and a glittering cane in his hand. He wore a red velvet top hat and matching waistcoat, and his black tailcoats glittered oddly in the light.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he boomed out, and the audience fell into an expectant silence. “Welcome to the circus!”

Applause broke out, louder than Nathan would have thought possible. He was excited like a child again, and he could feel Sophia almost vibrating with anticipation beside him. A warm hand slipped into his, long, clever fingers tightening around his, and the warmth spread up Nathan’s arm, curling in his chest.

“You’ll like it,” Nathan whispered. “I can promise you that.”

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Horses burst through the entrance, heads high and necks curved, trotting in perfect unison, knees lifting up. They were dressed up beautifully, like no horses Nathan had ever seen before, in gilt, sequined harnesses and huge plumes of feathers. Each horse’s harnesses and bridles were in a different color, and there was a smear of something shimmery on their coats and manes. The horses came in so close to the audience that Nathan could almost smell the horse sweat and feel the breath of wind on his face.

Two women and one man sat astride a horse each, with roughly six horses to each person. Eighteen horses! Nathan couldn't imagine how eighteen large horses could be marshalled in such a small space, but the three riders did it. They stood up on the backs of their horses, as easily as a person might rise from their seat.

Nathan held his breath with everyone else when the riders stood with one foot each on the back of a horse, two horses galloping together, and when one of the women twisted herself into impossible shapes *while* balancing on a galloping horse. They leapt over fences that got higher and higher, faster and faster, until a cloud of dust was rising around the knees of the horses, and Nathan was sure that the whole thing was one half-second away from become a twisted, bloody mess of broken limbs and fallen horses.

Then the music reached its crescendo and finished with a flourish, and the horses and riders stopped, breathless but calm and unharmed. The riders lifted their arms proudly to the audience, and the horses bent gracefully forward in a sort of bow, each with one shapely front leg stretched out in front of them.

Nathan didn't even realize that he was on his feet with everyone else, applauding till his palms were sore, until Sophia tugged on his arm.

"That was amazing!" she gasped breathlessly. "Oh, I could hardly *breathe*! They're so clever, so nimble!"

"I know," Nathan agreed, sinking back onto the seat. He felt oddly exhausted, even though he'd done nothing but sit



down. “They do that every day, almost. Twice a day on Saturdays, I think.”

“Goodness. Wait, is there more?”

Nathan followed Sophia’s gaze to the high platforms. Slim figures were climbing up the ladders to the platforms above, and he sucked in a breath.

“Acrobats,” he murmured. The horses were a new show, but he remembered the acrobats spinning through the air when he was young, and the way his mother had hid her eyes, sure that they would plummet to their deaths.

Sophia gulped audibly. “It’s very high,” she murmured.

“Yes,” Nathan murmured. “Very high.”

It was difficult to tell whether the acrobats were two men, two women, or a man and a woman. They both wore identical green and purple striped tights and voluminous white shirts, tucked in at the waist. They were slim and muscular and had white face paint and dark hair smoothed fiercely back over their scalps. Nathan glanced down at Sophia. Her face was ashen.

*She’s spotted the trapezes, then,* he thought.

The trapezes hung down from a long pole suspended above the platforms, simple, smooth wooden handles attached by two long ropes, like a swing. The crowd was holding its breath, and so was Sophia.

The first acrobat took hold of the trapeze and made an elaborate bow to the crowd. They perched on the wooden handle, as if sitting on a seat, and let the trapeze swing out from the platform, high, high above the audience.

Everyone gasped in mingled admiration and horror.

“What if they fall?” Sophia whispered, her fingers digging into Nathan’s arm.

“They won’t fall,” he assured her, with more confidence than he felt. “They never fall.”

The first acrobat landed on the second platform, and the second acrobat took the trapeze. This acrobat simply held onto the handle and swung out over the huge space, legs dangling in the air, until they swept up and landed on the first platform, so that the two acrobats had exchanged places.

There was weak, worried applause from the audience. Tensions were high, and it was apparent that most people were terrified that they were about to witness a hideous accident.

The acrobats bowed gracefully to the applause, then glanced at each other. Nathan had the strangest idea that they were siblings, or even twins, and could communicate with just a look.

The initial swinging had just been a warm-up. Before Nathan could draw in a breath, the acrobats both launched themselves off the platforms. The air seemed full of them,

swinging gracefully from trapeze to trapeze, somersaulting and hanging on by one hand, by their feet, by one knee hooked over the handle.

Sometimes one acrobat would fling themselves away from the trapeze altogether, flying through empty space while the crowd below cried out. The second acrobat would always snatch up their companion effortlessly, the two of them suspended from one trapeze, only to fling them away again to land neatly on the platform, or back on the first trapeze.

By the time the act ended, Nathan's heart was thudding fit to burst, and he hardly dared breathe. If the applause for the horses was loud, this round of applause was thunderous. The acrobats accepted the adulation with the same gravity as before, not seeming out of breath or even relieved at all their near misses.

"That was amazing," Sophia breathed, sitting down heavily. "No, amazing doesn't cover it. I thought for sure one of them would fall."

"So did I," Nathan admitted. "That... that was more than I remembered."

The man in the top strode into the ring as the last of the applause was dying away and announced that there would be a few minutes before the next act began, and in the meantime, there would be clowns.

The clowns came frisking and waddling into the ring, and Nathan breathed out a little. At least clowns weren't going to give him a fright. He turned to Sophia.

“So, can I take it that you enjoyed that?”

Sophia snorted. “I’ll remember this for the rest of my days. It was *wonderful*. Can you imagine being that talented?”

“What, can I imagine leaping around on trapezes like that, or doing somersaults on a horse’s back? No, I can’t imagine it, and honestly, I’d rather not even try.”

Sophia gave a gurgle of laughter. Her arm was still looped through his, their palms pressed together. She didn’t seem conscious at all of their contact. She didn’t pull away, either. Nathan didn’t dare move or attract her attention, in case she started to panic at the contact.

He didn’t want her to let go.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Nathan,” she murmured.

Nathan swallowed hard, and it stuck in his throat.

“I... I actually have something I’ve been meaning to tell you, Sophia.”

He felt her arm tense a little.

“Oh?” she said, lightly. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. It’s just... well, you keep saying that Jazzy should have been here, instead of you. It’s as if you feel that you stole her future.”

Sophia was looking away from him, and her expression was unreadable.

“I did,” she murmured. “I know that there’s nothing I or she could have done, but still. This life was for her.”

“What happened to Jazzy is a tragedy,” Nathan said firmly. “You’ll never forget her, and nor will I. But I’ve been meaning to tell you something, since the moment I met you.”

Sophia turned to look at him, and there was something like mingled despair and hope in her eyes.

“What did you want to tell me?” she breathed, and he barely heard her over the roar of the crowd laughing at something the clowns had done.

“I’m glad that you came here instead of Jazzy,” Nathan said, all in a rush. “I should have told you that right away, instead of letting you think that you were lesser, somehow. Jazzy was a wonderful person, I know that, but so are you. You deserve love, Sophia. You deserve to be happy, safe, and appreciated. You deserve all that, and I can give it to you. I *will* give it to you.”

Sophia’s throat was working, and she didn’t speak. Tears welled up in her eyes, glittering in the candlelight of the big

tent. Her hand was still interlocked with his, but her other hand lifted tentatively, hesitantly, to touch Nathan's face.

He was careful not to move an inch, not to let anything happen to frighten her away. Her fingertips grazed his cheek, sliding down to the edge of his jaw. Nathan's lungs burned, and he was suddenly reminded that he hadn't taken a breath in rather too long. He sucked in a breath, and Sophia's eyes darted down to his lips.

She leaned forward, just an inch, just a tiny bit.

*Should I move forward? Nathan thought dizzily. Is she going to kiss me? Will I scare her away?*

All he could think of was how badly he wanted to kiss Sophia. There were just a few inches between them now, and Nathan didn't think he'd ever wanted something as badly as how he wanted to meet her lips.

“Ah! There they are!”

There were few things that would have been a welcome interruption for Nathan at this point, but Pastor Sixsmith's voice was certainly not one of them.

Nathan and Sophia flinched, pulling apart automatically, and turned to see Pastor Sixsmith and James making their way towards them. Nathan wondered if he could get away with throwing his old friends from the top of the acrobats' platform. Probably not.

“We’re late, but James was insistent that you two had gone ahead,” Pastor Sixsmith explained, oblivious. “I spotted you two at once. Mind if we join you?”

Not waiting for an answer, Pastor Sixsmith flopped down heavily between Nathan and Sophia, forcing them apart.

“What have I missed?” he asked happily.

# Chapter Twenty-One

That night, Nathan dreamt of colorful horses and sure-footed riders, beautiful music and bright lights, a striped canvas sky and a pair of acrobats somersaulting across it.

Most of all, however, he dreamt about Sophia.

He dreamt about the hesitant, intent look on her face, and how she'd leaned in towards him, her gaze fluttering between his eyes and his lips. How the tips of her fingers had felt, sliding against his cheek.

And then wretched James and Pastor Sixsmith had turned up. Ruining everything. Nathan had quietly seethed through the rest of the circus, which was all very nice, but not quite as thrilling as the horses and the acrobats. There was a little parade of “freaks” in between two of the larger acts, obviously whisked from the tent of Freaks and Human Oddities outside. Nathan didn't like that, and he didn't like the way the crowd gasped and roared with laughter, and the “freaks” hung their heads or smiled boldly and fixedly out at the audience.

Sophia stiffened beside him. She didn't laugh or gasp, and neither did Pastor Sixsmith or James. In fact, quite a few people in the audience seemed to be tight-lipped and disapproving at the display. Whether they disapproved of the “freaks” or the way they were paraded like some sort of animal or interesting object, Nathan couldn't have said.

The pastor walked home with them, chatting all the way about the circus. He managed to walk directly between Nathan



and Sophia, much like he'd sat between them at the circus. It was all so obvious that Nathan might have thought Pastor Sixsmith was being deliberately aggravating. Unfortunately, while the pastor was very intuitive in some areas, he was entirely clueless in others.

By the time Sophia and Nathan reached home, the night was well along, and the moment was gone. They were too tired even to bother with supper. They said their shy goodnights and retired to their respective rooms.

*I told her that I loved her, Nathan realized with a jolt. I said that she deserved love, and that I'd give it to her. I've never told anyone that I loved them.*

Nathan couldn't even remember telling his parents or Jack that he loved them. Oh, they knew – their family was a warm and friendly one, and there was never any doubt as to their feelings for each other. Still, saying the words hadn't seemed necessary. He'd never said that he loved his sweetheart, either. It had felt different from this. The same, but also different in a way that Nathan couldn't explain or understand.

*I don't have to understand it, though. I can just feel it. Sophia's my wife – we've got all the time in the world.*

For some reason, that idea made Nathan feel as though a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He rolled onto his back in bed, smiling up at the sun-drenched ceiling, and thought that he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy.

He heard the shuffle and clattering of Sophia downstairs, and Nathan's heart sped up. Climbing out of bed, Nathan hurriedly washed and dressed, eager to come down and start his day. With Sophia.

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Sophia glanced up as Nathan came downstairs. She smiled shyly. "Morning."

"Good morning," Nathan replied. "Did you dream of circuses last night?"

Sophia laughed. "Flying horses and acrobats, with a few of those desperately unfunny clowns thrown in. I could smell roasted peanuts all night."

Nathan grinned, settling down in his usual seat. He could smell bacon frying, and his mouth watered.

"That smells delicious, Sophia," he said, and she beamed. There was something between them now, Nathan was sure of it. Something fizzling in the air, almost tangible.

"I'm going to go out and fetch some eggs. Could you watch the bacon?" Sophia asked. "Oh, before I forget, there was a letter lying on the mat this morning. Someone must have pushed it under the door. It's addressed to you."

Nathan's smile faded, and a cold sensation of dread trickled through his limbs.

"Right," he said lightly. "Where is it?"

Sophia tied on her apron and pulled a shawl around her shoulders, tying it around her waist.

“I left it by the dresser,” she said, indicating the ancient, peeling dresser near the parlor door, where Nathan kept all his documents, correspondence, and boring legal information. “I won’t be a moment.”

She darted out of the door without another word, and Nathan watched her stride happily across the courtyard, the small egg-basket hanging from her arm. She’d probably take the opportunity to feed the hens, too. He could hear them squawking and scratching with excitement at the sight of Sophia approaching.

*They love her already,* Nathan thought. He got up, moving briskly over to the dresser. He needed to shake off this growing black mood. Why should he feel worried? It was just a letter. Not after such a wonderful evening last night. Good times were rare in Nathan’s life these days, and he wasn’t about to let a good memory be ruined so easily.

Then he saw the handwriting on the envelope. It was terse and spiky, simply reading, *Nathan Rowe*.

Michael.

Stomach churning, Nathan glanced out of the kitchen window, making sure that Sophia wasn’t on her way back with the eggs yet. He’d made his decision not to worry her with all of this, and there was no reason to ruin her good mood, too.

*I promised her a safe home, he thought, and Michael is making this place anything but safe.*

The figure on the hill, watching the ranch, lingered uncomfortably in Nathan's mind.

He ripped open the letter, unwilling to prolong his anxiety any longer.

*My Dear Friend, Nathan,*

*I haven't heard from you in a while, nor seen you, either. I'm almost hurt. I thought we were friends, but I suppose you've learned to care more about your money and worldly goods than your friends.*

*Nevertheless, I'm getting impatient. I want my money, Nathan. I know what you're thinking. How can I possibly compel you to pay? Don't worry – I've thought about that too. I have letters between your father and mine, oh yes. They might not stand up in court, but they'll certainly convince everyone in town.*

*How would you like that, I wonder? Your darling father's sterling reputation, tarnished forever? I'll make sure everyone knows what he did. How he convinced my father to give up all of our money, then refused to pay a penny of it back. My father tried to help a man he thought was his friend, to save his friend's wife, and because of it, he died in poverty. Does that seem fair to you?*

Nathan paused, squeezing his eyes closed. The simple answer was *no*. It was not fair. But Nathan didn't have the money to pay him back.

*Do you know what I think, Nathan? I think that your dear, doting papa realized that his wife was dying and used it to wring all the money he could out of my family, then spent it on frivolous things, drink, and saloon girls. Yes, that would make sense. After all, if he really did spend it all on medicine, your mother wouldn't have died, would she?*

Nathan knew that was a lie. He remembered day after day, night after night, his father sitting at his mother's side, painstakingly spooning medicine into her slack mouth. His face had been gray and grim, twisted with misery. He'd barely left the house, and certainly hadn't attended any saloons.

But would others believe that? Would his father's reputation stand up to the gossip? Could Nathan stand it?

*I think I've made my point clearly enough for now. I want my money, Nathan, or at least I want some of it, and a solid assurance that I'll get the rest. I'll show the world those letters, and let them know how your family ruined mine, and yet you're making me out to be the villain.*

*You want me to be a villain? Very well. I'll accept the role. I might as well, after all. The war did an excellent job of making me into a monster, and I have to say that I am very good at it.*

*Meet me at the saloon as soon as you get this note. It'll be quiet at this time of the morning, and we can talk privately.*

*Don't be late, and don't try my patience any further.*

*We have to talk. I think we've got a lot to discuss, you and I. Don't forget, Nathan, I'm the only one who truly knows you.*

*Don't waste time.*

*Michael*

Nathan stared at the letter until the words blurred in front of his eyes. He crumpled the paper in his hand until it was a scrunched-up ball in his fist. He wanted to stride over to the stove and toss the letter inside, but his feet seemed stuck to the ground.

It wasn't over. Of course, it wasn't over.

How long had the letter been sitting on the mat? Would Michael still be waiting for him? What if he got angry and left?

Nathan knew that the memory of his mother was fading from collective memory. There'd been so many other tragedies since then, especially with the war. More graves. More grieving. When Michael told the story, all anyone would hear was that a false friend had ruined an innocent family, and now Michael Jasper was home to seek justice, only to be rudely refused.

If Michael had letters between their fathers, it could be possible that a good lawyer might force Nathan to pay. That would ruin him, of course. The ranch and everything on it

would be sold, and he would be homeless and without work. Ruined, like Michael had been.

Nathan wasn't sure whether he wanted to feel angry at his old friend or at the injustice he'd suffered.

Because, after all, it wasn't fair.

*I have to hurry*, Nathan thought, letting the crumpled ball of paper fall carelessly onto the floor. He tugged on his boots and coat but paused with his hand on the doorknob.

Who should he bring?

Sophia was out of the question. Michael would see her as a perfect means to hurt Nathan, and besides, Nathan had promised her safety. She'd be far safer here than at a *saloon*, regardless of what time of day it was.

Pastor Sixsmith? Nathan rejected that idea. He had a habit of riling Michael up, being kind when he should be firm, and demanding when he should give way. He and Michael had never really gotten along.

James, then? No, that was a *bad* idea. James was far too hot-tempered, and he was bitter at Michael's perceived betrayal.

Who, then?

*I have to go alone*, Nathan realized, tiredness washing over him. The good mood and elation he'd felt last night and this morning was entirely gone, washed away like a flimsy layer of topsoil after the rain, revealing rocks and hard earth underneath. The safest thing for everyone involved was for Nathan to meet Michael alone. This business was between their families and their families alone – no need to drag anyone else into it.

Besides, what could Michael do, really, besides rant and rave? He could threaten to ruin the Rowe family's reputation, and blacken Nathan's father's name beyond repair. That would be unpleasant, but Nathan should be able to live it down.

Hopefully, Michael would see reason. They could come to some sort of agreement, where Nathan would pay back his debt slowly. It wasn't ideal, but it seemed like the fairest way of doing things.

Decided, Nathan whisked open the door.

Sophia stood there, eyes wide, hand reaching for the doorknob. She laughed at Nathan's face.

“Goodness, you scared me!” she said, smiling. “Wait, do I smell burning? Nathan, did you forget about the bacon?”

“I have to go,” Nathan said hurriedly.

Sophia's smile faded. “Oh, is it that late already?”



“No, I just...” he cleared his throat. “Something’s come up.”

She bit her lip, tilting her head. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

Nathan forced a smile. “Oh, nothing to worry about.”

It was a deliberately evasive answer, and Sophia’s eyes narrowed.

*Don’t keep asking questions, Nathan thought desperately. You don’t want to hear the answer, I can promise you that.*

He avoided Sophia’s eyes, sidling around her and down from the porch. He began to stride across the courtyard, heading towards the stables. He’d take Radish – she was surprisingly fast, and there was somewhere to leave her comfortably tethered outside of the saloon. As Michael had pointed out, it would be quiet at this time of day.

“Nathan?” Sophia called after him, and Nathan froze. He turned slowly, almost guiltily, and looked back at her.

Sophia stood on the porch; her basket of eggs clutched to her chest. She looked uncertain and a little anxious.

“Is something the matter?” Sophia asked. “You seem... well, you seem different than last night. Did I say something wrong?”

Nathan swallowed hard. He knew exactly what Sophia was thinking. She thought that he was uncomfortable about their intimacy last night, about how they'd grown closer together and almost kissed, in plain view of the entire circus. She thought that he regretted it and was working to put distance between them again. It was only a marriage of convenience, after all.

His heart ached, but Nathan was absolutely sure that he was doing the right thing. If he told Sophia the truth, she'd probably insist on coming to meet Michael with him, and something visceral inside Nathan did not want that to happen.

"Nothing to worry about," Nathan said, feeling as if he were a parrot, repeating the same phrases over and over again. "I shan't be long. I'll be back for lunch, I bet."

"You haven't even had any breakfast. Surely whatever needs your attention can't be so important that you need to skip a meal."

She looked almost plaintive, hopeful, silently asking him to come back inside and talk to her, eat with her, like they did before. Nathan made himself look away, pretending to fiddle with the cuffs of his sleeves.

"Maybe another time," he said, still not meeting her gaze. "I'm not really hungry, actually. Could you tell James that I'll be late? He'll know what work needs doing. You go and have breakfast, though. Don't bother waiting for me."

Nathan turned on his heel, striding away towards the stables. Had he been too blunt? Probably. He knew, without

turning to look, that Sophia was still standing there, watching him. He couldn't bear to look back at her.

*I'm not betraying her, Nathan reminded himself fiercely. This is best for her and for me. I'll be back soon, and everything will be all right. We'll pick up where we left off. Everything will be fine.*

He saddled Radish up quickly, who stared at him with doleful eyes as if she knew exactly what he'd done.

"Don't you look at me like that," Nathan muttered. "You don't know all the facts."

When he and Radish trotted out of the stables, there was no sign of Sophia on the porch. Nathan found himself scanning the house for her, but he couldn't spot her at any of the windows.

*See?* He told himself, trying not to feel as though he'd made the wrong choice. *She doesn't even mind. Now, better go and see what Michael wants.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Sophia stood and watched Nathan ride away. He'd taken Radish, and for some reason, that made her feel a little better. Radish would take care of him. She was a steady, dependable horse, and Sophia had certainly warmed up to her.

She stood carefully back from the kitchen window, and when Nathan had raked his gaze over the house, she was sure that he didn't see her. She felt silly and stupid but didn't want him to catch her watching him. The blackened remains of the bacon smouldered gently in the pan, and Sophia couldn't quite summon up the energy to work on scraping it all out.

She'd lost her appetite, too. The comfortable hunger that Sophia had woken up with had dissolved altogether, and she had a feeling that if she tried to eat now, she'd end up with the food sticking in her throat and sitting in her stomach like a rock.

It was clear what had happened. The urge to blurt it all out was welling up inside Sophia, but of course there was no one to talk to. Leaving the smoking remains of breakfast beside the forgotten eggs, Sophia rushed upstairs, going straight to her writing desk. She started to scribble.

*Dear Jazzy,*

*I don't know why I'm writing to you again. Your letters are all buried in the back garden, where I hope that somewhere, somehow, you know what they say. I meant to only tell you good things – things that would make you happy, and*

*proud of me. I've told you about the garden, about the plants and the animals, and about Nathan. I know that you'd want to know about Nathan.*

*Everything's gone horribly wrong, Sophia. Last night we went to the circus, and I was going to write you such a long letter about it. Oh, it was wonderful. There was a moment when I thought... well, I thought that there was something between us. When I touched him, I stopped seeing Aunt Laura behind my eyelids. It didn't hurt, not even in my imagination.*

*I thought something had changed between us, but I was wrong. Nothing has changed.*

*This morning, I woke up full of hope. I felt like a proper part of this house – a real Mrs. Rowe. I got up early to make a special breakfast, and it never occurred to me that anything might be wrong.*

*Stupid, isn't it? Whenever you think that nothing can go wrong, that's when everything goes wrong. Nathan came to breakfast, and he acted so strangely. He barely looked at me or spoke to me. He didn't even eat anything.*

*He left and wouldn't tell me why. I don't think he had a reason – or else he made one up. He tried to sneak away while I was out feeding the chickens. He obviously thinks that we got too close at the circus last night, and he wants to remind me of my place. We're not in love, we're not even really friends. This is a marriage of convenience, nothing more, nothing less.*

*We are nothing.*

*How could I have been so foolish? This is all my fault. He told me... he said that he was glad that I came, and that he could make me happy. That I deserved it.*

*I don't know why he said that, and I don't know why I believed it. I wish you were here, Jazzy. If you were here, everything would be different. You'd understand, and you'd know exactly what to say and what to do.*

*I miss you, Jazzy. I miss you so much.*

A fat tear rolled down Sophia's cheek, plopping onto the paper and smudging the ink. She bit her lip, squeezing her eyes closed. What had she been thinking, imagining that she belonged here, in Jazzy's place? Hadn't Aunt Laura always said that she was a useless burden that nobody wanted? Her marriage to Nathan had been no different. He hadn't chosen her. He didn't want her, not really. He tolerated her, and he was a good man, but there was no real affection. Not truly.

There came a heavy banging at the door, and Sophia jumped, her pen skittering across the page and horribly blotting the letters. She sighed, shoving the paper and pen to the back of the desk, and got up, wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"I'm coming!" Sophia called hoarsely. "Just... just a moment."

She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and gave a whispered curse. Her eyes were red and watery, and her face was blotchy. It was apparent that she'd been crying and rubbing harder at her eyes only made it worse. There was a

second impatient knock, and Sophia gave up with a sigh, hurrying downstairs.

She yanked open the door to reveal James standing there, lunch pail dangling from his hand.

“Morning, Sophia!” He said cheerfully. “Where’s Nathan? He’s late again.”

Sophia swallowed hard, fighting down a second wave of tears. She wanted nothing more than to curl up on the floor and sob like a child.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I was supposed to tell you,” Sophia managed, conscious that her voice wobbled traitorously. “Nathan had to go out this morning. It was very sudden. He didn’t even have time to eat breakfast. He took Radish,” she added, as if that were an important detail. “He said that you’d know what chores need doing.”

“I do, but... are you all right, Sophia?” James asked, frowning.

Sophia forced a watery smile. “Of course,” she said, but it sounded flat and unbelievable even to her own ears. “I’m just... I’m just tired after last night. The circus, you know. It was exciting, but a little tiring. I slept badly, and I got up early to make breakfast, and the chickens...” Sophia trailed off, aware that she was firing excuse after excuse at James. Judging by his expression, he didn’t believe any of them.

“Something’s wrong,” he said firmly. “Are you going to tell me what it is, or shall I guess? Where’s Nathan gone?”

That did it. Sophia burst into noisy tears. She tried to dab them away with her apron, but the rough material scratched her cheeks. She turned away from the door and heard it close softly behind her. Perhaps James had decided to sneak away and leave her in peace.

No such luck.

Sophia heard the lunch pail clank on the floor, and there was a shuffling noise which sounded remarkably like somebody toeing off their boots. Then a hand with a clean, folded handkerchief appeared in her line of vision.

“Go on, take it,” James said gently. “I’m going to clean up these pans while you compose yourself. Then we’ll talk about what’s going on.”

Sophia bit her lip but accepted the handkerchief. She was well aware that the kitchen was a mess, with the congealed remains of porridge in the pot, the blackened bacon in the frying pan, and the eggs neglected on the counter, bits of straw everywhere. She’d made up some bread dough to go in the oven later while the porridge cooked, and there was flour everywhere. Sophia sank down onto a kitchen chair, cheeks hot with humiliation.

James didn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest. He hummed to himself, cleaning out the dirty pans, scraping away the burned-on bacon that Sophia had been dreading to clean. Then he dried the pans and put them away. When he was done,



he wiped down the kitchen counters and table with a wet rag, and carefully set down the proving dough on the counter, a cloth over it to keep out the flies.

“All done,” he said cheerfully, setting down a hot cup of coffee in front of Sophia, and a second one for himself.

“Thank you,” Sophia murmured. “I... I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. I’m sorry that it was such a mess. You didn’t have to do that.”

“What are friends for?” James said, dropping a wink. “I’ve done all this for Nathan more times than I can remember, and one day I’ll tell you about what he did for me when my parents were sick, and a year later when I broke my leg. Washing a few pans isn’t very much in the grand scheme of things, is it?”

Sophia smiled gratefully. “Thank you, James.”

“So, what’s wrong? This isn’t like you, Sophia. You’re normally so calm and composed. Did something happen?” he hesitated. “Did something happen between you and Nathan? Last night, at the circus, I thought... well, it doesn’t matter what I thought, but you both looked happy.”

Sophia sniffled miserably. “We were. Or so I thought.”

“Oh, dear. What’s Nathan done now?”

She twisted the already damp handkerchief between her fingers. “Why do you assume that Nathan did anything?” she

mumbled. “Don’t you think it’s more likely that I did something to offend him?”

“Can I assume that he’s acting oddly, then?”

Sophia sighed. “He left before breakfast, saying that he had something to sort out. And no, he didn’t tell me what. I can’t imagine what it might have been, can you? Is there some errand he had to do that I wouldn’t have known about?”

James shook his head sorrowfully. “I’m sorry, Sophia. I can’t think of where he’s gone. Go on, though.”

“He didn’t even talk to me properly. He wouldn’t tell me where he was going, and the next thing I knew, he was gone. I thought that after the circus last night – well, I felt closer to Nathan than I ever had before, and I thought he felt the same, I really did. I can’t believe that I was so stupid. What did I think was going to happen?” Sophia vigorously blew her nose on the handkerchief. “I feel so silly. I think he was trying to be kind, to remind me that this is all about convenience, nothing else.”

James was quiet for a few minutes. Sophia kept her eyes down in her lap, afraid that if she looked up and met his kind, pitying gaze, she’d burst into noisy tears again. She’d already shamed herself enough for one day. Aunt Laura always got so angry if Sophia cried in front of her.

“I’ve known Nathan for a long time,” James said slowly. “You asked why I assumed straightaway that Nathan had done something wrong? Well, it’s because I know him. Nathan is a dear friend to me, and he’s done more for me than most people will ever know. We fight sometimes – you’ve seen that – but

we're friends. Good friends. That'll never change. I know him better than most people. He's always been serious, and a little too blunt, but it got so much worse when he lost his family. I can't blame him, of course. But the truth is that Nathan doesn't know how to feel."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, right now, you're sad. Why are you sad?"

Sophia bit her lip, finally risking a glance upwards. She was relieved not to see pity in James's eyes. She couldn't stand being pitied.

"I thought that... well, I thought that Nathan was falling in love with me," she admitted, and it felt good to say it out loud. "Because I think I'm falling in love with him. And when he was so blunt and distant with me this morning, I realized that it wasn't going to happen, and that made me sad. I keep thinking that perhaps I should just leave, that it would be better for everyone if I was gone. After all, it wasn't as if it was me that Nathan wanted to marry. Why do you ask?"

"Because Nathan doesn't always understand why he feels the way he does. He relied on his brother and his parents a lot, to help him understand his own feelings. I can't help him like they did. Nathan wants to make everything right and smooth out all of the injustices, and of course he can't. He's been distant with me lately, for what it's worth."

Sophia's tears were starting to dry up, much to her relief. There was nothing to be gained by sobbing until her voice was hoarse and she'd rinsed the kitchen floor with buckets of tears.

She'd gotten used to keeping her tears inside at Aunt Laura's house, and now Sophia was afraid that if she didn't keep her composure, she'd start crying and just never stop. She'd cry and cry until she was all wrung out and there was nothing left.

"Are you sure it isn't just me?" Sophia managed. "I worry that he's not happy with me here."

James gave a wry smile. "Sophia, I can honestly tell you that your being here is wonderful for Nathan. He's so much happier now. I know that sometimes he behaves a little oddly around you, but he's fond of you, I can see that. Perhaps you feel that you shouldn't be here, that this should be your sister's home, but I guarantee that Nathan doesn't feel the same. The truth is, Sophia, I think he's falling in love with you."

Sophia's heart skipped a beat inside her. She wanted to grin like a lunatic but forced herself to stay calm. She didn't want her hopes raised again, only to be cruelly dashed. It was getting too much to bear.

"I hope that's true," she murmured. "I... I care about him. I really do. I could never have dreamed of living here, with a man like Nathan."

Sniffing, Sophia smoothed out the handkerchief and held it out to James. For a split second, they both looked at the wet, limp handkerchief hanging from her fingers.

"I'll wash it first," Sophia said, at the same moment that James said,

“You can keep the handkerchief.”

They smiled at each other, and Sophia tucked it away.

“Thank you, James. You’ve been a good friend to me today.”

He grinned, getting to his feet. “Not at all. I wonder if you’d repay my outstanding kindness by giving me lunch?”

Sophia rolled her eyes, smiling. “Of course. But didn’t you already prepare a lunch pail?”

“That is no longer my lunch pail. It is my mid-morning snack.”

Sophia chuckled, wiping away the last of her tears from her cheeks. James pulled on his boots, but hesitated at the door, hand on the doorknob. Sophia frowned. Hadn’t Nathan hesitated behind the door like that, hand on the doorknob, when she was coming back in from the chickens? He’d seemed almost as if he were waiting for something. She remembered how the frown line between his brows had deepened, and how his shoulders had hunched, as if he were carrying a heavy weight.

James seemed to be thinking something along the same lines, and he turned slowly back from the door.

“If Nathan is distant and seems to be acting oddly, there’s a good chance that he’s worrying over something,” James murmured.

“You mean like a debt, or work?”

James shook his head. “No, I think he would tell me that sort of thing. Why wouldn’t he tell you or me what was bothering him?”

Sophia thought hard but had no answer.

“Maybe we’re reading too much into it,” she suggested.

James shook his head. “No, I’ve known him too long. It’s strange that he would be distant with you and me at the same time. I hope he’s all right.”

A cold tendril of fear started to curl in Sophia’s belly. She sucked in a breath, trying not to panic.

“He set off on a horse,” she said, “So he’s going somewhere that he needs to ride to.”

“There’s no reason for him to leave the farm today,” James said bluntly. “We’d arranged to work on some chores together. We arranged it last night, on the way home from the circus. I was going to join you for breakfast – Nathan invited me. So, whatever happened to make him leave, it happened between last night this morning, and it was sudden.”

Sophia swallowed hard. “James, be honest with me. I want you to say exactly what you’re thinking. I’m tired of Nathan trying to sugar-coat things for me and protect me. It’s

kind, but I can take care of myself. Do you think that Nathan is in danger?"

James mulled over her words, and somehow that was so much worse than a quick, vague answer. He looked worried now, and Sophia saw him glancing around the kitchen, trying to look for clues as to why Nathan had suddenly disappeared.

"I don't know," he said finally. "Did he seem out of sorts, worried, or frightened?"

"He looked pale, and grim," Sophia said firmly. "Not afraid, though. Preoccupied. I could tell that he didn't want me to ask where he was going," she suddenly sat up straight, sucking in a breath. "The letter!"

"What letter?"

"I found a letter at the door early this morning. It had his name on it but no address or return address. It was already there by the time I came down, and I remember thinking that it was very early for the postman to come along."

"That wouldn't have been from the postman. It would have been hand delivered. What did the letter say?"

"I don't know," Sophia murmured. "I gave it to him and left him to read it while I went out to sort out the hens."

James bit his lip, and Sophia realized what had happened. She didn't have to say it. Whatever Nathan had read in the

letter had sent him hurrying out of the door. She felt foolish for not having put two and two together before.

“Right, well, for his own good, I’d say we have to find that letter,” James said decisively. “I wouldn’t usually try and read a man’s private mail, but I’m concerned about Nathan. What did he do with it?”

“I don’t know. It’s not on the dresser where I left it, and it’s not on the table here. He didn’t have it in his hand when he left. With letters he doesn’t need to keep, he usually just throws them on the...” Sophia broke off, staring at the stove. It wasn’t roaringly hot, but the embers still smoldered.

“Oh,” James said softly. “That’s not ideal.”

Sophia scratched her head, suddenly feeling very tired. She longed to creep back upstairs and go back to bed, but of course that wasn’t an option at all. If there was even the slightest chance that Nathan was in danger, Sophia needed to do *something*.

“Well, now what?” she asked wearily.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

“I’ll check the fields and paddocks,” James said shakily. “He might still be around.”

It was a slim hope, but Sophia thought she might have more chance poking through the coals for any scraps of the letter without James hanging over her shoulder. He was obviously worried about Nathan, and his panic was quickly infecting Sophia.

*One of us has to stay calm, she thought. James comforted me before, now it’s my turn to be strong.*

If the letter had been burned in the stove, there was no trace of it now. James let the front door slam and raced across the courtyard. Sophia sat back on her heels, trying to take deep breaths and stay focused.

There were all sorts of awful things that could have happened to Nathan, but there were far more safe, plausible explanations for the letter. Perhaps it was from someone in the general store, who’d ordered something for Nathan and wanted to let him know that it had arrived.

*But then why was he so secretive about where he was going?*

Perhaps it was a last-minute appointment at the bank, or something similar. That might account for his air of nervousness.

*Hand-delivered, for an appointment at an hour's notice?  
Hardly.*

Every hopeful explanation that Sophia thought up was immediately rejected. There was no getting around it – Nathan was acting strange and had gone rushing off after getting a mysterious letter.

Hadn't there been another letter earlier, which made him act strange? The memory came flooding back, and Sophia frowned. Had the handwriting been the same on the envelope? She couldn't have sworn to it, but it did seem that perhaps the two letters were connected, written by the same person.

She glanced around the kitchen, trying to think of what to do next. She couldn't even remember what direction Nathan and Radish had headed off in. They could be going anywhere, and Sophia didn't know the land well enough to work out where to go.

Crouched in front of the stove, Sophia was in the perfect position to see underneath the kitchen table. At first, she thought she was looking at a ball of dust and was just about to chastise herself for letting the floor get so dirty, when something made her lean a little closer.

It wasn't a ball of dust at all, but a crumpled-up piece of paper, dropped on the floor. It had rolled up against a table leg, mostly hidden. She crawled underneath the table to retrieve it, and shuffled back out again, suddenly breathless. She smoothed out the piece of paper, and scanned the page of spiky, angry writing.

Allowing herself a second or two to feel guilty over violating Nathan's privacy, Sophia began to read.

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James took a moment to catch his breath. He bent over, resting his hands on his knees. It was at times like this that he most clearly remembered the doctor's contemptuous words about James and his lungs.

*"Absolutely useless. The boy is good for nothing, certainly not war. Such frail, weak men really are a waste of space."*

When James had told Nathan and Jack, they'd intended to head back down to the office and give the doctor a piece of their mind, but Nathan had talked them out of it. He wasn't sure whether he regretted not going to war or not. On the one hand, staying at home had been shameful, but on the other – well. He'd seen what it did to Nathan, let alone Jack and Mr. Rowe.

His knees were shaking, and his lungs burned, and James knew that he couldn't run anymore. There was no sign of Nathan anywhere, and James was beginning to panic. Something was clearly wrong, and he felt like a fool for not seeing it before. Sophia had noticed, and while she was actually Nathan's wife, she'd only known him for a few weeks, whereas James had known him for years.

There had to be a rational explanation for all this. He'd go back to the house any minute now and find Nathan safe and sound, laughing at James for being so silly. Sophia would be smiling sheepishly, and they'd chalk it down to an amusing mistake.

That would be nice, actually. James straightened up, scanning the landscape around him one last time. If Nathan had taken one of the horses, he wouldn't have stayed on their land. He was going somewhere, and he'd chosen not to explain it to James and Sophia.

*Curse you for a secretive old hermit, James thought, with a mixture of affection and annoyance. Sophia hasn't arrived a moment too soon. She'll knock your grumpiness out of you.*

A faint voice reached him on the wind, and James frowned, turning in a circle to see where it was coming from. The ridge behind the house was the best vantage spot. You could see almost the whole ranch from here, if you could survive the steep climb and the relentless wind that buffeted the summit, taking away James's breath.

He glanced down at the house and spotted a tiny figure in the courtyard. Sophia, of course. James's gaze sharpened. She was facing his way, and was waving, jumping up and down. She was trying to shout something, but of course James couldn't make it out. He waved in a way that he hoped conveyed his intent to come down, and began his slow, slippery decline.

In theory, going down the hill should have been so much easier than going back up. But now James's legs were weak as jelly, and he couldn't catch his breath. He was now in the perfect position to see just how far he'd fall if he lost his footing.

He didn't lose his footing, however, and James was thoroughly relieved to stand on level ground again. Sophia

raced across the courtyard to meet him, and James saw that she had a crumpled piece of paper in her hand. She was white and grim-faced, and James's heart sank. Whatever she had to tell him, it wasn't good news.

“Read this,” Sophia said, shoving the letter at him. “This is the letter that Nathan got this morning. He crumpled it up and dropped it on the floor – he didn't throw it in the stove at all.”

“That's a little messy for Nathan,” James commented. “He doesn't drop things on the floor like that.”

“Just read it,” Sophia said.

James did, and his throat got tighter with every sentence. He had to read the letter twice to fully understand it.

“Michael,” he murmured.

“Michael Jasper,” Sophia said.

James glanced sharply up at her. “You know him?”

“Yes and no. I talked to him on the train platform when I first came to town. He told me his name and said that he knew Nathan. I forgot all about it, but there's a sentence in this letter that reminded me,” she tapped the bottom of the letter. “*Don't forget, Nathan, I'm the only one who truly knows you,*” she read aloud. “That's what he said to me on the train platform. That he was the only one who knew Nathan. I thought it was strange, of course, but I had no idea what sort of man Nathan

was, and it was all new to me, and I'd just lost Jazzy... anyway, the point is, I didn't really understand what he meant. But that sentence reminded me. He says that Nathan owes him a debt."

"That can't be right," James said, frowning. "Nathan doesn't owe any money. I know that he doesn't because I've helped him with his accounts in the past. He's worked hard to keep the ranch debt-free, and he didn't inherit any debts from his parents. Pastor Sixsmith wouldn't have suggested Nathan get married if he knew he had debts, and I don't think Nathan would have agreed to it. Nathan doesn't owe anyone money."

"What about this part here?" Sophia asked, tapping the letter. "Where it says that Nathan's father borrowed money for his sick wife, and never paid it back?"

She kept her eyes fixed on James's face, gauging his reaction. He swallowed hard, fighting down the impulse to lie. Sophia deserved the truth, even though James only knew the half of the story he was reading here.

"Michael Jasper was our friend," he said, after a long moment. "We were all friends. He lived with his father, Mr. Jasper, who was well-off at the time. I remember that Nathan and his family were going through a hard time, and then Mrs. Rowe fell ill. They were a close-knit family, and her illness hit the family hard. She wasn't going to recover, we all knew that, but there was always some snake-oil salesman offering miracle cures, along with the medicine prescribed by the doctor to help her pain."

Sophia bit her lip. "So, Mr. Rowe could have borrowed the money from Michael's father?"

“I never heard anything about that, but... well, I think perhaps he must have done. A few years later, the Jasper family fell on hard times, and I remember people wondering where their money had all gone.”

Sophia slipped the letter out of James’s hand, reading through it again.

“So, Mr. Jasper wanted his money back, and he didn’t get it,” she said softly. “No wonder Michael is so bitter and angry. He wants justice.”

“You and Nathan don’t have money to spare,” James insisted. “What are you supposed to do about it? It isn’t your debt.”

“It wasn’t Michael’s either, but he’s suffering for it,” Sophia countered.

James sighed, raking a hand through his hair. It was past lunch now. The day was slipping away, and there was still no sign of Nathan. The bad feeling in the pit of James’s stomach was growing stronger, and he could see from Sophia’s pale, strained face that she was worried, too.

“This must have been what was worrying Nathan,” Sophia said, folding up the letter tightly and stuffing it into her apron pocket. “If I know him at all, he’ll want to set things straight with his friend.”

“You don’t know what Michael is like. He’s not the same boy we knew. The war’s changed him,” James said.

“Perhaps, but now we know where Michael and Nathan will be. They’re meeting at the saloon.” Sophia flashed a brief smile. “We can meet them there.”

She turned on her heel and strode back across the courtyard. It took a moment for her words to sink in, and then James scuttled after her, his sore lungs wheezing at the sudden sprint.

“Wait, wait, what do you mean, *we*?” James asked. “You can’t possibly mean that you’re coming to the saloon.”

“Of course, I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Why *wouldn’t* you?” James let out a nervous, slightly hysterical laugh. “Well, it’s... it’s a *saloon*. Ladies don’t go to saloons. Well, not respectable ladies, at least. You can’t possibly go.”

Sophia sighed. “I’m not going to drink and gamble. I’m going to support my husband, about a matter that involves me now, too.”

James imagined explaining to a stone-faced Nathan why he’d allowed Sophia to go strolling right into a saloon.

“I’ll go, Sophia. You can’t possibly go. Please, reconsider. How will you get there?”



“I’ll ride, of course,” Sophia said, shooting him an annoyed glance. “I’ll ride Byron.”

James frowned. “Bryon?”

“The new horse. Byron and Radish.”

James paled. “You don’t mean the stallion.”

“Of course, I do. Byron and I like each other.”

James’s visions of Sophia marching confidently into the saloon were replaced with visions of Byron, the unhinged stallion, racing wildly down the main street, with a screaming Sophia clinging onto his mane. James and a stolid mare that would *not* be hurried plodded behind them in this vision, coming to a halt in front of Nathan, who looked exceptionally grim.

James swallowed hard. “That’s a bad idea, Sophia. Please, just stay at home. Or at least wait outside the saloon.”

“He’s my husband,” Sophia said, turning and smiling up at James. She looked more serene than before, as if she finally understood what was going on. “I’ve worried all this time that I had no place here, but I do, of course, I do. I have my place in all this, and it’s right beside Nathan.”

She turned and continued towards the stables.

“Well, at least let me come with you!” James said, a last-ditch attempt to help.

“Of course, you can come with me. Who else is going to stop me from doing something *really* stupid? Not Nathan, that’s for sure. Let’s finish our chores, first. Nathan won’t be happy to know that we left the ranch all abandoned while he was gone.”

It wasn’t a suggestion, more of a statement of fact. Sophia disappeared into the house, and James darted off towards the paddocks. The quicker he got his chores done, the quicker they could get this tomfoolery over and done with.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Nathan pushed open the door to the saloon and was immediately hit by the pungent smell of unwashed bodies, spilled alcohol, and stale air.

He didn't often visit the saloon. Otherwise, perhaps he'd be used to it.

At this time of day, the saloon was almost deserted. A gaunt, gray-haired man lounged behind the bar, wiping ineffectually at a grimy counter. A handful of solitary drinkers, all sitting at different tables, slouched over greasy glasses, never even glancing up as Nathan passed by.

The man sitting at a table in the corner stood out a mile.

Michael had his back to Nathan and sat quite straight and still. He didn't turn around as Nathan approached. He had an empty glass and a half bottle of whiskey set in the middle of the table. Only one glass, and Michael hadn't so much as touched it.

"Hello, Michael," Nathan murmured.

His friend – were they friends anymore, though? – looked terrible. Michael was pale, the unhealthy, waxy color of someone who'd spent too much time hunched over a desk inside. His eyes were red-rimmed and puffy underneath, like he hadn't slept well. His clothes and hair were neat, but the neatness couldn't do much about the look in his eyes.

Desperation. Anger. Bitterness.

“Nathan, glad you could join me,” Michael said crisply. “Sit down. We’ve got lots to talk about.”

Nathan glanced around the saloon. Nobody was looking their way, not even the gray man behind the bar. He’d given up on wiping the grimy counter with a grimier cloth and was now picking at his dirty nails. He clearly didn’t care whether Nathan ordered a drink or not.

Nathan slid into the seat opposite Michael. The table with gritty with stale crumbs, and there were large patches of stickiness. It might have been spilled alcohol or something else – there was really no way of telling.

“You don’t look well,” Nathan said quietly.

That was the wrong thing to say. Michael stiffened and scowled at Nathan.

“Save your false sympathy. You don’t give a damn whether I live or die.”

Nathan flinched. “Of course, I do, Michael. We were close friends once.”

“Once,” Michael echoed. “I think it’s fair to say that ship has sailed. Do you have my money?”

The silence spread out between them, thick and heavy. Nathan wasn't sure whether it was the look in his friend's eye – accusing, angry, contemptuous – or the smell in the saloon that made his eyes water and a lump rise to his throat.

“I told you, I don't have the money,” Nathan said quietly.

Michael drew in a deep breath. For a moment, there was silence between them. Nathan stayed quiet, waiting for the other man to react.

Michael knew that he didn't have the money. He had to know. Nathan had told him, over and over again.

To Nathan's surprise, Michael's thin mouth curled into a smile. A hysterical giggle escaped from between his lips.

“This... this was your last chance,” he said, chuckling disconcertingly. “You don't know what you've done, Nathan.”

“I can't pay the money off all at once, but I'm sure we can come to an arrangement,” Nathan tried, ignoring the eerie feeling that Michael's smile and giggle sent prickling over his skin. “If you'd be willing to accept a small monthly payment...”

“I need it all at once,” Michael interrupted. “All of it. Now. Or at least half of it.”

Nathan spread his hands wide, trying to look Michael in the eye. It wasn't working – Michael's gaze slid around the room, darting restlessly around.

“I don’t have it,” Nathan repeated. “I’m sorry, Michael. I don’t know what you want me to do.”

Another silence. Michael had started drumming his fingers on the sticky tabletop, beating out a frantic rhythm. It got louder and louder until even a few of the solitary drinkers glanced their way. Then, without warning, the rhythm stopped abruptly.

“You haven’t told anyone about this, have you?” Michael said, his voice dropping to a low rasp of a whisper.

Nathan swallowed. “No, of course I haven’t. I’m keeping this between us.”

“That’s how I know you never intend to pay back the money.”

Nathan flinched. “Michael, I...”

“Shut up, I’m tired of hearing your excuses,” Michael hissed, leaning forward over the table. “You’re just like your father. He put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes, didn’t he? Like a child. He didn’t want to know; didn’t want to see how my father and I were struggling. He didn’t care.”

“That’s not it at all. We didn’t have...”

“Didn’t have the money, yes, I know. You know, Nathan, your family has always been so very proud of not going into

debt. When times were hard and other ranch owners went scuttling to the bank, your pa doubled down and clung on grimly. So, when we were all drowning in debt and interest, your family were free to start making a real profit. My father had to use everything he had as collateral for his loan, and before he died, the bank came calling. There was nothing left. And you and your family were getting along quite well, weren't you? No loans to worry about. No debt, no interest, no blank-faced bank men in suits and briefcases knocking on the door. You can't possibly know how it feels, hunkering in a shack of a house while the bank men knock on the door, knowing that you have no money to give them, but they'll be back. Sooner or later, they'll get through the door, and then it'll all be over."

Michael drew in a deep, ragged breath after his speech, leaning back in his seat. He'd gone pale, and his hands were shaking. Nathan found himself wanting more than anything to sit beside his friend, to wrap his arms around his shoulders. They could sit in silence, just like they had when they were children, and one of them was upset over some tiny thing. Something small and silly, that seemed too big and frightening at the time.

"Oh, Michael." Nathan whispered, reaching across the table. Michael snatched his hand away, glaring at Nathan from red-rimmed eyes.

"Save your sympathy," he spat. "I just want my money."

"I know that you need it quickly..." Nathan began nervously, but he was quickly interrupted.

“Oh, you know that, do you? How nice for you,” Michael sneered. “You’re hoping that this all just goes away, don’t you? You’ve buried your head in the sand and that’s it. See, I’ve learned to take my responsibilities head on. I know how to deal with my enemies now, Nathan. I’m not skinny, earnest little Michael anymore.”

“You’re still my friend.”

“Like hell I am.”

Nathan pressed his lips together. Michael had never cursed, not even when they were rebellious teenage boys, thrilled by the idea of using inappropriate language. They’d find a quiet spot in the forest and dare each other to say the worst curse they could think of, aloud of course. The thrill of doing something forbidden mixed with the nervous knowledge that if they were caught, they’d be spanked so hard they couldn’t sit down.

Michael had refused to participate. He was so prim and proper back then.

Not now, though. Now, Michael was pale and drawn, glaring at Nathan as if they were mortal enemies.

*Well, we probably are,* Nathan thought miserably.

“I owe money to bad people, Nathan,” Michael said, his voice so low that Nathan had to lean forward to hear. “There’s a gang... oh, I shouldn’t tell you this. It’s dangerous.”



“I want to help you, Michael,” Nathan whispered back. “Please let me help you, just like we used to help each other.”

Michael wasn't listening. He had a strained, glassy look in his eyes, his gaze fixed on the table. There was a piece of wood gouged out, probably by the tip of someone's knife. Michael was tracing the damaged section with a fingernail. His hands were still shaking.

Whatever he was afraid of, it was something tangible. Something that haunted his every step. A prickle of unease ran down Nathan's spine. He knew something was up – Michael wouldn't be afraid for no good reason – and now it seemed more real than ever.

“Michael?” he prompted.

Michael flinched, as if he'd been lost in his own thoughts, and glanced up sharply at Nathan. Their eyes met for the first time since they'd entered the saloon, and Nathan read fear there, plain and clear.

“It was after father died,” Michael whispered. “To clear his debts, I... I borrowed money. It was all I could think of. I paid the debt, and thought I'd have a better chance of just dealing with one big debt, rather than half a dozen slightly smaller ones. I was a fool to think that.”

He drew in a ragged breath, pulling back his hands and dropping them into his lap beneath the table. His shoulders hunched over protectively, and his dropped his gaze again.

“They want their money, don’t they?” Nathan murmured.

Michael nodded mutely. “I don’t know much about them, but I know that they’re close. They’re coming for me, unless I can pay, and quickly.”

Nathan rested his elbows on the sticky tabletop, pushing his hands through his hair.

“What are we going to do, Michael? Maybe if we talk to the sheriff...”

“We?” Michael straightened up sharply, eyes glittering. His face was hard and grim again, no trace of weakness left. He was scowling again, too. “There’s no *we* here, Nathan. There’s just me, and you. You need to pay the money you owe me, and quickly. I’m going to tell the gang that you have the money, so it’s in your best interests to get it quickly. Give it me, and this can all be over. We can go our separate ways, and you can settle down with your nice mail-order bride.”

A spike of frustration ran through Nathan.

“You’re not listening. I don’t *have* the money.”

“Get it from somewhere,” Michael spat. “Go crawling to the bank, like my father had to do. Borrow it from someone in town or sell off your new wife to someone else.”

“Michael! Don’t you dare speak about Sophia like that!”

“I don’t care what you have to do,” Michael ploughed on relentlessly. “Just see that you get it done. Quickly. Because time is running out for us both, and I’ll be sure to take you down with me.”

He eyed the untouched whiskey on the table for a long moment, then dived forward for it. He poured out a generous measure into the clean (well, cleanish) glass, and drank the whole thing in one mouthful. His eyes screwed up, and his mouth puckered, like he was sucking on something sour.

Despite everything, Nathan had to smile.

“You were never much of a drinker,” he commented quietly.

Michael scowled at him, setting down the glass with a *clack*.

“You don’t know me,” he snapped. “Don’t pretend that you do. Just get my money as quickly as you can, or you’ll be sorry. I don’t want your help or your pity, just your money. This was your last warning, Nathan, do you hear? I don’t know how long I’ve got left. Like I said, I’ll be sure to take you down with me. Got it? Now get out.”

Nathan flinched, not quite able to believe that he was being dismissed so abruptly.

“Michael, can’t we talk about this?”

“Nothing more to say,” Michael said brusquely, pouring himself a second glass of whiskey. He drank this one down in one gulp too, although his face didn’t twist as much as the first time.

He was getting used to it, and Nathan thought that was probably a very bad thing.

Nathan hesitated for a moment or two, hoping that Michael would change his mind, or show some signs of softening. Perhaps he’d accept Nathan’s help after all.

He needn’t have bothered. After the second glass, Michael leaned forward, his breath sour with alcohol.

“Get out, or I’ll drag you out,” he snapped.

It was doubtful that he could manage that. Michael had always been slimmer than his friends, and his face was pale and gaunt now, with bad living and anxiety.

That wasn’t the point, though.

Nathan got to his feet mechanically, glancing around the saloon. He didn’t know what he’d expected to see – a huddle of suspicious-looking men in the corner, glowering at him? Some hints of the gang Michael had mentioned, perhaps?

But there was nobody here except the lone drunkards, nursing their beer and whiskey. Nathan’s feet felt heavy as he moved towards the door. He paused, glancing back over his

shoulder at Michael. Waiting for Michael to shoot one last look at his old friend.

Michael stayed where he was, back turned, hunched over his third glass of whiskey. With a heavy heart, Nathan stepped outside, leaving Michael behind.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Sophia only got a little way away from the house before she remembered the shotgun. Surely it wouldn't hurt to bring it along with her. The back of her neck was prickling, as if there were hidden eyes on her.

Well, maybe there were.

As soon as James had darted off to get on with his chores, she hurried out of the house, taking out the shotgun that she'd practiced with earlier. It wasn't loaded, and Sophia loaded it with shaking hands, praying that she was remembering how to do it correctly. The weight of the gun felt unwieldy and unfamiliar in her hands.

There was something going on out here, and Sophia needed to know exactly what it was. James was too nervy, and he seemed to think that she should sit at home and let him do the searching. She'd get further on her own.

*What am I even expecting to happen out here?* Sophia thought, shuddering.

She didn't let herself answer. James was gone, and she felt horribly alone.

Sophia hesitated on the porch just for a moment, scanning the surrounding landscape. She still wasn't familiar with the layout of the place, and getting lost during her search for Nathan was a very real possibility.

*You can't stay here*, Sophia told herself firmly, and made herself step off the porch and onto the open.

Now for the real work. Now she needed to find Nathan.

The saloon couldn't be hard to find, surely.

The gun was heavy and clunky in her hands, but Sophia squeezed it tight, holding it to her chest. The safety was on, just as Nathan had shown her. She hurried towards a field full of some golden crop, waving in the weak sunlight, and scanned the field for Nathan.

Sophia stopped dead.

In the center of the field, the crops were swishing around, as if blown by the wind. But there was no wind today, and the rest of the crops stood still. Something was moving in the field.

Sophia squinted, not daring to take a step closer. She couldn't see anything, but *something* was crawling through the field.

“Hello?” she called, half-expecting James to pop his head above the rows of crops. What James would be doing crawling around in a field, Sophia didn't know, but it would be so much *easier* if it were James.

No James appeared. The movement of the crops went still, and a prickling feeling ran up and down Sophia's spine.

*It's a fox, she told herself firmly. We've had trouble with foxes taking chickens lately, haven't we? Nothing to worry about.*

She ought to scare away the fox. It would only come for the chickens again. Somehow, though, Sophia did not want to go ploughing through the chest-high crops to find the culprit. What if it was something bigger than a fox, like a wild dog, or a wolf?

*What on earth would a wolf be doing out here? Sophia asked herself, almost amused. Do you really think that you're going to come face to face with a wolf right here, in the middle of the day?*

Still, the best course of action was to scare the thing off from a distance, and fortunately, Sophia was in the best position to do that.

She lifted the heavy shotgun to her shoulder, aiming it well above the field. She had no intention of shooting anything, not even a murderous fox after her beloved chickens. A gunshot would scare it away.

Drawing in a deep breath, Sophia fixed her gaze on a low cloud at the horizon and pulled the trigger.

The kickback made her stagger, and the sound of the shot was ear-splitting. Blinking hard and shaking her head to drown



out the ringing in her ears, Sophia stared into the field. She expected to see a panicked rustle of crops, followed by a reddish streak of fur heading out of the field and towards the woods, well away from the poor chickens.

A man stood up in the middle of the cornfield.

The sun was behind him, throwing him into shadow, and he was too far away for Sophia to see much of his face in any case. He seemed to have a beard and wore a wide-brimmed hat shading his eyes. He only appeared for a split second. Then he was running, running towards the woods. He took a strange, zig-zagging path, as if afraid that Sophia might try and shoot him again.

She stood where she was, frozen with fear.

*Something is wrong, she thought wildly. He should not be here.*

Then something inside Sophia snapped. She dropped the gun – a foolish thing to do, but it was soon too late to remedy it – and began to run.

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Sophia ran and ran, till her legs were sore and screaming for rest, and her lungs were burning. She couldn't have said where she was going, only that she needed to get away from the ranch and that horrible, shadowy figure in the field. The feeling of menace pursued her, though.

Sophia dragged down great breaths of air, feeling it prickle down her dry throat. She threw a panicked glance over

her shoulder, expecting to see a figure pursuing her.

There was nobody there, but that didn't calm Sophia's fears. When she really could breathe no longer, she skidded to a halt and stood, sucking down lungfuls of air.

*Where am I?* she thought wildly, glancing around. This wasn't a familiar part of the ranch.

*Am I lost?* Sophia thought, resisting the urge to laugh hysterically. Imagine, running away from a stranger only to get lost on her own ranch.

"Excuse me, miss, is everything all right?"

Sophia flinched almost out of her skin, spinning around.

She spotted Pastor Sixsmith immediately, as he sat atop his horse in the dusty road.

She opened her mouth to reply, but all that came out was a pained, frantic gasping.

Paster Sixsmith frowned. "Well, it's clear that everything is *not* all right. Where is Nathan?"

Sophia wanted to burst into tears. If it wasn't for the fact that crying would take up too much breath, she might have done.

“I don’t know,” she gasped. “I can’t find him. But there was... there was a man... a man... I think he was watching me. Us. The house.”

“Hm. I see. Well, that’s serious, isn’t it? We can find the sheriff – and Nathan – soon, but for now I think you need to sit down and have something to eat and drink. You need to catch your breath. Come on, I’ll take you back to the ranch and make you something.”

The pastor dismounted and gestured for Sophia to get on the horse. She obeyed, her legs numb and sore. Pastor Sixsmith smiled widely and led the animal back down the road.

In a surprisingly short time given how far Sophia thought she’d run, Pastor Sixsmith was helping her up the steps of her own porch.

“Sit down, dear,” Pastor Sixsmith said, bustling about her kitchen as if he belonged there, “And when you’re ready, you can tell me what’s going on.”

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“... and that’s all I can think of for now,” Sophia said. She felt oddly drained by the confession. Everything had come out – Nathan’s odd behavior, the letter, the man hiding in the field. Pastor Sixsmith’s face had darkened when Sophia began to talk about Aunt Laura, and he pressed his lips together as the stories came pouring out. Sophia had even shamefully admitted that she hadn’t even stopped to warn James about the possible intruder.

“Don’t worry about young James, Sophia,” Pastor Sixsmith said mildly. “We can go and find him later. He’s a clever young man, and he can take care of himself. Besides, you probably scared off the intruder in any case.”

“I can’t believe that I dropped the shotgun.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” the pastor said, leaning forward to refill Sophia’s cup. “Take another piece of this good bread you’ve made. I don’t know where I’ve ever had finer. It sounds like You’ve been through a lot over the past few weeks, and things very much seem to be coming to a head.”

“I just don’t understand what’s going on.” Sophia sighed. She did take more bread. Now seemed like a bad time to be eating, but apparently her stomach didn’t realise that. After her long, panicked run, she was starving. “Nathan won’t tell me anything.”

“Nathan thinks he is protecting you,” Pastor Sixsmith said firmly. “He thinks that he can handle things himself. He doesn’t want to worry you unduly. I suppose that’s very sweet of him, but he doesn’t see that hiding things from you will only strain your relationship. He’s used to being alone, I think. Solitude isn’t good for a person.”

Sophia curled her fingers around her coffee, feeling the warmth through the cup. “Sometimes I think that I annoy him,” Sophia whispered. “Other times I feel... well, I feel as if we are a properly married couple. A couple that chose each other for love, not necessity. I don’t understand him.”

“Nathan has suffered a lot over the past few years. Just like you. That sort of suffering leaves a mark. It doesn’t vanish once the physical suffering stops. Now, I have never been married, so I’m not sure how much my advice counts, but here it is anyway. Be patient with each other. Be kind. Speak freely about your feelings, even if you think that you should not. A marriage can be happy or miserable depending on how much a couple communicates.”

Sophia smiled weakly at him. “I think that’s very good advice.”

“Now, as to this business with Nathan and the debt. I suspect you may need a bit more background information, my dear.”

Sophia’s gaze sharpened, and she leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

Pastor Sixsmith was quiet for a moment, tapping his fingertips on his cup.

“That man you met at the train station. Michael Jasper. He grew up in this town, just like Nathan and James. James’s parents have always been... well, the less said about them the better, but Nathan’s family and Michael’s family were very close. It was quite natural that the boys should become friends. The three of them were inseparable, for years.”

“So, what happened?” Sophia asked, drawn into the story. Somehow, she knew it wouldn’t have a happy ending.

Pastor Sixsmith sighed, shaking his head. “Nathan ought to be telling you this. Like most relationships, money got in the way. I won’t go into details – I shall let Nathan explain that – but Michael’s father lent Nathan’s father a great deal of money. It wasn’t an official loan, as I understand, but the implication was that he should be paid back.”

“Was he paid back?”

“No, he was not. Not out of spite, though. There were hard times in this town back then, and I daresay Nathan’s father couldn’t afford to repay the debt. But Michael and his family needed that money. They quickly went bankrupt and left town. The man died destitute, leaving Michael an orphan and a pauper. He joined the army when the war broke out, and you can imagine what war does to a man, especially one as bitter and hurt as Michael Jasper. It’s a perfect recipe for heartbreak and anger.”

“Poor Michael,” Sophia murmured. “And now he’s back?”

“Yes. He’s back, and he wants his money. From what I understand, Nathan does not have it.”

Sophia swallowed hard, absorbing this new information.

“So, what now? What happens next?”

Pastor Sixsmith sighed. “I don’t know. I think Michael may have fallen in with some dangerous people. He owes money, and he needs the money that Nathan’s father owed him

in order to make good on his debts. My guess would be that he's afraid, mortally afraid. He's panicking, and he's willing to do whatever he has to in order to make Nathan pay up. He's becoming desperate, and desperate men are extremely dangerous."

A silence fell over the table, a tense, fraught silence. For the first time, Sophia began to realize how dangerous their situation was. Michael Jasper, desperate for his money, wasn't the real danger. It was the "dangerous people" the pastor had mentioned, trailing him and hungry for their own money.

In between Michael Jasper and the bad people were Sophia and Nathan.

At the moment, just Nathan – alone.

"I have to find Nathan," Sophia said. "I told you about the letter. He tried to hide it from me, and it was clear that he was afraid of what was in it. It said that he was going to meet Michael in the saloon. That's where I'm going now – to find Nathan."

Pastor Sixsmith took another sip from his own cup. "Very well. However, it's not safe for a woman to go into the saloon by herself. At the very least, you ought to take James with you."

Sophia grimaced. "That's what James said, too."

"Let me guess. You didn't take his advice?"

Sophia wavered. Her fright with the stranger in the field was still raw.

“Maybe I ought to take James along, after all,” she said.

Pastor Sixsmith chuckled. “A good idea. Finish your tea, then go to find him. I’d come, but I have another visit to make before my rounds are done this afternoon.”

“Let’s hope it’s not too late,” Sophia said under her breath.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

Sophia's heart was pounding like a drum. She'd regained her breath after her mad dash of a run, but her legs still felt shaky, like jelly.

Maybe the man she'd seen in the field was just a poacher, or someone who'd gotten lost and decided to hide from the nervous-looking young woman with a shotgun. She scaled a hill, hoping to see James—and not any interlopers. Below her, the house sat in a dell. Off to one side, a tiny black line sat before a golden field. That was where she'd dropped the shotgun. Apparently, it hadn't been moved.

Movement caught her attention. For a moment, panic rose in Sophia's throat, until she saw that it was James, carrying a pile of scrap wood towards the barn from the creek.

"James!" she called at the top of her voice, not sure whether her voice would carry well enough for him to hear. There was a lot of distance between them, but the air was still. She leaped up and down, waving madly.

James paused, glancing around, and spotted Sophia on top of the hill. It was too far to see his expression, of course, but he was probably confused.

"James!" Sophia shouted again, cupping her hands around her mouth. "Come up here!"

Every shadow and sheltered spot on the ranch could hide that stranger. He might have gone, or he might have hidden

somewhere, waiting for Sophia to leave.

She couldn't have said why, but her gut was twisting into knots. James should never have been abandoned like that. He was clearly fine and had just been getting on with his chores. But the hairs on the back of Sophia's neck prickled. She didn't want to go down to collect her shotgun, and she wanted James away from their field as quickly as possible.

*Dozens of men could hide in that field,* Sophia thought with a pang of fear.

James set down the scrap wood just at the door of the barn. The door was open, a yawning black hole inside. Was it Sophia's imagination, or were the animals horribly quiet? James turned his back to the barn and ambled towards Sophia. He moved agonizingly slowly, glancing curiously up at her.

Sophia's eyes were fixed on the barn. Was something moving inside?

No, it must have been her imagination. Either that or one of the animals. A rogue chicken, perhaps.

"Hurry up, James, hurry up!" she hissed under her breath, teeth clenched.

There was a rattling sound, and a few pieces of the scrap wood tumbled to the ground, as if knocked by something. James jumped, spinning around. He stared at the barn for a long moment. Sophia didn't breathe.

Then James turned back towards her, and began to walk fast, faster and faster until he was almost running. He didn't look mildly curious anymore. He looked panicked. He glanced over his shoulder at the barn more than once.

When he reached the foot of the hill and started to climb towards Sophia, something definitely moved in the doorway of the barn. Whatever it was, it stayed just out of the light, but Sophia saw the movement.

Then it was gone.

James, wheezing for breath, crawled the last few feet to the top of the hill.

"There was someone in the barn," he rasped. "I'm sure of it. I... I saw him, when I turned back to look. Sophia, I was just about to go into the barn. He was... he was waiting for me."

Sophia threw her arms around his thin shoulders, squeezing him tightly.

"I left you, James, I shouldn't have done that," she gasped. "I... I saw someone in the field."

"You *saw* someone?"

She nodded, ashamed. "I thought it was a fox, and I aimed a shot above the field..."

“I thought I heard something.”

“And it was a man, hiding there. I didn’t think, I just ran. I can’t believe I left you here all alone, James. I’m stupid, so stupid...”

Sophia tightened her grip. She’d let him down. She’d let herself down. Jazzy would never have done something like this. Aunt Laura would be so gleeful, smug that she was right about Sophia, about how selfish and stupid she was, that...

“Hey, hey, *hey*,” James pulled back, gripping Sophia by the shoulders and forcing her to look him in the eye. He was pale, and still wheezed slightly, but the color was returning to his face. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You were scared. You ran. Anyone might have done the same thing. Besides, you’re here now, warning me, aren’t you? There’s no harm done. You aren’t stupid. Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

Sophia smiled weakly up at him. “You’re kind, James.”

“Yes, I’m a wonderful person. Didn’t you know that?” James turned to glance back down at the barn. Nothing moved in the courtyard or around any of the outbuildings. The field was still, unmoved by a breeze or anything else. There was no indication that anyone was down there, but Sophia knew in her bones that James had had a narrow escape. She shivered, and James slung an arm around her shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he said gently. “We’re both all right.”

“Pastor Sixsmith told me about Michael Jasper,” Sophia murmured. “And the money Nathan owes him. And the money Michael owes to a dangerous gang.”

“It is a bit of a pickle, isn’t it?” James agreed, wincing. “Nathan hasn’t been the same since the war, and I dread to think of what it’s done to Michael. This thing isn’t just going to go away, no matter how much Nathan hopes that it will.”

“Why did none of you tell me about this?”

Sophia hadn’t meant to sound accusing, but James wouldn’t meet her eye.

“It’s not your mess,” he said quietly. “Michael was our friend. Nathan didn’t want to worry you.”

She shrugged. “I’m part of the family now, aren’t I? His worries are my worries. Besides, a problem shared is a problem halved.”

James smiled wryly. “Pastor Sixsmith was right about Nathan getting married. You’re exactly what he needs.”

“Pastor Sixsmith also suggested that I should take you to the saloon,” Sophia muttered.

“Sounds like sensible advice,” James grinned. “Are you going to take me?”

She sighed. “Well, after what just happened, I don’t think I’ll ever want to do anything alone ever again.”

He chuckled. “Right. Let’s go, then. Give me a minute to catch my breath, then we’ll go to the saloon. Let’s hope nobody sees us.”

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It was apparent that his panic and mad dash up the hill had taken its toll on James. He still wheezed a little when he breathed, and he walked more slowly than he would usually do when he took Sophia to one of corrals away from the barn to find horses they could ride to town.

Whenever he caught Sophia eyeing him anxiously, he smiled, and said something off-hand about being as fit as a fiddle.

She didn’t believe him.

“It was my lungs that stopped me going to war,” James said, after they’d stopped yet again for him to rest. Riding seemed easier for him than walking, but not by much.

“The army doctor took one look at me and said that he needed to listen to my breathing. Less than a minute later, he was writing me off as completely unfit for duty. I used to be so ashamed.”

“I’d say that you were lucky,” Sophia said. “I’ve heard that the war was a terrible thing for the men who survived.”

“It was. Nathan says that I’m lucky, too. Besides, I don’t think I would have lasted long. If Jack and Mr. Rowe didn’t survive, then...” James trailed off, biting his lip. “Look, Sophia, don’t be too hard on Nathan, keeping all of this from you. He’s just trying to do what’s right.”

She sighed. “I know, I know. I just... I want to feel like I belong here. My aunt never bothered to tell me anything, and it made me feel like a hired girl rather than part of the family. Well, at that point, that’s probably how she saw me, too. It was silly things, like not bothering to tell me that she was hosting a dinner party until the day before and expecting me to get everything ready in time. It made me feel... well, it made me feel like I wasn’t a person. I was just a thing, who did what she was told, when she was told. I thought that feeling would go away when I left.”

James shrugged. “When we go through something awful, it doesn’t just stop. Not all scars are visible, and the ones you can’t see tend to last longer.”

She smiled wryly. “Pastor Sixsmith said something similar.”

“He’s a sensible man. Nathan adores him.”

“I know, I’ve noticed. He’s good for Nathan, isn’t he?”

“I suppose so, but they’re both stubborn men with hearts of gold, and that’s a deadly combination.”

Sophia let out a chuckle.

They must be getting close now. The ranches and houses were closer together, and she could see the lines of the main street in the distance. There were people around now too, with baskets of dry goods and carts rumbling along the hard-packed roads.

*They'll all see me go into the saloon,* Sophia thought with a jolt. There went her burgeoning reputation in town. A woman who boldly walked into a saloon – chaperoned or not, of any age or marital status – would be fiercely dubbed as fast for the rest of her life.

*I'd rather be fast than widowed, though,* Sophia thought.

“Do you think Michael would hurt Nathan?” she said aloud, following her train of thought about being widowed. It wasn't a nice thought.

James didn't immediately respond.

“I don't know,” he said after a few moments. “At one time, I'd have said no, absolutely not. Michael would never do anything to Nathan. Or to me, even. We were thick as thieves. We were like brothers, and I'd have bet my life on Michael.”

“But now?”

“But now, I don't think Michael is the same man we knew before. I don't know what he's capable of, and neither does Nathan. I think we need to assume that Michael is willing to do whatever it takes to get his money.”



“And the gang he owes money to?”

James sucked in a deep breath. “I think it’s fair to say that *they* would hurt Nathan. And us. And Michael. And anyone else who got in their way.”

Sophia shivered.

The saloon loomed in the distance, a low, shabby-looking building. For the first time, Sophia imagined walking inside. She’d never been inside a saloon. It was probably filthy and smelled awful. It wouldn’t be too busy in the middle of the day, but there were always some hardened drinkers in places like that.

Or so she’d heard.

Everyone would look at her. A woman in a saloon was always a shocking thing. A respectable woman, that is, not one of those poor soiled doves with dead eyes and powdered faces, smiling mechanically around. Sophia had seen ladies like that back in Chicago, on the streets or lounging in the doorways to saloons and houses of ill repute. Her mother had always dragged her past quickly.

*“Don’t look at them, Sophia,”* she’d whispered urgently.

*“Are they bad women?”* Sophia had asked.

Her mother had bit her lip. *“Not bad women. But life has not been kind to them. There’s nothing behind their eyes anymore, the poor things.”*

Sophia hadn’t known what that meant. *Nothing behind their eyes.* She’d understood later, when she was older, and had seen more saloon girls in town one time. She’d even seen the same expression in her own eyes, when Aunt Laura was particularly bad.

“What are you thinking?” James said, breaking into Sophia’s thoughts. “You look grim.”

“I was just thinking about what life would be like for saloon girls.”

“Bad, I would think,” James said decisively. “Why are you thinking about that?”

“Well, I’m about to go into a saloon for the first time in my life.”

“That’s a good point. Look, are you sure you don’t want to wait outside? I can go inside, or just...”

“Wait,” Sophia said suddenly, clutching at James’s arm.

Up ahead, a figure was making their way down from the saloon. They walked slowly, hunched over, head down. It was a man, leading a horse along behind him by its bridle. As the figure got closer, Sophia recognized the glint of blond hair, escaping from a crude ponytail.

“There he is!” she gasped, relief washing over her. “That’s Nathan!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” James muttered. “He’s not dead. He will be dead when I get my hands on him, though.”

Nathan glanced up from his feet and then stopped short, as if seeing them for the first time. There was a heartbeat where nothing happened. Then he started to run towards them.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

It seemed entirely natural for Sophia to start running towards Nathan, too. Leaving James behind, she hitched up her skirt as far as she dared and ran. There was no real thought in her mind except reaching Nathan.

She skidded to a halt, gasping for breath, and Nathan snatched her up into his arms, holding her close against his chest.

“Sophia, I’m so glad to see you,” he said, his voice muffled. “I can’t even tell you how glad I am.”

She slipped her arms around his neck, pressing a kiss to the side of his cheek.

“The feeling is mutual,” she whispered. “Very mutual.”

“Not to interrupt,” James said, “But we might want to put some distance between us and the saloon.”

Nathan glanced over his shoulder. “Yes. Michael is still there.” He bit his lip, avoiding Sophia and James’s eye. “I suppose I have some explaining to do.”

Sophia and James exchanged glances.

“You do,” she said eventually, “But we’ve got something to tell you, too. I think we’re in danger, Nathan.”

Nathan's expression hardened.

“Right. Well, let's get home and safe. Then we can discuss it.”

James cleared his throat. “That's just it, actually. Home may not be as safe as we would like.”

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“The barn and outbuildings are clear,” Nathan said, stepping into the kitchen with James right behind him. He had the abandoned shotgun tucked under his arm, having snatched it up from where Sophia dropped it. “I didn't see a soul, or any signs that anyone was here. Nothing was vandalized, and there was nothing that could have been a message.”

“I definitely saw him. James saw him too,” Sophia said.

“I know, I know. I'm just saying that whoever it was, he's gone now,” Nathan raked a hand through his hair, sighing. He looked exhausted, with deep circles around his eyes.

James was still breathless but had insisted on following Nathan around the house and immediate grounds, checking for intruders. Once the house was well searched, Nathan had instructed Sophia to stay inside with the doors and windows locked while they moved onto the barn and outbuildings.

It had been a tense hour for Sophia. She was vaguely aware that she should make something for supper, but somehow the time had gone by, and nothing was done. Besides, she wasn't hungry.

The sun was going down by now, and it would soon be dark. Sophia shivered at that thought. In the dark. Anyone could be outside, looking in the windows, walking around their land. Inside, all that kept the darkness at bay would be a few candles and a fire.

Not enough.

“My guess would be that whoever you two saw was one of the gang members following Michael,” Nathan said, locking the screen door and the kitchen door behind him. He threw across the bolt at the top, and after a moment’s consideration, also hooked on the chain. “They must have followed him here and decided to keep an eye on us.”

“Do you think they would have hurt James?” Sophia asked. Though James clearly wasn’t harboring any hurt feelings, it bothered her that she hadn’t tried to warn him sooner.

“I don’t know,” Nathan admitted. “If he’d cornered them, perhaps. Let’s just be grateful that they didn’t catch him. James, are you going to stay here tonight? I don’t like the idea of you walking home in the dark, and it’ll be safer for us to stay together.”

James nodded. “I will. I might need to lie down for a bit. I still can’t catch my breath.”

“Take the spare room upstairs. You know the one, don’t you?”

James nodded again and levered himself gingerly to his feet. He made his way upstairs, with both Nathan and Sophia looking anxiously after him.

“He doesn’t look well,” Sophia murmured.

Nathan bit his lip. “He’s taken this business with Michael to heart. I don’t think he knows how to feel about him. He’s our old friend, but on the other hand, he’s not the boy we used to know.”

“How do you feel about him?”

There was a long silence. Sophia waited, patiently. Before, she might have fidgeted, wondering whether she’d asked a silly question, or whether Nathan was annoyed at her for asking questions. Now, however, she knew more about Nathan – and herself. Nathan took his time to formulate an answer. This business with his old friend was complicated, and it wasn’t fair to expect him to have a simple answer ready to hand.

“I want us to make things right,” Nathan said finally. He sank down onto a seat at the kitchen table, beside Sophia. He placed his hand on top of hers, and the movement seemed entirely natural. “I want my friend back. What happened to him wasn’t fair. He should get the money back; I just don’t have it. Not yet at least. I want to help him.”

The warmth of his palm, rough and dry, soaked into Sophia’s fingers. A tingling sensation, rather pleasant, crept up her arm. She squeezed his hand, smiling softly at him.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll try and make it right, Nathan.”

Nathan was staring down at the grain of the table, nibbling on his lower lip. “He threatened you, Sophia. He said... he said that if I didn’t have the money, he’d come for you. To hurt me. He told me I should just get a loan from the bank, at crippling interest, like he and his father had to do.”

“He’s bitter,” Sophia said, somewhat unnecessarily. “He’s been hurt, and he blames you for that. Don’t let it make you bitter too, Nathan.”

Nathan shook his head. “I won’t. I just... I don’t know where to go from here. If he sends those gang members after me, I... I don’t know what we’ll do. I don’t know how I’ll protect you. That’s why I didn’t want you to know about any of this. It just seems so frightening. It’s heavy, like I’m carrying a boulder on my shoulders. I keep waiting for it to go away, or to get better. I’m a fool, though. It’ll never go away. Never get better.”

“You don’t have to carry this weight alone,” Sophia said firmly, shifting in her seat to face him. Nathan dragged his gaze from the tabletop to meet hers. His expression was more open and hopeful than she’d ever seen before, and that familiar warmth unfurled its petals in Sophia’s chest.

*My husband*, she thought, squeezing his hand again. *My Nathan*.



“Think about it,” Sophia continued. “It’s easier to carry something heavy with somebody else, rather than carrying it alone, yes?”

“Of course.”

“That’s what a marriage is all about. Two people, tackling all the problems that come their way. Carrying them together. That’s what I want, Nathan.”

He bit his lip. “I wanted to be a good husband. I wanted to protect you.”

“Keeping things from me isn’t being a good husband. You don’t need to protect me, Nathan. I want to help you. I want us to be a team.”

There was a long moment of silence, Nathan searching Sophia’s face for something. He seemed to find it, because the light slowly returned to his eyes.

“I’m lucky to have you, Sophia. You know that, don’t you?”

She grinned. “Of course, you are.”

“And I wish...” he paused, visibly gathering his thoughts, “I wish I hadn’t told you that our marriage was one of convenience.”

“I like to think it’s a little more than that, now.”

He chuckled. “No, you don’t understand. I think I’ve been in love with you from the moment I met you. I just didn’t realize it at the time.”

Sophia’s breath caught in her throat. “Did... did you just say that you love me?”

Nathan smiled, and Sophia noticed for the first time that he had dimples in his cheeks. His beard hid it well, but she could see them.

“I suppose I did, yes.”

Sophia reached out tentatively, cupping her hand around Nathan’s cheek. She felt the rough bristles of his beard, smooth if she stroked them one way and prickly if she stroked them another. Nathan tilted his head, leaning into her touch like a cat.

“I can’t remember when I first started falling in love with you,” she said softly. “Maybe it was when I read those letters you’d sent to Jazzy. But I thought it was wrong, that you weren’t for me.”

Nathan reached up to place his hand over Sophia’s, where it cupped his cheek. “If Jazzy can see you know, I know she’s thrilled and happy,” he said, barely louder than a whisper. “I know that she loved you.”

A lump rose to Sophia’s throat, mingling with the tingle of excitement and happiness running through her chest.

The fear of strangers watching them melted away, as did the knowledge that Michael was out there somewhere, wanting money, a gang of faceless thugs behind him.

For a moment, none of it mattered. It was just Sophia and Nathan, lost in each other's eyes, their hearts beating in time.

Then James came bouncing down the stairs, talking ninety to the dozen.

“Goodness, that spare room is fresh and clean! Not a speck of dust! Was that you, Sophia?”

Sophia removed her hand with a sigh.

“Yes, that was me, James.”

Oblivious to the glares that he was getting from Sophia and Nathan, James pottered around the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of milk. He drank it in one gulp, setting the glass down with a clack and a satisfied sigh.

“So, what's for supper?”

Sophia wondered if she could throw James out for the night after all. Nathan probably wouldn't mind.

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Nathan's mind was whirling. He'd been so sure that Sophia was about to kiss him, before James came blundering

in and ruined everything.

Not that it mattered. She loved him. Sophia loved him.

His heart skipped a beat at that, and Nathan found himself grinning like a fool.

Sophia had hustled him out of the kitchen while she worked. Poor James had been deputized to peel the vegetables, probably as a punishment for interrupting them. Nathan was currently sitting in the parlor, with a book in his hand that he couldn't seem to concentrate on.

It was cold in the parlor. Nathan didn't dare stoke up the fire too warmly. If they ran out of firewood, he had no intention of walking out to the woodpile to get more. Not in the dark, not with Michael and that gang out there.

The curtains were drawn, so that nobody could look in, but Nathan still felt as though he were being watched.

It wasn't over, not by a long shot.

Someone cleared their throat in the doorway, and Nathan jumped. He dropped the book.

"Butter fingers," James said, smiling nervously. "Sophia finally let me go. I hope you enjoy all those potatoes and carrots, by the way. All peeled by my fair hands."

Nathan rolled his eyes. “I’m not sure that peeling vegetables is the same as cooking them. Sit down, James. How is your breathing?”

James sat down heavily, shrugging. “Fine.”

“You don’t sound fine. I can hear your breath catching.”

James fidgeted, like he always did when Nathan pressured him about his health.

“I’ll be all right, Nathan. Look, I wanted to talk about Michael.”

Nathan felt like his throat was closing up. “I’m not sure that there’s anything to talk about.”

James was quiet for a minute or two, twisting his fingers together.

“I wish you’d told me more about what was going on,” he said finally. “He was my friend, too.”

Nathan swallowed hard, not able to meet James’s eye. “I know. I should have told you, and I feel terrible that I didn’t. Sophia said the same thing – better two people should carry a burden than just one.”

James nodded. “I keep thinking about the old days, you know? You, me, Michael. I keep thinking about the stories you

tell me about the war. Did Michael go through all that? I know there's things that you don't tell me, too. Bad things."

Nathan squeezed his eyes closed. There were things he'd seen during the war that he would never tell a soul – not Pastor Sixsmith, not Sophia, not James. Dark things, wicked things, that should never be spoken. Not speaking about them was the best way to forget them. It made him feel sick to remember.

"I don't know what the war did to Michael," Nathan said finally, "But I know what it's done to other men. He's in a bad way, I'm sure of it."

"I think we can still reach him."

Nathan glanced sharply at James. "I've tried, believe me."

"I know, but I haven't tried."

"James, what are you saying?"

James drew in a deep breath. "I want to go and talk to Michael. Alone. I think I can reach him. Even if I can't, I have to try. I'll never forgive myself if I don't try. He's frightened, angry, and bitter, and I can sympathize with that. I'm going to talk to him, Nathan. There's nothing you can say to change my mind."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

James had always been an early riser, ever since he'd been a child. He'd always been a little weaker than the other boys, somewhat sickly. He'd had croup, jaundice, measles, and all the colds and fevers you could think of when he was young. He'd survived them all, to the shock of the doctors.

But there was still that tightness in his chest when he breathed too deeply or moved too quickly. There was always the pang of panic when he couldn't fill up his lungs all the way. He'd learned to manage by now.

He used to get up early because he woke up early, with shortness of breath and the familiar panic. The doctor gave him a syrup now which helped. He didn't wake up breathless anymore, although the habit of getting up early never really went.

James didn't mind. The early morning was a good time of day. Quiet, peaceful, fresh. The odd, gray moments between the end of the moonlight and the start of the sunrise was his favorite time. Unusual, but there it was.

He woke up and knew automatically that dawn wasn't far off. He stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling, on an unfamiliar bed, and listened carefully.

Nobody was awake. That was good. James needed to slip out quietly. There was no way Nathan would let him do what he planned. Even Sophia would think that it was a bad idea.

Nathan had been very clear last night on what he thought about James's plan.

*“You can't talk to Michael, James. It's a terrible idea. He won't listen to you. I'm not going to let you go, and I mean it. You say that everyone deserves a second chance, and that's fair. But Michael is too far gone to listen. Not everyone wants a second chance. It's just too dangerous. He's unpredictable to say the least, and you'll just make things worse. It's dangerous, James. Too dangerous for you. No offence meant.”*

That was a fair point. Nathan often underestimated James. Not because he was malicious, just overprotective. They'd seen that with Sophia. He tried to shelter her from the truth, and all it did was push them further apart.

James was sure that they'd made up by now, and he was glad. Nathan deserved a wife who loved him, and Sophia was perfect. Besides, they were clearly madly in love with each other. James hadn't meant to interrupt their moment last night, but they'd both shot furious glares at him for hours afterwards. It was quite funny.

He sat up in bed, wincing at the aches and pains in his body. He decided not to light a candle. Stealth was the name of the game here.

He slipped out of bed, quietly pulling on his clothes, left neatly folded over a chair for easy access. His boots were downstairs by the kitchen door, so James tiptoed out of his room in his stockinged feet, closing his bedroom door softly behind him.



He paused on the landing, listening for sounds of life. There was nothing but a faint snoring coming from behind Nathan's door. Suppressing a smile, James slipped down the stairs.

Pulling on his boots at the door, James paused, grappling with last-minute nerves. He couldn't *see* anyone outside, and already the first light of dawn was starting to break over the horizon. If the gang members were going to attack, surely, they would have done it in the small hours, when everyone was asleep?

*Don't think too hard about it, James thought, or you'll never do anything.*

He unlocked the door and stepped out, careful to pull it shut so that the latch clicked behind him. No need to leave Nathan and Sophia in an unsecured house. He'd just have to bang on the door if he wanted to get in again.

James got his horse, shuddering as he ducked through the doorway and remembered the vague, stocky silhouette filling that same space, looking directly at him. Was it the same man Sophia had scared off in the field? Maybe, maybe not.

His trepidation melted away as the sun rose and Rowe Ranch receded into the distance behind him. James closed his eyes, letting the weak morning sun play across his face. They'd probably figured out that he was gone by now. Nathan would be angry, and Sophia would be surprised, and underneath it all they would both be worried about him.

Well, if he was successful, they'd have to admit they'd been wrong about him.

*Hey, this isn't about you, James admonished himself. This is about Michael, and about making things right between the three of us. Don't start worrying about proving a point.*

He spotted the saloon in the distance, and drew in a deep, shaky breath. Chances were that Michael wasn't there anymore. He might have rented a room here – James hadn't heard of him staying at any of the other boarding houses – or he might be camping somewhere else. There was no telling what Michael would do anymore. The old Michael would have gone to his family ranch, but of course that was long gone. Pulverized to make room for a railroad, which hadn't even been built yet.

The saloon was all shut up, of course. It would open sometime around noon, for the hardened drinkers to come in and get their watery whiskey and sour beer. Some saloons stayed open all the time, but this one closed in the early hours, throwing out the drunken revelers into the night, and locking up their doors for a few precious hours.

Probably to give them a chance to clean up a little and let the poor saloon girls get some sleep. Heaven knew they needed it.

As he approached, James spotted something slumped against the wall, dark against the cheap, whitewashed wood, speckled with dirt. At first, he thought it was a half-empty sack, or some abandoned clothes.

It was neither. It was a man, propped up against the wall, motionless. His legs stuck out comically in front of him, and his head lolled onto chest.

Michael.

James's heart stuttered. He wasn't moving, and from here, James couldn't even see if he was breathing. Despite the complaints from his muscles and aching lungs, James broke into a light run. As he approached, Michael's head jerked, and he gave a resounding snore.

James wanted to laugh with relief. "Oi, you," he said, kicking Michael's foot. One of his shoes was missing. After a moment's search, he found it near the doorway, stuck toe-down in the dirt.

"Wake up, Michael," James said, giving him a gentle shove.

Michael's eyes flew open, red and bleary with drink. He stared at James uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then a suspicious expression descended. His face twisted into a scowl.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"I could ask you the same," James retorted. "You were never much of a drinker. Can I assume that you got thrown out of the saloon last night?"

Michael colored, and James knew he'd gotten it right. Aside from all the other evidence, Michael stank of alcohol. It was on his breath, of course, but it smelled like he'd also spilled it down his clothes and let it dry.

"None of your business," Michael said, struggling to get to his feet. He blanched, eyes going glassy, and slumped heavily back down again.

"You must have a killer headache," James said pleasantly. "And I bet you feel sick."

Michael glared at him and said nothing.

"I've got your shoe, by the way," James said, placing it on the ground. Michael snatched it up. "You shouldn't have slept outside all night. It's not safe, and it's cold at night."

"I'm fine."

"You could have stayed at Nathan's."

At the mention of Nathan's name, Michael's expression hardened further. "Shut up, James. You don't know what you're talking about. Nathan's going to get what's coming to him."

James tilted his head to one side. "Remember when you and Nathan fell out when we were kids?"

"You always sided with him," Michael muttered sourly.

“I did, because he was usually right. Remember what I used to say?”

Michael pursed his lips. He remembered. James knew that he did. He leaned close, so the tip of his nose almost brushed Michael's.

“If you want to get to Nathan, you'll have to go through me.”

There was a little silence after that. Michael flinched, as if he wanted to move backwards, but his head was already pressed against the side of the saloon. James could see flecks of white paint stuck in his hair, from where the paint was peeling away from the wood.

In this light, Michael looked far older than he really was. He looked haggard, old before his time. A stab of pity landed squarely in James's heart.

“Just leave me alone, James,” Michael said hoarsely. “Go on, get out of here. You can side with Nathan as usual, if you like. I don't care.”

“That's the thing. I care. Nathan cares. About you.”

“Nathan can go to hell.”

“*Language*,” James said, deliberately sounding offended. He'd clowned around like that when they were children, and

never failed to get a smile out of his friends.

It was working now. The corners of Michael's mouth twitched, like he wanted to smile but simply wouldn't let himself do it. He was staring off to the right, avoiding James's stare.

"Don't, James," Michael said, his voice so quiet that James had to lean forward to hear it. "Stay out of this. I'm in trouble, and there's no need for anyone else to go down with me."

"Except Nathan, right? And Sophia. And me after all, because I work for Nathan."

Michael pressed his lips together. "Nathan owes me."

James shrugged. "We're your friends, Michael."

"You *were* my friends."

"Well, I can't speak for you, but Nathan and I are still your friends. We want to help you. You've dug yourself into a hole, and you've been punished for debts that weren't even yours in the first place. It's not fair, but neither is demanding money from Nathan that he doesn't have. I think you know that, though. You were always the clever one out of all of us, Michael. You know what's right and wrong. You also don't have much of a choice. You're scared."

"I'm not scared," Michael said, his voice small.

James sighed. “Do you remember when you climbed over Mr. Thorne’s fence, and stole all those apples from his orchard? He saw you, but because it was from a distance, he didn’t know which of us it was, and he was interrogating us to find out. Our fathers were waiting there, ready to punish whichever one of us had stolen all the apples. You were terrified, I remember that.”

Something flickered on Michael’s face. He said nothing, but he remembered. James knew that he remembered.

“Mr. Thorne figured that it was you,” James continued. “Then Nathan stepped forward and said that it was him. Remember? Then I said that no, it was me. Then *you* finally confessed and said that you’d done it. They didn’t know which one of us it was, because we all confessed.”

The tiniest of smiles began to break out on Michael’s face.

“It didn’t work,” he murmured. “All three of us got punished.”

James chuckled. “No, but we did it *together*. The three of us. It was always the three of us.”

Michael swallowed hard, his scrawny throat bobbing. “Those apples weren’t even worth it.”

James snorted. “They certainly weren’t. I’ve never eaten anything so sour.”

Michael laughed tentatively, as if he wasn't much used to laughing anymore. James grinned at him, not quite ready to celebrate yet.

“Come back with me, Michael. Come back to Nathan's. Let us help you. We'll face things again, the three of us.”

Michael shook his head. “You seem to forget that the three of us didn't get away with it. We were punished.”

“Ah, but we didn't have Sophia with us then. She'd have gotten us out of it, I bet. She's smart as a whip.”

Michael dropped his gaze to his lap, twisting his fingers together. His nails were bitten to the quick, red and painful.

James got to his feet and held out a hand to help Michael up.

“Come on,” he said brusquely. “You can't sit here all day. Come on, Michael. Come on, and let's be friends again.”

The moment of truth. James had intended to be cleverer than this. Michael hesitated, eyeing James's hand. His own hands lay limply in his lap, making no move to reach out.

*Come on, Michael, James thought, heart pounding. Please, Michael. This may be the last chance you have to turn back.*



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“He’s not upstairs,” Nathan said grimly. “He’s not in the house at all.”

Sophia sucked in a breath, twisting her fingers in her apron, winding the material into careless little knots. She looked as worried as Nathan felt.

Breakfast was set out on the table, now growing cold and congealed. Once-appetising porridge was gloopy and gray, and the bacon was now lukewarm strips of something chewy and salty, sitting beside rubbery eggs.

They hadn’t bothered to wake James while breakfast was prepared. Nathan had casually mentioned that James was usually an early riser, so if he was sleeping in, he must need his rest.

He felt like a fool now. He ought to have known that something was wrong. Instead, they’d wasted time, pottering around in the kitchen. When Nathan had finally gone up to wake James, once breakfast was ready, he found the spare bedroom empty.

“I don’t understand,” Sophia said, for the tenth time that morning. “Why would he leave? Where would he go?”

Nathan swallowed hard. “I... I think I might know.”

Sophia glanced sharply at him. “What aren’t you telling me, Nathan?”

He raked a hand through his hair, which had come undone sometime during their frantic search for James.

“James talked about going to find Michael,” he admitted.

Sophia’s eyes widened. “You mean the man who’s caused all this trouble? He must be mad.”

“He was our friend once, and James thought that he could talk to him, maybe reach him this time.”

“You’ve already tried that. Please tell me that you didn’t encourage James to do that.”

“Of course, I didn’t. I told him it was mad, and too dangerous, and that he shouldn’t do it.”

“And what did James say?”

Nathan hesitated. “He didn’t say anything.”

Sophia groaned. “Oh, dear. So that’s where he’s gone, then.”

Panic flared in Nathan’s chest, hot and tingling. “What now, then? What should we do?”

“One of us needs to find him,” Sophia said decisively.

“He could be anywhere by now.”

Sophia nodded. “That’s why I’m going to go and fetch the sheriff. I’ve got an awful feeling about all of this, and I’m afraid that James is in danger.”

Nathan chewed his lip, thinking it over. “We can’t both go to fetch the sheriff,” he murmured. “We’ll come back to find the house and barn ablaze, probably.”

“That’s why I said that I’ll go.”

He shook his head. “No, Sophia, it’s dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll take one of the horses.”

“Sophia…”

“Listen,” she moved closer to him, laying her hand gently on his arm. “We can’t both go, can we? It’s just as dangerous for me to stay here alone. At least if I go, I’ll have the horse, and you can keep an eye on things here.”

Nathan shook his head. “I can’t let you do this, Sophia.”

Sophia sighed. “We have to, Nathan. It’s that, or we just wait and hope that James is all right.”

“He might be. He’s cleverer than you think.”

“I didn’t say that he wasn’t. But do you really want to take the risk?”

Nathan thought it over. The simple answer was no. He didn’t want to lose his oldest, dearest friend. James had been there for him when nobody else was, and it would be unforgiveable to let him down now.

“Let’s flip a coin,” he said finally. “Heads you leave the ranch, tails I do. Does that sound fair?”

Sophia nodded. “All right. It’s dangerous either way, I suppose.”

Nathan scrambled in his pocket for a silver coin. He clutched it in his palm for a moment, then tossed it in the air before he could reconsider. Snatching it out of the air, Nathan slapped it down on the back of his other hand.

Heads peered up at them.

“Looks like I’m going, then,” Sophia said lightly, and Nathan’s stomach plummeted.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” he whispered, voice strained. “I can’t... can’t bear to lose you.”

Sophia stepped even closer, reaching up to cup his cheek. Standing up on her tiptoes, she pressed a kiss to his other

cheek.

“Stay safe until I get back,” she murmured. “We’ll talk more about our future when I return. You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

Nathan had to smile at that. “*You* be careful.”

Sophia moved quickly after that. She tossed a shawl over her shoulders, pulled on a pair of boots, and let herself out of the kitchen door. Nathan stood on the porch, heart thudding at being out in the open, and watched her dart around the courtyard. He almost stopped breathing when she disappeared into the barn. She reappeared only a few minutes later, leading a saddled-up Byron. Flashing him a quick smile, Sophia nimbly mounted the horse, and then they were off, disappearing over the summit of the hill.

Nathan stood there for a moment or two, staring off in the direction that Sophia and Bryon had disappeared. He moved back inside, closing and locking the door. The house was very quiet without Sophia.

*How did I manage to live like this before she came?* Nathan thought dizzily. Glancing back at the table, he wondered whether he should try and eat something, or just clear it all away.

Somebody hammered on the door.

Nathan started, spinning towards the door.

Was it Sophia? He prayed that it was. Maybe she'd decided against it, or... or...

He didn't let himself consider any other possibilities. Peering out of the window, Nathan scanned the porch, trying to work out who was at the door.

James's round, flushed face popped into view. Nathan flinched back, sucking in a breath.

His hands shook, trying to pull back the bolts and chains on the door. He flung it open and stopped dead.

James stood there, out of breath and a little sheepish.

Michael stood behind him.

He certainly looked the worse for wear. He was wearing the same clothes he'd worn when Nathan saw him yesterday, albeit crumpled and smelling of sweat and alcohol. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his hair hadn't been brushed. He needed a shave and wouldn't look Nathan in the eye.

"What's going on? Sophia just went out to find you," Nathan said hoarsely.

James swallowed hard, glancing over his shoulder at Michael.

"Well, I found Michael."

“I can see that.”

“He’s ready to talk. Properly, that is. Can we come in?”

Nathan wavered. There was no sign of Sophia now, and if Nathan wanted to catch up with her, he’d have to leave now.

But perhaps it would be safer if she went on to see the sheriff. At least she wouldn’t be here, with ominous, shadowy men lurking in every corner. Besides, Nathan didn’t particularly want Sophia and Michael to come face to face again.

He could always fetch her later.

“All right,” he said. “Come on in.”

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Three cups of coffee sat steaming on the freshly scrubbed kitchen table. Nathan had removed all the breakfast things. Nobody had much of an appetite, anyway. They all took a seat, and silence descended, heavy and uncomfortable.

Michael stared into his coffee; long white fingers wrapped around the cup.

“I stayed at the saloon after you left,” he said abruptly, not even glancing up at Nathan. “I drank the rest of that whiskey, then some more. Then my money ran out, and the saloon keeper threw me out. I don’t remember falling asleep outside. I just remember James waking me up.”

“You could have frozen to death overnight,” James murmured.

Michael swallowed hard, nodding. “Sometimes I wish I would.”

“Don’t talk like that, Michael,” Nathan said sharply. “Nobody here wants you dead or hurt, and we won’t stand to hear you talk about yourself like that. I want to help you.”

“Nobody can help me.”

Nathan’s heart clenched. He wanted nothing more than to throw his arms around his old friend, but somehow, he knew that it wasn’t the right time.

“Aren’t you going to let me try?” Nathan said. “You’re here, aren’t you? I know that what happened to you and your father wasn’t fair. I’m not trying to argue that my father was right not to pay you back. I know he didn’t have the money, but a debt is a debt.”

“Even one between friends?” Michael asked, a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

“Especially one between friends,” Nathan said firmly. “I can’t pay it back all at once, but I swear that I *will* pay it back.”

“I don’t have a dime to my name, Nathan.”



“Well, you can stay here, or stay with James, until you’ve got your money back,” Nathan insisted. “We’ll take care of you won’t we, James?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re not going to have to face all this alone, Michael. We’re friends. It’s always been the three of us, and we’ll stick together through thick and thin. Just give me an opportunity to make things right.”

Nathan paused for breath, watching Michael closely for his reaction. So far, there *was* no reaction. Michael stayed where he was, hunched over his coffee, staring down into its murky brown depths. He bit into his lower lip, worrying it between his teeth.

“I don’t think you’ll be so keen to help me when I tell you what I’ve done,” he whispered, speaking so quietly that Nathan almost didn’t hear him.

“What?” James prompted, a frown appearing between his brows. “What have you done? Michael?”

Michael closed his eyes. “I told you that I’d tell the gang that you had the money, didn’t I? Well, they didn’t believe me. Why should they? I told them that I owned this land and everything on it.”

He glanced up, meeting Nathan’s eye. Nathan sucked in a breath, trying to force down the sudden, nauseous sensation of

fear.

*What have you done, Michael?*

“Did they believe that?” he said, trying to keep his voice level.

Michael swallowed. “I forged a deed. To this land, to the house, to everything. I told them that it was mine. They would have killed me otherwise. I ran out of time a few days ago.”

“A deed?” James echoed. “How can you forge a deed?”

Michael shrugged. “It won’t stand up to close scrutiny. It’s just a forgery. But it was enough for the gang leader. His name is Evan, and that’s all I know about him. I don’t even think that it’s his real name. What I’m trying to tell you is that he thinks he can sell this land and this house to get back his money. He’s coming today to collect.”

An awful silence descended over the table. Michael had gone almost deathly pale and dropped his gaze down to his coffee again. He hadn’t even taken a sip.

“Still want to help me?” Michael whispered.

Nathan didn’t know what to feel. There was anger there, as well as hurt that his old friend would have done such a cruel thing.

But he was still Nathan’s friend.

“Of course, I do,” Nathan said, a little shakily. “As you can imagine, I’m hopping mad at you, and we’ll definitely have words later. But for now, you’re my friend, and you’ll always be my friend. I can yell at you later. Right now, though, I want to go and get Sophia. She rode out to find James, and if the gang is coming to the ranch...”

Nathan didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to. James had gone horribly pale, and Michael looked as though he were going to be sick. Sophia wasn’t what the gang was after, but if their paths crossed...

Better not to think about that now.

“You two stay here,” Nathan said brusquely.

He got up from the table, carelessly bumping against it and spilling his coffee onto the wood. Thank heavens he’d kept his boots on, although Sophia wouldn’t be happy about that.

He fumbled with the lock on the door, fingers suddenly numb.

“I’m sure Sophia must have gotten through,” James said, getting up from the table. His chair scraped across the stone floor as he did so, a sound that set Nathan’s teeth on edge.

“What if she didn’t, though?” Nathan heard himself say. He got the lock open and turned his attention to the bolt. The wretched thing was horribly stiff and rusty. He should have

oiled it long before, but it was just another one of the endless jobs around the ranch that *needed* to be done but he simply didn't have time for.

“She’s a clever woman,” James insisted. “Clever, and slippery, you believe me. I bet she’s safe.”

“I can’t take that risk.”

The bolt scraped across, and Nathan threw open the door. Cold air rushed in – the morning sun hadn’t yet warmed up the world. Nathan stepped out onto the porch, then stopped short.

A man stood a few feet away from the porch, as if considering walking up the steps. He had his hands in his pockets and wore a wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his face. He was eyeing the house contemplatively and didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned or nervous at Nathan’s sudden appearance.

“Morning, friend,” the man said pleasantly. His voice was a low drawl, in an accent that Nathan couldn’t place. He had dark eyes and a graying black mustache. Otherwise, his features and clothes were so determinedly ordinary that Nathan wasn’t sure he could pick out the man again if he passed him by in the street.

“What are you doing here?”

The man only smiled at Nathan’s tone. “Well, that’s not friendly, is it? What if I were a lost traveler, seeking directions or shelter?”

“Are you a lost traveler?”

Nathan’s voice was hard and grim, and he could see the pleasantness fading out of the stranger’s face. Behind him, the porch creaked. Either James or Michael had stepped out of the house to stand behind Nathan. He didn’t dare glance over his shoulder to look. He didn’t dare tear his eyes away from the stranger.

Two gun holsters hung from the man’s hip, a subtle warning.

“I am not a lost traveller,” the man said lightly. “My name is Evan. I expect you’ve heard of me.”

## Chapter Thirty

“Yes,” Nathan said, cutting through the silence. “I have heard of you.”

Evan smiled. He seemed to be somewhere between thirty and forty, with a tanned, lined face and a placid expression that seemed more like a mask than anything else.

“Then you’ll know that this here is my property.”

There was movement on either side of Evan, and two more men appeared, coming around the sides of the house to stand beside Evan, one on either side. They were bland-looking, average men, but with heavy guns hanging at their hips and cold expressions in their eyes.

Evan didn’t glance at them, but his lips curled up under his mustache.

“These are two of my boys,” he said casually. “There’s another two out of the back door, if you were thinking to run for it. Not that I don’t mind you running, of course. It’s not you that I’m here for.”

“You can’t take Michael,” Nathan blurted out, before he could consider the wisdom of admitting that Michael was on the premises at all. He had a feeling that they were well past that, though.

Evan tsked. “I’m not here for Mr. Jasper, even though he does owe me money. No, his debt is settled – halfway settled, at least – by handing over this here land and house. The same house you’re standing in front of, friend.”

Nathan raked a hand through his hair. He hated having it dangling in his eyes, especially at a time like this. It wasn’t as if he could start trying to tie it back now, though. He blinked, trying to toss golden strands out of his eyes.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Evan, but you’ve made a mistake. This is my land, and my house.”

“I’ve a deed that says otherwise.”

“That deed isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.”

Evan pursed his lips. “You think not?”

“He’s right,” Michael spoke up from behind Nathan. His voice was weak and trembling, but he stepped into the light. He was the one who Nathan had heard stepping onto the porch. James was lingering in the doorway, ashen faced. “I’m sorry, Evan. This land was never mine to give. I wasn’t lying when I said that my family had owned land around here, and a house too. But the bank took all that long ago. I don’t even have a dime to my name.”

There was a long, awful silence. Evan’s expression didn’t change, but his men glanced nervously at him, as if expecting some sort of explosion. None of them spoke, not even to throw insults at Nathan and Michael.

That seemed a little off. They weren't just deferential to Evan; they were afraid of him. Michael was afraid of him too. Nobody spoke while Evan stayed quiet. They were waiting, all of them.

“Well, now,” Evan said finally. “That’s a disappointment, and no mistake.”

“Listen,” Nathan said firmly, taking a step forward. The men on either side of Evan tensed, as if expecting an attack, but Evan didn't even blink. “Michael’s going to get some money soon. Not a lot, but a little. He can pay you off, if you’re willing to be patient. I promise you that.”

Evan sighed, shaking his head. He almost seemed disappointed, like a father confronted with a misbehaving child.

And yet there was an aura of menace underneath it all, something that made Nathan’s skin prickle.

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t do that, Mr... Rowe, isn’t it? Nathan Rowe? With the pretty young wife? Everyone’s talking about you in town. Congratulations, by the way. See, I had a feeling that Mr. Jasper here was defrauding us. I’m a trusting soul – it’s a weakness of mine, and folks often take advantage of that.”

*Somehow, I doubt it,* Nathan thought grimly.



“But Mr. Jasper and I can discuss his deceit at a later date. For now, I’m here for my money.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Nathan snapped, teeth gritted. “But there’s nothing for you here. Get gone, or I’ll call the sheriff.”

“How about you get out of my house, Mr. Rowe? Leave now, quietly, and we won’t need to make a fuss about all this.”

There was another long pause, fraught with tension. The two men on either side of Evan were poised for action, muscles taut, eyes fixed on Nathan.

“Nathan,” James said, in a hoarse whisper, “Get inside the house. Now.”

Nathan swallowed hard, glancing sideways at Michael. His friend’s face was waxy white, and he was sweating despite the cool morning air.

He gave a tiny nod, and Nathan pressed his lips together grimly.

This was how they were going to do it, then.

“Get inside!” Nathan bellowed. There was a desperate scrambling for the door, and all three of them heaved their weight against it. It slammed shut, just as someone barreled heavily into it from the other side. They locked every lock and pulled across every bolt, just as a foot slammed into the door. And again, and again. Somebody was trying to break it down.

Not Evan, Nathan guessed. He didn't seem like the sort of man to break down his own doors.

“James! The back door!” Nathan hollered.

“Already locked!”

“Reinforce it with something, it's only closed by one old lock.”

James gave a short nod and raced away through the kitchen.

“Michael, the windows,” Nathan gasped, bracing his shoulder against the door. “It's too late to lock the shutters, but we should be able to...”

On cue, a rock smashed through the window, shattering glass everywhere. It bounced across the kitchen table, the hard stone gouging out a chip from the wood.

“I'll nail wooden boards across the windows,” Michael spoke up. “Just one or two. Like when we played forts, do you remember? It should keep them out.”

“Good idea. You can find old wood and a few nails in the pantry. Quickly!”

Without warning, the shouts and thundering footsteps on the porch outside ceased. Whoever was flinging himself at the door stopped.

“Boys, come on down here,” Evan said, his voice as calm and measured as if they were out for a pleasant morning stroll.

Nathan pressed his ear to the door, straining to listen.

Michael appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, with planks of wood under his arm.

“What’s going on?” he asked, breathless. “They’ve gone quiet.”

“Nobody’s out the back,” James called. “Nathan, can you hear anything?”

“I might be able to hear, if you two would pipe down!” Nathan snapped irritably. He held his breath.

It was no good. Nathan could hear the sound of Evan speaking, but he couldn’t hear any of the actual words. All sorts of horrible ideas sprang to mind, not limited to Evan riding into town to catch Sophia, or simply setting fire to the house.

But the silence dragged on.

“Shall I take a peek out of the window?” Michael whispered.

“No, don’t,” Nathan said sharply. “They might have a sniper trained on us.”

He shivered at that idea. Nathan had seen too many friends and comrades struck down simply by poking their head above the safety of the shelter at the wrong time.

Abruptly, the sound of smashing wood broke the silence, followed immediately by the frantic squawking of chickens. Nathan’s heart sank.

“The chicken coop,” he whispered. “They’re going for the chicken coop.”

“What? Why?” James asked.

Nathan didn’t answer. He knew what Evan’s plan was now, and it was worse than what he could have imagined.

He pressed his forehead against the fine wooden door his father had built and imagined Evan’s men kicking in the door to the barn. He imagined them pulling up the plants in the garden, tearing down the fences. All the work Nathan had broken his back to complete would be destroyed in a matter of minutes.

He closed his eyes, ignoring James and Michael’s murmured conversation behind him. It had all been for nothing, hadn’t it?

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“I think they’re gone,” James called tentatively from upstairs. By racing from room to room and peering out of the

bedroom windows, he could look all around the house and most of the surrounding land. The men had jumped on horses they'd stolen from Nathan's barn and galloped off some time ago. Still, nobody had made a move to leave the house.

Wooden boards were nailed across all of the windows. Only one window had been boarded up before a rock could be thrown through it. They'd left the bedroom windows alone. The boards kept out the light, making the inside of Nathan's home dark and eerie. Nathan himself sat on the kitchen floor, his back resting up against the door. Michael had stood in the middle of the kitchen and peered out through the gaps in the boards, watching the destruction. Nathan hadn't been able to bring himself to watch.

"I never thought... I..." Michael rasped, not looking at Nathan. "Sorry isn't good enough, I know that."

Nathan swallowed. The urge to scream and bellow and smash things had faded some time ago. Now he felt numb and weak, like a puppet whose strings had been cut unexpectedly. He didn't feel any anger, or fear, or anything. Just that awful despair.

What had been the point of it all?

"We're friends, Michael," Nathan said, his voice low. "Maybe you'll trust me next time."

Michael dropped his chin to his chest. He'd been crying, Nathan could see the streaks on his cheek and his reddened eyes.

No point delaying the inevitable. Nathan hauled himself to his feet and turned to the door. Click. Click. Click. The locks and bolts were undone, and the door opened with a painstaking squeak. On the porch, broken glass crunched underfoot, mixed with soil and destroyed plants from the window boxes.

Nathan barely noticed it.

Across the courtyard, the wreck of the barn still smoldered. They hadn't bothered to really burn the thing to the ground. The roof was caved in, and one side was all burned away, before the fire fizzled and died. Some of the other outbuildings, less sturdy than the barn, had simply been kicked into firewood. The animal feed had been dragged out into the courtyard. The hay and straw which hadn't burned had been scattered everywhere and made inedible. The chicken feed was all gone, probably emptied into the well behind the house.

The horses were gone. No doubt they'd tried to take them – horses like that weren't cheap – but by the looks of things, most of the horses had fled, terrified. One might have thought that five men could only do so much damage.

Crops had been destroyed, the chickens released, and their necks wrung, when they'd been caught. Nathan spotted a couple of horses frisking around loose in a nearby field. The rest were nowhere to be seen. There was no sign of Radish, and Nathan found himself hoping fervently that she wasn't one of the horses the men had taken for themselves. They were fine horses and would fetch a good price. Not enough to clear Michael's debt, though.

Behind him, Nathan heard a hoarse sob.

“Nathan, I’m *sorry*.”

Michael, of course. Nathan thought about turning around and offering some sort of comfort. This was Michael’s fault, of course, but it was clear that his conscience was torturing him. He was full of regret and shame, and perhaps that might be the best thing for him right now. He’d made a mistake, and his friends were there to support him.

Nathan thought about doing it, but instead he just sank down onto the ground, sitting numbly on the rough stone of the courtyard, legs splayed out in front of him. The fence that he and James had spent hours repairing had been torn out in patches, the posts viciously snapped in two.

“I can’t do it,” Nathan heard himself say. “I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this place. Every piece of wood, every plant, every animal had something of my parents in it. Something of *Jack*, and they just... just destroyed it all! I can’t fix this now. It’s too much.”

“Nathan...” James murmured, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on Nathan’s shoulder. Nathan wrenched his arm away. He felt guilty over behaving so unkindly to James, but he couldn’t stop himself. It was as if someone else had control of his body.

“They’ve ruined everything,” Nathan said softly. His eyes were misting up with tears, and it was only a matter of time before they started to fall.

In the silence that followed, all three of them clearly heard hoofbeats in the distance. Horses, heading this way.

“Careful,” James said, his voice sharp with fear. “It sounds like they’re coming back. What should we do? Nathan? What should we do?”

Nathan didn’t even bother to glance in the direction of the thundering hooves. He just stared out at his ruined farm. It was just a smoking, hollowed out shell now.

“Let them come,” he answered absently. “I don’t care anymore.”



## Chapter Thirty-One

Sophia wanted to scream with frustration. Sheriff Thomas was a kindly man in his fifties, who should probably have retired many years ago. Still, he'd listened to her carefully, asking additional questions. He'd suggested more than once that it might all be a misunderstanding, and Sophia had to fight down her panic and fear that he wouldn't believe her. When he'd announced that he would round up his deputies and head on over to Rowe Ranch immediately, Sophia had felt like weeping with relief.

She hadn't realized that it would take them so *long* to get ready to leave.

Sheriff Thomas and his graying old mare trotted briskly but steadily along the road, entirely unhurried. The handful of lanky young deputies trotted alongside him, careful not to outpace the sheriff himself.

"Please, you must hurry!" Sophia burst out. "It's important. They may need our help."

"Calm down, little lady," Sheriff Thomas said comfortably, patting his horse's glossy neck. "No point us rushing along and winding up in a ditch with a broken leg, eh? I'm sure that they'll be right as rain once we get there, and all will be well."

*And won't you feel silly,* was the unspoken remark.

Sophia clenched her teeth. She could feel Byron itching to go, ready to gallop. He could sense her irritation. But there was no point racing ahead.

*Please be all right,* Sophia closed her eyes and sent up a quick prayer for Nathan. *Please be safe. I'm coming.*

“What’s that coming down the road towards us, sheriff?” one of the deputies called, and Sophia’s eyes flew open.

A dark speck was moving down the hillside from Rowe Ranch, quickly resolving itself to a horse, galloping at full, frantic speed. It had no rider. It was racing towards them, moving erratically, ears pinned.

The horse was terrified.

“Radish,” Sophia breathed.

“What was that?” Sheriff Thomas said, coming to a stop. “Miss Sophia?”

Sophia didn’t listen. Her eyes were fixed on Radish, racing towards them. She needed to stop her, needed to find out what was going on.

Radish screeched to a halt in front of the riders, whinnying with fright, eyes rolling in her head. Sophia slipped off Byron’s back, and moved softly towards Radish, hands held up.

“Miss Sophia, you stay back from that horse,” Sheriff Thomas said sharply. “A scared horse is a dangerous horse.”

As if to prove his point, Radish reared up with a scream, hooves flying and windmilling.

Sophia shrank back, willing her heart to stop pounding in terror. Radish landed with all four hooves on the ground, a tremendous *thump* that lifted up clouds of dust. Her rolling eyes landed on Sophia, and she could have sworn she saw a flicker of recognition there.

“It’s all right, girl. You’re safe now. You’re safe,” Sophia soothed, reaching out a tentative hand towards Radish.

Radish snorted, tossing her head, but her ears relaxed a little. Sophia touched her soft nose, careful not to make any sudden movements.

“You’re safe,” Sophia repeated, and Radish blew out from her nose. She was breathing heavily, sides slick with sweat. There was a nasty graze on her back, and Sophia frowned. “Sheriff, what’s that?”

Sheriff Thomas sucked in a breath. “Powder burns. Someone’s fired a gun at this animal. No wonder she’s so terrified.”

“Nathan would never shoot at his animals.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. Come on, boys, we’d better hurry on down to the ranch. Miss Sophia, follow

behind.”

“I don’t want to follow behind.”

“I’d prefer it,” Sheriff Thomas said grimly. “We don’t know what we’ll find there.”

This was a different man to the amiable, skeptical sheriff who had agreed to accompany Sophia back home. Sheriff Thomas was grim and serious, and his mood had rapidly passed on to his deputies.

With a rush, the group of them began to move forward, galloping now when they’d trotted before. Sophia had nothing to tie Radish with but was relieved to see the mare begin to lope steadily after Sophia and Byron. She wasn’t going to wander, at least.

As they crested the final hill, Sophia saw a plume of smoke rising. She felt sick.

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They stood on the top of the hill and stared silently at the destruction for a moment or two. The barn was half burned, the animals nowhere to be seen. The chicken coop was turned into nothing but firewood, with a few limp bodies of dead birds scattered around. The rest of the chickens, Sophia guessed, would have fled into the nearby woodland, to hide in panic until night fell and the foxes came out. Crops and plants had been dug up and torn away, manure heaped into the little stream that bisected two of the fields, creating a makeshift dam. The water was spilling onto the grass at either side of the stream, and it was all horribly contaminated with the manure. It was a clever piece of sabotage.

The house seemed relatively untouched, or least it did until Sophia spotted the glitter of broken glass, the smashed windows, the dents and scratches in the front door.

A man sat on the ground in front of the porch steps, staring at the wreckage. Two men hovered behind him, peering worriedly up at them. They must have heard the sheriff and Sophia coming and were probably afraid that the saboteurs were back.

“That’s James,” Sophia said, a rush of relief making her dizzy. The man beside James was both familiar and not, all at once. Then Sophia remembered him.

“That’s Michael! That’s Michael Jasper!” she gasped, pointing at the stranger.

Sheriff Thomas’ face hardened. “Ah. I heard he was back in town. How much do you want to bet that he’s got something to do with this?”

“I wonder why he’s here,” Sophia murmured. She spurred Byron forward and cantered down the hill into the courtyard.

Nathan glanced up when he heard her coming, and Sophia’s heart ached at the plaintive, miserable despair in his eyes.

*He’s lost everything, she thought, and then, no, not everything. Almost everything, perhaps. But not everything.*

“Nathan?” Sophia spoke quietly, slipping off Byron. Nathan stayed where he was, staring into space.

James appeared beside Sophia. “I hear that you went to look for me,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

Sophia smiled wryly. “I wasn’t going to leave you alone again. Looks like you didn’t need my help.”

James shrugged, glancing back at Michael. “No, but he did. The gang leader who’s after us is called Evan.”

“Evan? Evan what?”

He shrugged again. “Just Evan. They thought Nathan’s farm belonged to Michael, and they were going to take it for themselves. They weren’t happy when they found out otherwise, as you can see.”

Sophia bit her lip. “Well, what now? What about...” she paused, glancing at the destruction. “What about this?”

“First things first,” Sheriff Thomas spoke up, striding into the courtyard. He surveyed the chaos with a practiced eye. “Round up those animals. I see some horses in that field there, and I reckon the pigs will root for mushrooms at the edge of the forest. Jim, round up all the pigs you can. Cows will come home when it’s time to be milked. Horace, Eddie, you get the horses in. Jacob, you catch all the chickens you can. Any other animals, Miss Sophia?”

Sophia shook her head. “Not down near the house. What about the damage?”

“The damage will still be here tomorrow morning, but the animals might not be,” Sheriff Thomas replied. “James, and, uh, Michael, you boys help me make this barn shipshape.”

“How?” James burst out. “Look at it! It’s ruined!”

Sheriff Thomas scoffed. “Ruined? They did a bad job of that. They ought to have razed it to the ground. Not a stone left on a stone, as the good book says. No, we’ve got three – uh, two and a half decent walls. No roof, but it’s a start. If we can cobble together a square something to keep the animals in, we can take a breath and work out what to do next.”

James gave a short nod. “I’ll get the tools. Michael, come help me.”

Everyone departed in a hurry, eager to be helpful. That left only Sheriff Thomas, Sophia, and the silent Nathan in the courtyard.

“What about me? What can I do?” Sophia asked.

The sheriff flashed a wry smile and nodded at Nathan. “See to him, won’t you?”

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Sophia sat down beside Nathan, close enough for their shoulders to press together, and the two of them watched Sheriff Thomas pace around the barn, eyeing the damage.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Nathan spoke first. His voice sounded oddly muffled, as if he’d been crying, even though his eyes were dry. “I thought... well, never mind what I thought. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I shouldn’t have left you.”

“You wanted to help James. That’s the sort of person you are. Besides, you being here wouldn’t have changed anything. All of this,” Nathan gestured viciously at the destruction, “Would still have happened.”

“We’ll rebuild it,” Sophia said. It seemed like the right thing to say, but there was nothing but anguish and emptiness in Nathan’s face. This had hit him hard.

“I rebuilt it before,” Nathan said softly. “When I came back from the war to an empty house and a heart full of grief. I rebuilt it then, and it nearly killed me. I think that part of me wanted it to kill me. I thought it was over, and now this.”

Sophia bit her lip. A lump was rising to her throat at the raw grief in Nathan’s voice. She rested her cheek against his shoulder and felt him tilt his head to rest against hers.

“But you were alone then,” Sophia said softly. “You aren’t alone now, are you?”

“I can’t protect you, Sophia. When those men were here – I was useless. I did nothing.”



“What should you have done?”

“Protected my home. Driven them away. That’s what a real man would have done.”

Sophia sat upright again, shuffling around to look Nathan directly in the eye.

“A real man would forgive his old friend, even after his old friend had hurt him more times than he could count. A real man would accept help when he needed it. A real man would welcome a strange woman into his home and heart. You’ve done all that, haven’t you? You’re the best man I’ve ever known, Nathan. Rebuilding again won’t be easy, but you’re not doing it alone. Look at how many people are here! Sheriff Thomas, all those deputies, – I should probably try to remember their names – James, and Michael. You aren’t going to have to do any of this alone.”

“You forgot one vital person in that list,” Nathan said, a tiny smile. “You.”

Sophia smiled, color rushing to her cheeks. “I didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“*Presumptuous?*” Nathan reached forward hesitantly, cupping Sophia’s face in his hands. His palms were warm, and rough but not harsh. She closed her eyes, leaning into the touch. “Sophia, you are the most important person to me. I... I never could have dreamt of this. You, me, all of this. It’s like a dream come true, and I keep expecting to wake up.”

Sophia chuckled, opening her eyes. “You won’t. I’ve pinched myself a few times over the weeks. This is real.”

She placed her hands over Nathan’s, feeling their warm, well-earned strength.

*If you could only see me now, Aunt Laura, she thought, with a mixture of glee and triumph. If you could see how happy I am, you’d be furious. You’d be furious, and Jazzy would be thrilled.*

“They pulled up the plants you put in for Jazzy,” Nathan whispered, misery creeping across his face again.

Sophia smiled. “Then we’ll plant more. They’ll have to try harder to make us forget Jazzy, won’t they?”

On impulse, Sophia leaned forward, slowly and hesitantly. She pressed her lips to Nathan’s, feeling his golden stubble scratch at her skin. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation.

When she pulled away, Nathan was red, but smiling.

“I love you, Nathan Rowe,” Sophia murmured.

“And I love you, Sophia,” Nathan replied, his smile widening. “Don’t look now, but we’re being watched.”

Sophia glanced over her shoulder to see Sheriff Thomas and a stray pig staring in their direction. Sheriff Thomas

hastily turned around and pretended to be inspecting a broken wooden board on the ground.

The pig continued to stare shamefully.

“Come on,” Sophia said, getting to her feet and extending her hand to Nathan. “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

“I feel as if I’m not needed. Sheriff Thomas doled out all the work very effectively.”

“Then let’s start on sweeping all that broken glass off the porch. You can do that, and I’ll work on making food and drink for all these people.”

Nathan chuckled. He took her hand, letting her haul him to his feet.

“That sounds like an excellent plan. You... you know this isn’t over, don’t you? You know they’ll be back?”

Sophia’s expression hardened. “Oh, I know. In fact, I’m counting on it.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

“Come on, lads! Hurry, hurry, hurry! No time to lose!”

Sophia woke with a start, vaguely aware of noise and bustle going on outside. For an instant, the panic came flooding back – the gang might have returned – until she recognized Pastor Sixsmith’s booming voice.

The morning was well along, and Sophia had slept in. That was hardly surprising, since she’d lain awake for most of the night, ears pricked up for any sound from outside. Sheriff Thomas had left two of his lanky young deputies to stand guard, but they were nervous young men and didn’t particularly inspire confidence.

James and Michael had stayed the night, of course, and all four of them had retreated to their rooms once it got dark. Somehow, their newly found determination and hope flickered away with the sun.

Sophia peered out of her room and saw that the doors to James and Nathan’s rooms were open. She thought that Michael had slept on the parlor floor last night. If he’d slept at all, that is. Tiptoeing down the stairs, she saw them both, standing in the open doorway, looking out.

“They’ve been here since dawn,” Nathan said as Sophia descended the stairs, not looking around. “The pastor told them not to knock, as we probably needed our sleep.”

“He was right,” James murmured, glancing over his shoulder at Sophia with a wry smile. “I never heard a thing until half an hour ago. Michael made breakfast, by the way.”

Sophia glanced over at the kitchen table, spotting Michael for the first time. He sat hunched over, pale and listless, smiling nervously when he caught Sophia’s eye.

There was a sad little offering of burnt toast, rubbery eggs, and cold porridge sitting on the table too, with bowls and spoons out for four people. It wasn’t a particularly appetizing breakfast, but it was apparent that Michael had worked hard on it.

“Thank you, Michael,” Sophia said quietly, and was rewarded by a relieved smile.

Outside was a flurry of activity. Pushing past Nathan and James, Sophia stepped out onto the porch, and let out a gasp of surprise.

There were dozens of men and women from the town swarming over the damaged outbuildings. A couple of young women were appearing over the hill with a small flock of assorted animals in their wake. A lanky youth was determinedly rebuilding the damaged chicken coop, which they hadn’t been able to fix yesterday. The animals that had been recovered yesterday still stood in the ramshackle shelter constructed out of what was left of the barn. A group of men were busy rebuilding the barn around the mildly confused animals, using supplies and tools which they appeared to have brought themselves.

Even old Mrs. Harrison was there, with a basket full of goodies and a huge flask of lemonade. She caught Sophia's eye and gave her a cheery wave. Sophia waved back, not entirely sure what she was seeing.

"What's going on?" she said, glancing back at Nathan for an explanation.

Nathan was smiling. It was a soft smile, just a gentle curve of his lips, but happiness was shining out of his face.

"Sheriff Thomas spread the word about what happened here. Pastor Sixsmith got to know it, of course, and rounded up a few volunteers to help rebuild."

Sophia swallowed hard, a lump suddenly forming in her throat.

"They... they're here to help us?" she managed.

James grinned at her. "Of course, they are. We're all in it together, aren't we?"

Sophia glanced back at the bustling activity out in the courtyard. Pastor Sixsmith was darting between the groups like a bee between flowers. He offered advice to the men rebuilding the barn, asked the young women to put the newly recovered animals with the rest, and held a plank of wood still for the young man rebuilding the chicken coop. The man seemed to thrive on activity.

He looked up and caught Sophia's eye, and his craggy old face creased into a smile. Murmuring something to the young man, Pastor Sixsmith darted neatly through the chaos towards the porch.

"Morning, all!" the pastor boomed out, beaming around. "I hope you all slept well after your scare yesterday. Sheriff Thomas intends to come up and check on you all soon. By the way, those two deputies are worse than useless. I arrived at dawn, and they were both fast asleep on the porch."

Nathan snorted. "I feel safer already. You didn't have to do this, Pastor Sixsmith. I know that you're the one behind it all."

Pastor Sixsmith pursed his lips. "Behind all this? Do you mean your friends and neighbors eagerly coming to help you out? I can't possibly take credit. After all, I'm not the one repairing your barn, or rounding up your chickens. I'm only the supervisor. If that, even." He chuckled.

Sophia felt an overwhelming sensation of relief settle in her chest. Perhaps it was too soon, but it seemed as though everything was going to be all right. She watched the men and women bustle around the place and realized that she didn't even recognize half of them. That meant that they didn't know her, and yet they were keen to come up here and help out a neighbor.

*I would never have seen this in Chicago,* Sophia thought dizzily. She couldn't imagine Aunt Laura packing up her tools and baked goods to help a neighbor who'd hit a run of bad luck. She couldn't imagine any of Aunt Laura's disapproving, sour-faced friends doing that, either. She could see them all

now, clustered around on uncomfortable sofas in the “good parlor”, sipping tea and eating cake, venom flowing off their tongues.

So-and-so’s daughter was too cheeky. She was *fast*, they were all sure of it. Mr. Smith had fallen on hard times and was looking shabby. Mrs. Smith hadn’t paid her grocery bill in too long. The new schoolteacher bringing in “New Ideas” was an upstart little thing with ideas above her station.

On and on it went, a seemingly endless spring of gossip and nastiness. Frankly, it always left Sophia feeling exhausted from their constant demands and sharp tongues. They never talked about helping any of those people, only about how each person and their family fell short of what was right and proper.

Pastor Sixsmith cleared his throat, breaking into her thoughts. “I hear that Michael is here,” he said quietly. “How is he, Nathan?”

Nathan bit his lip. “He’s down, I think.”

The pastor nodded. “May I speak to him?”

“Of course. He’s inside.”

Nathan stepped aside, allowing Pastor Sixsmith to peer inside. Michael glanced up, an expression of apprehension and horror flashing across his face.

Pastor Sixsmith only smiled kindly and stepped inside. James looked as though he wanted to follow, but the pastor



firmly but gently closed the door in his face.

“I assume they want privacy, then,” James mumbled. Nathan chuckled at him, shaking his head.

The three of them sat there for a moment or two, still trying to get their bearings.

Sophia reached out and took Nathan’s hand. He glanced down at her, smiling.

“I told you,” she whispered softly. “I told you that it would be all right.”

Nathan leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I’m glad you’re here with me, Sophia,” he murmured. “Should we go and help?”

“Michael tried to help earlier,” James butted in. “A couple of the men told him to get lost. It seems that they heard what he did, and they aren’t quite as ready as Nathan to forgive.”

Nathan frowned, nibbling his lip. “I don’t want Michael to be punished for this. Evan and his gang are going to be back, that’s for sure. They stole a few bits and pieces from around the ranch, but they can’t have made much money. They’ll want the rest of their payment. We need to present a united front if we’re going to be able to resist them.”

Sophia shivered at that. She hated the idea of fighting, of living on edge and waiting for something terrible to happen.

Somehow, though, it was different when one faced these things with friends, rather than alone.

The door opened behind them, and Pastor Sixsmith stepped out, followed by Michael. Michael looked a little sheepish, but there was color in his face that hadn't been there before.

“Can I have everyone's attention?” the pastor boomed out. Activity and chatter stopped, and everyone turned, craning their neck to hear what Pastor Sixsmith had to say. A flurry of murmurs broke out when they spotted Michael. He flushed, but stayed where he was, chin lifted.

“That's more like the old Michael,” Nathan murmured to Sophia.

“We've had a shock in town, haven't we?” Pastor Sixsmith continued, glancing around the little crowd. “We're all fond of Nathan, and his lovely new wife, Sophia, and of course James. I didn't have to ask any of you to help – you all turned up on my door when you heard about this. You're all fine men and women, that much is clear. But I don't want to see Michael Jasper punished for any of this, do you all understand? If Nathan Rowe has seen fit to forgive him, I'm sure that none of us could have a grudge to hold against him.”

The pastor had a nice way about him, Sophia thought. He didn't sound as if he were accusing anyone, or hectoring them, or trying to make people squirm. His voice was light and pleasant, and it was clear that the workers were hanging on his every word.

“Going forward, we’ll keep pulling together the way we have done before,” Pastor Sixsmith continued. “We aren’t the ones who break things down, who destroy and threaten and bully. We are the ones who rebuild. That’s what we’ll do here, today. We’ll rebuild. You all know that Nathan and James here would have done exactly the same if any one of you were in the same situation.”

There was a general murmuring of agreement.

“So,” Pastor Sixsmith concluded, “We’re all in this together, yes? We’ll pull together and stay focused, and this gang of bullies and thieves won’t break our spirit. Yes?”

“Yes!” everyone chorused, including Sophia. Activity burst out again, even more determined than before.

Nathan joined the group of men rebuilding the barn, and after a moment’s hesitation, Michael joined him. James hurried over to the young man rebuilding the chicken coop and began to help him with that.

Sophia hesitated, not entirely sure what she could do. Pastor Sixsmith had already plunged back into the fray and was helping a couple of men lever a heavy wooden beam into place.

“It’s Sophia, isn’t it?”

She flinched, glancing up at a tall, thin young woman with fire-red hair and a soft Welsh accent. She was smiling.

“Yes, I’m Sophia. You were one of the women who brought back the rest of our horses, weren’t you? Thank you so much.”

The woman smiled. “Yes, I’m Shirley. My sisters and I help our parents raise horses, so I’ve got quite a knack with them. Do you want to help us take care of the animals? They’re rather skittish at the moment, as you can imagine.”

“Yes, I’d like that very much,” Sophia replied. She had the strangest feeling that she’d just found a friend.

Then the sound of hoofbeats cut through the air, and Sophia’s shoulders stiffened. She glanced frantically around, but nobody else seemed to have heard. A man on a horse was galloping down the road towards them, and Sophia didn’t recognize him.

“It’s all right,” Shirley said gently. “It’s Jim, one of the deputies. He’s my brother. You needn’t be afraid.”

“Oh,” Sophia murmured, color rushing to her face. “I’m... I’m just a little on edge.”

Shirley nodded sympathetically. “I understand. I meant to ask about your husband’s friend. His name is James, isn’t it? I’ve seen him before, in church, but never had the chance to...”

“Mrs. Rowe!” Deputy Jim bellowed, and it took Sophia a moment or two to realize that he was talking to her. He trotted

towards her, and she spotted the same fire-red hair that Shirley had. The poor man was streaked with sweat, gasping for breath.

“What’s the matter?” Sophia asked, a twinge of fear sparking in her chest.

“Sheriff Thomas sent me to find you and Nathan, as quick as I can,” Deputy Jim answered, still out of breath. “Nothing else is wrong, but he did a little investigating last night, and he thinks he knows where Evan and his gang are holed up. If we go now, there’s a good chance that we can catch them before they come back to attack again. They’re hiding in the forest, but once night falls, they’ll strike again. We have to move now, do you understand? There’s no time to waste.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Like every other child who grew up in this town, Nathan's childhood had been speckled by warnings.

*Don't play near the old well. Don't stay out after dark. And don't go to Arrow Ridge.*

Of course, that was like a red rag to the bull. It was a mark of bravery to visit Arrow Ridge, and you always had to pick up one of the strange, triangular-shaped rocks found beside the fast-moving stream, to prove that you'd been there.

Coming back to Arrow Ridge as an adult, though, Nathan understood why their parents had always told them to stay away.

The Ridge was situated deep in the forest, which had probably had a name once, but whatever it was had been long forgotten. The ground was unusually rocky, and the little pebbles that crunched under their feet soon turned into a huge, craggy boulders. It would be easy to slip and crack open your skull on those unforgiving rocks.

They climbed higher and higher, with a slip of a young boy leading the way. His name was Devon, and he'd spotted the gang hiding out here, and gone running home to his grandfather, Sheriff Thomas, to share the news.

They all climbed in silence: Sheriff Thomas, his handful of deputies, Nathan, and Sophia.

James had wanted to come, but after the steep, relentless climb, Nathan was glad he'd talked him out of it. Michael was unceremoniously told to stay back at the ranch, just in case.

That only left Sophia.

Nathan glanced at her back over his shoulder. The climb had left her breathless, but not exhausted. He'd tried to convince her to stay back at the ranch, under the keen eye of Pastor Sixsmith, but of course she wouldn't have it.

*I think that's one of the things I love about her, Nathan thought. Maybe I need someone who's a little bit stubborn.*

A piece of rock broke away under Nathan's feet, bouncing down the hill behind them, clattering loudly.

"Hush!" Sheriff Thomas hissed. They all froze, hunched over in the half walk, half climb needed to get to the top of the Ridge. At the top of Arrow Ridge was the source of the stream, along with a cluster of deep, musty caves. It was in one of these caves that Devon had spotted a group of men, one of whom had "a nasty smile and a mustache that was going gray".

The silence filled the air. Not even birds were calling around here.

Sheriff Thomas let out a heavy breath and gestured for them to keep moving onwards.

“It’s not too late to go back,” Nathan whispered to Sophia. “It would be safer back in town.”

“I don’t care about being safe. I care about catching these men who are making our lives a misery. We’ll have no peace until they’re gone.”

Nathan bit his lip. “I want you to be safe. Just... just promise you’ll stay behind me, won’t you? And keep your shotgun handy.”

Sophia swallowed, nodding. Nathan knew that she didn’t feel comfortable with the heavy gun slung over her shoulder. He had a pistol, but that was all. It wouldn’t be easy to get a clear shot in a place like this, not when the trees closed in again.

Apparently, the original settlers had cornered a group of native people right here, at Arrow Ridge. They’d slaughtered them all, of course. Men, women, and children. Their blood stained the stream red, and broken arrowheads lined the stony banks. The story had always made Nathan shudder to hear it. It was told as if the settlers were the heroes, boldly wiping out the savages, but that didn’t seem right. The native people were here first, weren’t they? This was a big land, with room for everyone. Was it fair to pit arrows and spears against bullets and swords?

Not that he’d dare say anything like that. Somebody said once that not all of the native people had been murdered, and some had escaped and gone further west. Nathan often found himself wondering where they’d gone, or what they would do now that their land had been snatched out from under them.



He gave himself a little shake, focusing on the task at hand. The path – not that it was anything more than a slightly smoother succession of rocks – was sloping upwards more steeply now. Sheriff Thomas kept gesturing for them all to be quiet. He'd talked a lot about the element of surprise before they headed out here, and Nathan was under no illusions that the element of surprise was really all they had going for them.

Oh, they technically outnumbered the gang – there were five members, including Evan – but that meant nothing. Sheriff Thomas was an old man, and the three deputies he'd brought were young, scared, and inexperienced. Nobody else could be spared. Then there was Nathan and Sophia.

Nathan closed his eyes, suppressing a shudder.

*Stay calm*, he reminded himself.

In an instant, he was long gone from Arrow Ridge. He was climbing up a steep, muddy bank in a nameless field, towards a fence of twisted wire, shots roaring over their heads, cannonballs plunging into the earth and sending up sprays of mud, blood, and worse. The air was full of pained shrieks and cries of terror, pleas for help that would never be answered. The sky was black with smoke, the sun blocked out. It felt like the sun would never shine again.

“Nathan? Are you all right?” Sophia whispered, her small hand resting on his shoulder, making Nathan jump. “You’ve gone white.”

Nathan sucked in a breath, and they were back in Arrow Ridge again, cold rock under his feet.

“I’m all right,” Nathan murmured. “I just... I was just remembering something from the war.”

Sophia nodded, a flicker of understanding in her eyes. “I’m here, Nathan. You’re safe. Well, safe-ish.”

He had to smile at that. They were nearly at the peak of the ridge, and Nathan’s burning lungs thanked him. At the peak, the severe slope evened out. The ground was still rocky and uneven, but at least it was relatively flat. Trees stood tall around them, forming a sort of little clearing. The entrances to caves gaped at them, black holes that allowed no light to penetrate. Nathan glanced around, looking for signs of life, but there was nothing. Not an old fire, not a ribbon of smoke, nothing. As one, everyone glanced at Devon.

“Are you sure you saw them here, lad?” Sheriff Thomas asked.

A cold and horribly familiar voice cut through the still air.

“Well, well, well. I see you brought some friends, Mr. Rowe.”

The smile dropped off Nathan’s face like a stone. A figure stepped out of the nearest cave, materializing from the darkness.

Evan, of course.

He was dressed the same as when Nathan had seen him before, minus the hat. He had a receding hairline, Nathan noticed, the same black streaked with gray as his mustache.

Figures appeared from the other caves, and Nathan's heart sank.

There were more than five of them. There were about eight gang members in total, including Evan. They were outnumbered.

Evan's smile widened, as if he knew what Nathan was thinking.

"You know, I had a feeling we'd see you all up here," he said thoughtfully. "I thought sooner rather than later, but never mind. Guess I overestimated you all. Good day to you, sheriff. Look, I don't want any trouble. I want the money that Michael Jasper owes me, and if I can't have it, I'll take Michael himself."

"Michael isn't here," Nathan shot back. "I made him stay behind."

Evan's eyebrows lifted. "Are you sure about that?"

In the silence that followed, Nathan clearly heard crunching footsteps behind them. Sophia's hand slipped into his.

"Michael, no," she whispered.

A pale, familiar figure appeared from behind a heavy boulder, just a little way behind them. Back straight, head up, Michael walked up the slope and past Nathan, never glancing left or right. He had his eyes fixed on Evan.

“This is my fault, and I want to fix it,” he said firmly. “Your business is with me, not with these people. Leave my friend Nathan alone, and Sophia.”

Evan laughed. It was a nasty sound, echoing around the hillside.

“Friend? It didn’t sound like he was your friend when you handed over his ranch to pay your debts. We ain’t finished, Michael. Not by a long shot.”

Michael swallowed. “Fine. Just let them go.”

“We’re here to fight,” Nathan hissed. “Michael, we’re here to arrest them.”

Evan laughed again at that, and the noise sent shivers down Nathan’s spine.

“Now, that *is* funny, Mr. Rowe. But I can’t help but notice that we outnumber you quite nicely. And, of course, I have men who can actually fight. You got a girl, a spineless coward, an old man, and a group of spotty teenage boys. Forgive me if I fancy our chances.”

Nathan glanced down at Sophia.

*Stay back*, he mouthed, then released her hand. Pushing his way past a troubled-looking Sheriff Thomas and the visibly terrified deputies, Nathan stepped into the space between his people and Evan's.

"We can deal with this," Nathan said firmly, looking Evan dead in the eye. "You and me, like men."

Evan snorted. "And by that, I guess you mean that I should agree to hinge everything on a fight between us huh? This ain't regency England, and we ain't fighting a duel."

"I'm not going to let you take my ranch, and I'm not going to let you take my friend," Nathan replied, calm and clear.

Evan's eyes narrowed. "Oh, you have no idea what I can do, Nathan Rowe. I know all about you. You were one of those men who couldn't stomach what needed to be done and came home all sad and soft. Pathetic. You think that marrying a woman brought from Chicago makes you more of a man? Nah. You're a weak, worthless fool, and I'm going to walk right over you and take everything you have. You know why? Because I'm a man who gets what he wants, and you're not. That's all there is to it."

A heavy hand landed on Nathan's shoulder.

"Steady, son," Sheriff Thomas said quietly. "We're outnumbered here. Let's go carefully and easy until we figure

out what to do.”

“That’s right,” Evan said, his voice cruel. “Listen to the old man, Nathan. Maybe if you’re polite to me, I won’t take your pretty new wife with us when we leave.”

That did it. Nathan wrenched his shoulder away from the sheriff’s grip, and stormed towards Evan.

“You say I’m weak, but you’re just a bully. You don’t *take*, you steal,” he snapped, teeth gritted. “Pathetic. I bet I know what you did during the war. You were probably one of those men who went rifling through the bodies when it was all over, stealing valuables that should have gone to the men’s families or gone with them to their graves. You’re a damn liar and a murderer, Evan, and I’m not afraid of you.”

The tension rocketed. Nathan heard the familiar, metallic clicks of guns being armed and aimed. Evan’s face was a bloodless white, fixed on Nathan. His gang members had their guns trained on Nathan, or on the others behind him. He didn’t know if Sophia was still behind him. He prayed that she was.

*Be sensible, he thought wildly. Keep yourself safe. I can’t lose you too. I can’t lose you. And then, I never told her. I never told Sophia that I couldn’t bear to lose her as well. What if I never get the chance?*

Fear bloomed in Nathan’s chest. His fingers twitched for his gun, but it still hung in the holster at his hip, and Evan’s dangled from his fingers. He wouldn’t get halfway to his gun before Evan put a bullet in his head.

*Jack always told me that I tended not to look before I leap, Nathan thought. Well, he was right about that.*

“I do what I need to in order to survive. That’s what I am – a *survivor*. You don’t know the first thing about me,” Evan hissed. His placid, pleasant mask was gone entirely. His eyes were dark and vivid, fixed on Nathan, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth, like a dog about to bite.

“I know that I’d rather die than be like you,” Nathan said, his voice low but clear.

Something nasty flickered across Evan’s face. He smiled, baring more teeth than was necessary. In the blink of an eye, his gun was raised and pointing directly at Nathan.

“Well,” he said pleasantly, “That can be arranged.”

Nathan stared down the dark barrel of the gun.

*I should really have seen that coming, he thought. Poor choice of words.*

# Epilogue

Sophia couldn't breathe. Her lungs burned, and the heavy wooden butt of the gun pressed into her shoulder. It would leave a bruise; she was sure of it. The air seemed to have gone still. Sophia wouldn't have been surprised to glance up and see birds suspended in the sky, stopped in mid-flight.

Nathan didn't flinch when faced with Evan's gun. Time slowed to a crawl. Sheriff Thomas and his white-faced deputies had their gazes and guns locked firmly on various members of the gang, but it didn't matter. They were all outnumbered anyway.

Evan's eyes were narrowed, unblinking. He didn't strike Sophia as the sort of man who would waste time talking at a time like this. Once he leveled a gun at you, you had seconds – if that – before the trigger was pulled.

At this distance, he couldn't possibly miss.

And judging by the hardened, intent expression on his face, he didn't intend to.

The gunshot echoed through the still air, violent and unrelenting. Sophia couldn't hold back a shriek, her ears ringing.

Chaos unfolded. It was impressive how one single, harsh noise like the firing of a gun could turn a scene upside down.



Sheriff Thomas fired twice, felling a gang member with each shot, and crossed the space between them much faster than a man of his age should have been able to manage. His faithful young deputies followed doggedly.

Nathan stood as if he were frozen in place, waiting for the shot. He turned slowly, eyes wide, looking at Sophia.

Sophia lowered the smoking gun from her shoulder with a shaking hand.

Evan had gone spinning backwards, the gun leaping out of his grip, snatched up by a deputy. He was crouched on the lip of the cave now, clutching his wounded hand and groaning in pain.

“Good shot,” Nathan said. The noise still rang in her ears, making his voice sound muffled and distant.

Sophia swallowed hard. “I didn’t mean to hit him. I was going to shoot over his head and distract him.”

The corner of Nathan’s mouth twisted up into a smile. Then Sheriff Thomas thundered out Nathan’s name, and time sped up again.

Nathan leaped across the space, snatching up a dazed Evan by the scruff of his neck, and pointing the barrel of his pistol at the man’s temple.

“Lay down your arms, or he’s dead!” Nathan bellowed. “I mean it!”

Perhaps in another gang, the threat wouldn't have worked. Here, though, it was clear that Evan's men had too much fear and respect for their leader to risk his life.

There was a heartbeat of silence, during which Sophia was terrified that the gamble wouldn't work.

Then the first man dropped his gun to the ground.

Things went along quickly after that. Knives and guns were dropped, the men's eyes fixed on Evan. Evan himself had gone pale, his face shuttered and grim.

"Quick, lads, tie them up," Sheriff Thomas ordered, and the deputies fell on the men, tying their wrists behind their backs, and their ankles together.

Sophia watched breathlessly, still clutching the shotgun in her hand. She didn't want to risk dropping it this time. She wasn't sure that she *could* let go of it, even if she wanted to.

"It's over," she said aloud. "It's *over*."

It seemed ridiculous that all the fear and danger of the past few days could be smoothed over after one terrifying incident. But there was Evan, wrists and ankles bound, face like thunder. There were his gang members, grim and blank-faced, tied together in a line.

It really was over.

“You two take a moment to rest,” Sheriff Thomas said, eyeing Nathan and Sophia. “You look shaken. We’ll take this lot back to the jail. I daresay they’ll be transferred to the big jail in town. I’d wager your ranch isn’t the first one they raided. They’re not getting out of jail for a while.”

Nathan sat down heavily on the lip of the cave, where Evan had stood only a few minutes ago. Sophia sat down beside him, close enough to press their shoulders together.

“Are... are you sure?” he managed.

Sheriff Thomas chuckled. “Ah, those young lads aren’t as useless as everyone says. Don’t you worry.”

The deputies and the sheriff filed away, picking their way back down the rocky slope, the tied-up prisoners walking between them, backs hunched and heads hanging.

“You saved my life,” Nathan said.

Sophia shrugged. “You saved mine, just in a slightly different way.”

“That really was a good shot. Even if you weren’t aiming at him at all. You really are a natural.”

“I think I hate shooting.”

“Yes, but you’re *good* at it.”

Sophia gave a light chuckle, nudging her shoulder against Nathan’s. “It’s strange to think that it’s all over. What now, do you think?”

Nathan chewed his lip, looking thoughtful.

“Well, I’ll need to come to arrangement with Michael about the money. Although considering that the damage to our ranch is his fault, he might decide to waive the debt. I don’t know. Either way, Evan and his gang are going to jail. We’ll be safe.”

Sophia nodded. “You know, the view from up here is really beautiful.”

“It is, but this place has a sad history.”

She tilted her head to one side, considering. “You know, that makes sense. There’s a sort of sadness in the air here. A kind of tension, like when something awful happens in a place. It’s hard to explain, but I can feel it.”

She glanced to her side to find Nathan looking at her, something soft and warm in his eyes.

“I feel it, too,” he murmured softly. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

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It was entirely natural for them to hold hands as they picked their way back down the rocky slope. Oddly enough, going down was much harder than going up. Stones skittered and slid under one's feet, threatening to trip them up. It was a relief to get back on solid ground again, and Sophia found herself giggling like a child. Nathan didn't let go of her hand.

“What next, then, *Mr. Rowe*?” Sophia asked playfully. “Do you know, whenever anyone calls me *Mrs. Rowe*, I don't think that they're talking about me for a minute or two. It's so strange.”

“Well, I never thought I'd *have* a Mrs. Rowe, so I'm still congratulating myself on my good luck.”

Nathan hesitated, stopping before they could catch up with Sheriff Thomas and the prisoners. Sophia glanced back at him inquisitively.

“What's the matter?”

“Are you happy here, Sophia? I mean, really, truly happy?”

“Of course, I am.”

Nathan took a step closer, tilting his head to one side. “With everyone helping us with the repairs, I think the ranch will be shipshape again in a couple of days. We're lucky. Then we can get on with our lives together. I just want you to know how glad I am to have met you, Sophia. I love you, and when you're by my side... well, I feel as though I can do anything.”

Sophia felt that warm sensation in her chest again, soft and heady, spreading through her limbs. She stepped closer to Nathan, placing her hands on his shoulders and tilting up her face for a kiss.

“I love you too, Nathan Rowe,” she said softly. “And you aren’t just imagining it. When we’re together, we really *can* do anything. Come on, then. Let’s go home.”

*THE END?*

(turn the page)

# Extended Epilogue

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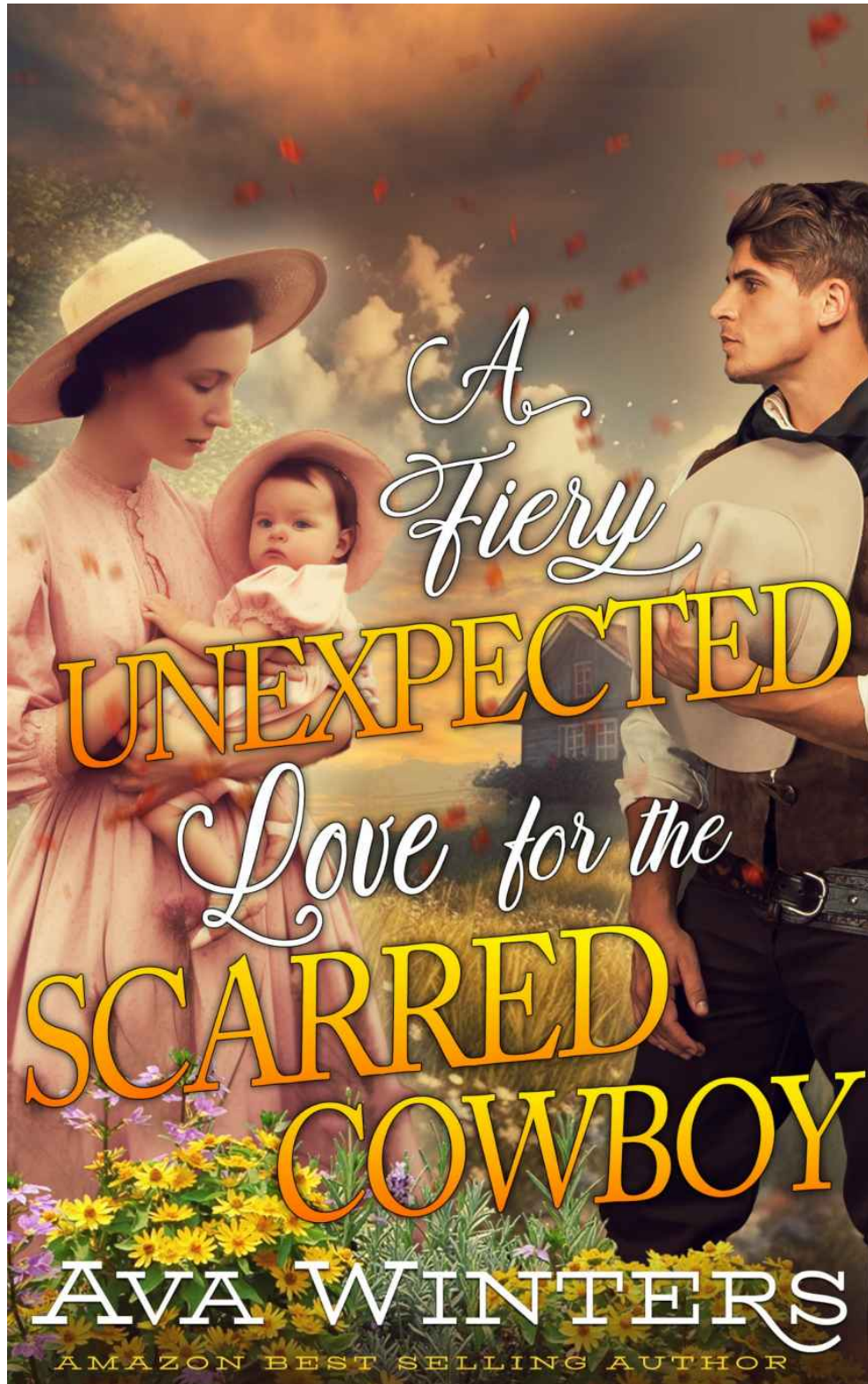
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*A  
Fiery*

**UNEXPECTED**

*Love for the*

**SCARRED  
COWBOY**

**AVA WINTERS**

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# A Fiery Unexpected Love for the Scarred Cowboy



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

*A Western Historical Romance Book*

by

*Ava Winters*

# Blurb

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**She's a woman on the run with a baby she promised to protect. He's an isolated man, ashamed of his scars and with a heart smouldering with tragedy. Can a secret mail-order bride ad cure their burnt souls?**

Dessie, a young widow burdened with her sister's baby, embarks on a journey to marry a man she exchanged heartfelt letters with. But when she discovers that the man she expected is not who he seems, her hopes are shattered. Can she find the strength to face her challenges and protect the baby she loves?

Zachariah, a man scarred by tragedy, finds solace in hard work and isolation. His past haunts him, but when a mysterious woman arrives at the train station with a baby not her own, his world is turned upside down. Will he be able to look beyond his scars and trust in love again?

As fate intertwines their lives, Zachariah's harsh words and Dessie's fiery spirit clash. Despite their initial animosity, an undeniable connection begins to grow. Will they be able to overcome their painful pasts and find healing in each other's arms before it's too late?

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# Prologue

*13th September 1868*

*The Rapp Ranch, Outskirts of Provo, Utah*

The warm fall sun beat down on Zachariah Rapp's back. As he mechanically embedded winter wheat seeds into the dry Utah soil, he could feel sweat gathering across his shoulders and down his spine, tickling his skin slightly where he still had sensation left.

Every now and then, a drip of sweat would travel from his scalp down his neck, and suddenly the feeling of it would disappear as it reached the knotted, twisting scars that covered much of the right of his neck and back. The disappearance of sensation was a constant reminder of why he was there, working, rather than out enjoying himself.

The only things that mattered in his life were the ranch, his mother, and his foreman. As much as he could, he tried to forget that anything beyond those three things even existed. It was easier that way. He dropped one last seed into the soil and straightened up.

With a large stretch, he tried to free his mind from his own thoughts. His muscles ached as he shook his arms to loosen them, clasping his left elbow with his right hand and pulling to stretch out his back. He groaned in satisfaction, and then let his arms drop limply to his side. Reaching into the waistline of his tattered denim trousers, he pulled out his shirt.

Screwing it up in his fist, he used it to wipe away the beads of sweat collecting on his forehead. He let out a small sigh and shook the shirt once, gently, before returning it to its place, tucked into the tight waistband of his trousers. He turned his head, craning his neck to see behind him.

“Not bad for midday,” he mumbled to himself. He’d done around a third of the field so far—he might even be able to get the entire field done by the day’s end. He just needed to hurry it along a little.

Looking out across the field ahead of him, he spotted his foreman, Michael Sturgeon, heading toward him from the barn that sat at the far right corner of the ranch. Zachariah tilted his head to one side, covering his eyes with his hand in an attempt to see better. Michael was supposed to be grooming the horses and feeding the cattle, so why was he heading toward Zachariah? Zachariah’s brows knotted tightly across his forehead as he waited for Michael to reach him.

Before long, Michael had jumped the fence to the winter wheat fields, and Zachariah could see him more clearly. His friend and foreman looked, as he always did, cheerful. He wore dark denim trousers which were in much better condition than Zachariah’s own, with a cream button-up shirt tucked haphazardly into them. His brown hair was slicked back against his head, and there was a small amount of stubble showing along his jaw.

“Afternoon!” Michael yelled as he closed the final few meters between the two of them. A huge smile sat on his face. It was a smile that Zachariah was very accustomed to seeing, and whilst for many people, he was sure it would be one of those infectious smiles, for him it had lost its effect. Michael

was always smiling, usually in an attempt to get Zachariah to do the same. Most of the time, the effort was in vain.

“Well, hello!” Zachariah replied. “What can I do you for?”

“Well, I finished with the animals, and figured you could do with a break,” Michael shrugged. “I know that if I don’t come and make you take one, you’ll work yourself to the bone.”

Heat spread across his cheeks and nose. Michael was right. Zachariah’s passion for the ranch often meant he found himself working ridiculous hours and doing far more than his body should ever be expected to handle.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Zachariah replied. Other people would have taken his tone to be offensive, but he knew that Michael would recognize the humor in his voice – they’d known each other long enough.

“Oh no, of course, it’s not like you’ve already done the work of two men in the space of a morning, then, right?” Michael asked, raising one brow and eyeing the field behind Zachariah. Zachariah rolled his eyes; he’d tried countless times to explain to Michael why he put so much energy and work into the ranch, but it seemed like none of the information sank in. His ranch was his family’s legacy, and after all that they had gone through, it was the least that he could do to keep it afloat and successful. He and his mother had lost enough. They would never lose Rapp Ranch. Not while he was around, anyway.



“If we don’t get this seed sown soon, we’ll miss the sellers’ markets and delivery dates for winter wheat. You know that’s how we make a big portion of our profits, Michael,” Zachariah explained. “Besides, what else am I going to do, sit around and mope? Go into town? Please.” He shook his head and reached down to the small metal bucket by his feet. Lifting it up, he placed the wire handles over his forearm and took a handful of seed out.

“You could rely on the ranch workers a bit more,” Michael objected.

“They’ve got plenty to do,” Zachariah dismissed. Without even looking up, he *knew* that Michael was rolling his eyes. They had a conversation like this at least twice a week.

“You’re doing too much, Zac,” Michael insisted. “Between this, and caring for Mary,” he shook his head. “Do you even get a moment for yourself?” As if to punctuate his point, Michael looked behind him, over his left shoulder, to where Mary Rapp, Zachariah’s mother, sat in her wheelchair on the porch.

“I sleep,” Zachariah replied with a shrug, following Michael’s gaze across the fields to his mother. When she noticed their attention, she raised her hand in a small, weak wave. The two men waved back, and Michael returned his attention to Zachariah.

“That does not count,” Michael sighed. “You don’t spend any time doing anything for yourself. Not even going to the local saloon. When was the last time you and I went for a drink?” he asked.

“We have drinks in the house. Do you want a drink? Let’s have a drink tonight.”

“Darn it, Zachariah!” Michael yelled. “You make this so difficult, y’know.” He shook his head again and let out an exasperated breath. A pang of guilt radiated across Zachariah’s chest, but he ignored it. He wasn’t trying to be difficult. He just wanted to work in peace. Michael might think he never did anything for himself, but his work was for himself.

When he was lost in ranch work, he didn’t worry about disgusted or pitying eyes on him. The work distracted him from the sensation of his skin pulling at the gnarled scars that spread from his right ear down his back. He’d told Michael this in the past, but it was clearly not something that his foreman understood.

“Sorry,” Zachariah shrugged, looking down at his feet. “I’m just trying to keep the ranch afloat.”

“I know,” Michael said, his voice softer than before. There was a moment or two of silence, and Zachariah hoped that his friend would take the hint and continue with his work so that he could do the same. But instead, Michael stepped closer. “Maybe I’d feel less worried about you if I knew there was a woman taking care of you,” he said quietly. “A wife, perhaps.”

Zachariah began to tremble, but whether it was with frustration or nerves, he could not tell. “A wife?” he hissed.

*How dare he suggest I get a wife? he thought to himself. Does he not realize that no woman in her right mind would*

*come near such a freak like me? Any chances I had at marriage were ruined!* Zachariah took in a shaky breath, his frustration rising to anger as he looked up from his feet and into Michael's eyes.

Michael's eyes widened and he stepped back.

"I-it was just a thought," Michael said, holding his hands up in surrender. "I just thought you might want some company that isn't me or, or your mother," he said quickly. "It was just a thought, Zac, I'm sorry."

"I could never marry," Zachariah said through gritted teeth. "It isn't on the cards for me. Not anymore."

Michael let out a small, sullen sigh. He looked at Zachariah imploringly for a moment but was met with an icy glare.

"Alright, I'm sorry," he acquiesced. "I'll leave you to your work." He nodded once and turned on his heel. "I will take you up on that drink, soon, though," he added. With that, he walked off, down the field and back toward the barn. Zachariah glanced up at his mother, checking to see if she had been able to see any of his and Michael's argument.

She waved at him again and blew a kiss. *Completely oblivious*, he thought to himself. *Thank goodness*. He had never spoken to his mother in the same way that he had with Michael. As far as she was aware, he still planned to marry, and he still hoped for a good, happy life. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel that he'd failed, or, even worse, to think that she'd failed him.

Clearing his throat, Zachariah tried to shake off the rush of anger. It wasn't Michael's fault he didn't understand. Zachariah's position was not a common one, after all. He was just angry at the reminder of the life he could never have.

When he was younger, he used to look at the ladies in his town and wonder which of them he might marry one day, when he was old enough. Turns out the answer was none of them. He ran a hand through his light brown hair—sure, as always, to avoid touching the scars which embraced the right-hand side of his hairline.

“Back to work, Zac,” he told himself, desperate to move his mind on. When he worked, he could just think about what he was doing. The processes of it all, what came next, what else he needed to do that day. The other elements of his life just faded away into the background. It was his quiet place, his sanctuary. He worked hard to keep everything going, but he also worked hard to keep himself sane.

Turning back to the row he was sowing, he took seeds out of his hand one by one and pressed them into the soil. Watching the dry dirt cover the seed provided him some peace; knowing that in eight or nine months days it'd be a fully grown stalk of wheat gave him a feeling of contentment that he failed to find elsewhere. With a small smile, he continued down the row, pressing each seed into the soil and watching as it disappeared. Soon enough, his argument with Michael was in the past, and his frustrations had completely dissipated. It was just him and the ranch.

Then, in the distance, behind him, he heard a voice. He froze. It was not a voice he recognized, which meant it had to be someone traveling between ranches or into town. Slowly,

he peered over his shoulder to look at the entrance and the fences that lined the front of the ranch. Walking along the outside of the fence was a young couple.

Younger than him, anyway, maybe twenty-five or twenty-six at the oldest. The two of them were chatting away as they walked, looking across the fields. Zachariah dropped down into a squat, hoping that the hedgerows separating the fields would hide him. He had not left the ranch in months, if not longer. He tried his very best to remain unseen by the townsfolk and other ranch owners—he couldn't stand the way that they all looked at him.

Their eyes always landed on his scars, and it made his skin crawl. Sometimes, their stares made it feel like his skin was burning all over again. He let out a shaky breath at the thought and rolled his shoulders back, desperate to shrug off the phantom gazes.

So he spent his life working, hiding from passers-by, and caring for his mother. It wasn't a bad life. He didn't know why Michael made it out to be so. Sure, he was lonely—but who wasn't?



# Chapter One

*14th September 1868*

*San Francisco, California*

Odessa Brown sat at the table in her childhood home, pen in hand. Sat across from her was a pale man who was a few inches larger around the waist than he should've been. He had dark, almost black hair that was pulled forward as if trying to cover a dwindling hairline. He wore a suit that didn't seem to quite fit him and boots that were made for ranch work, not business. Dessie couldn't quite help but think that he looked like a caricature.

“So, just sign here.” The man leaned across the table, his breath warm and pungent. “And we'll take this nightmare of a ranch off your hands, little lady.” He smiled at her and a shiver traveled down her spine.

“It's not a nightmare,” she said quietly, scanning the document before she reached forward to sign it.

“Then why're you sellin'?” The man smirked. She let out a small huff and focused on the document—he was just trying to get a rise out of her and she knew it. She was selling the ranch because it was the best way to keep herself afloat. She had her baby niece to care for and a life to live. The ranch had worked fine with a whole family to tend it, but now it was just her. She could not possibly keep it going. She'd tried.

Once she'd scanned the document in front of her for the third time, she anxiously raised her hand toward it, gripping

the pen so tightly that her fingertips were white. Behind her, she could hear Robin crying in her cot. She too wanted to cry at that moment. She'd grown up on that ranch, and now she was signing it away to a slimy stranger in a bad suit with even worse breath. She had never, for one moment, thought that she'd end up here.

*Sign it, she told herself. It's for the best. A new start. For you, for Robin. Sign it.*

Shakily, she pressed the nib down to the document and signed her name. She had to make a conscious effort to sign it as Odessa, and not Dessie. It felt odd, to use her full name. Nobody ever called her by it. It felt as if a stranger were signing away her childhood home, not her.

It was almost a relief.

The second that she finished the stick of the 'a', the man snatched the documents away from her. With a grin on his face that deeply unsettled Dessie, he rose from his seat and bowed.

"A pleasure doing business with you, miss," he said. "Now, get off my property." And with that, he placed an envelope full of cash on the table. "Shoo, be gone."

Dessie stared at the man before her in disbelief. She'd packed her bags prior to signing the document, thank goodness, but she had not expected him to want her out the moment the documents were done. He stared back at her, his eyebrows raised.



“Go,” he said, then shook his head as if she were acting like some sort of imbecile.

Slowly, she stood up from her seat and stepped away, turning around to collect Robin from the cot behind her. Placing her in the baby carriage that she had bought downstairs that morning, she collected her bags from the floor beside it. She returned to the table and grabbed the money, flicking the envelope open to check that it had everything inside it that she was due. Satisfied, she steered the pram to the hallway, collected her coat, and then turned back to the man.

“It was *not* a pleasure doing business with you,” she said simply, her voice stern.

Before he could reply, she whisked away out of the front door and down the dusty track that led away from the ranch. Fortunately, it was not a long way from the Brown Ranch to the town center—so she began to walk. The weather was pleasant enough, with a slight breeze in the air to combat the warm fall sun as it shone down on her and Robin. The young girl had now stopped crying, and, it seemed, had been rocked to sleep by the movement of her baby carriage, leaving Dessie completely alone. She had become accustomed to being alone. Everyone around her, everyone she loved, was gone—except Robin.

She tried hard to focus on the journey, where she had to go first, what time her train was, and the adventure that was ahead of her, but all she could think about was the ranch that she had just sold. It felt as if she’d left a part of herself behind.

“It’ll be alright,” she told herself. “You’ve just got to pay the debts, and then you can go.”

After her family died, she tried to keep the ranch going. It ended badly. There was just too much for one woman to do. Hands had to be paid, equipment needed maintaining, upgrading and managing, the barn had fallen into disrepair, and the livestock were subsequently falling ill from the cold and disease. Loans seemed like the only option to begin with, but she soon found out that they were mistakes. She began to fall further and further into debt. Eventually, the only feasible way out was to sell. She knew that, but it hadn't made the decision any easier. Then it had occurred to her that by selling the ranch, she'd be able to pay back what she owed and, if it sold for enough, would have had enough to buy a home. As it happened, though, she'd struggled to sell. After all her debt, she had just enough left to get out of San Francisco.

Around the same time that she'd understood the ranch was a losing battle, she had realized that she clearly wasn't capable of raising Robin and living alone. Maybe if her husband had survived the war, they could have made it work. But after much thought, Dessie decided she'd have to remarry. She was a young widow, and she might be able to find someone understanding of her situation.

Then, when clearing out the house one day, she found a series of letters between her sister and a man in Utah called Zachariah. They'd met through a mail-order bride advertisement, and were discussing marrying one another. He knew about Belle's baby out of wedlock, and was willing to take her in regardless.

Dessie had suddenly had an idea. Getting married would prevent her from falling into more debt, and would give Robin a life free from judgment. Everyone seemed to think the baby was Dessie's and those who didn't, knew that she was born out

of wedlock. The only way to stop Robin from being ostracized was to find her a family. So Dessie did.

She had already replied to countless mail-order bride advertisements. But to no avail. Then, when she replied to the letters from Utah as Belle, one thing led to another and soon she was to move to a ranch just outside of Provo, in Utah, where she would marry Zachariah.

She didn't know much about him, but he knew even less about her. They'd exchanged letters for a month, and in that time she had been going by Belle. She was wracked with guilt. The first time she'd written to him she sobbed all night. She felt as if she were betraying her sister and herself, and yet, some part of her knew it was the right thing to do.

As Dessie and Robin reached the town, Robin began to stir in her baby carriage. She rolled to and fro, giggling and cooing at nothing in particular.

“At least you're happy,” Dessie mumbled under her breath as she crossed the street. She had walked from acres and acres of farmland into the town and was now surrounded by much larger buildings, hundreds of people, and carts journeying up and down the roads. There was a constant chattering noise that, if she listened carefully, broke down into layers upon layers of strangers' conversations. From where she was standing on the sidewalk, she could see the bank down Main Road, perfectly positioned on one of the busiest corners. With a small inhalation, Dessie pushed Robin's baby carriage down the sidewalk, carefully swerving and dodging to make sure she didn't collide with anyone on her journey. Moments later, she reached the doors of the bank.

It was one of the first to have been built in San Francisco, and it was used by most people in the county. They made much of their money by giving loans to those who needed to set up ranches or businesses and charged late fees and interest on as many of those loans as possible. That's where Dessie had been caught out. But now, in her bag, she held the ticket to her freedom. She just had to pay them back. Stepping inside, she walked straight over to the reception desk, pushing Robin as she went.

"I need to, uh, I need ..." she sighed. "I need to make a payment."

The man behind the desk looked up from the piles of paperwork stacked around him. He looked around at the roomful of desks. Reams of paperwork piled on every flat surface, and clerks' abacuses dotted the scanty patches of clear space.

"There's nobody free," he said flatly. "You'll need to wait."

"How long?" Dessie asked. She tapped her foot on the floor and shifted her weight slightly.

"Until somebody's free," the man replied. "Take a seat." He gestured to his left, where a group of plush armchairs had been seated around a small wooden table. The wall beside it had a large, golden-framed mirror on it, through which Dessie could see all of the men at their tables. She could also see herself, and how tired she looked. She usually pinned her curly chocolate-brown hair back in a large curl at the back of her head. But today it looked frizzy and flat, and her dark brown eyes seemed to match the color under them. Her pale, milky

white skin was still smooth and soft-looking, but it was all she had going for her.

“Okay, thank you,” she said quietly, suddenly embarrassed to be there looking the way she did. She pushed the baby carriage around to one of the large armchairs and plopped herself down into it. Carefully, she brushed her hair down with her fingers, trying to place it in a way that looked slightly more presentable. Afterward, she rubbed her eyes, hoping that it’d do something to combat the bags which had found their way under them.

Dessie only had to wait for around fifteen minutes, in the end, before an older man with gray hair and a gray mustache walked over to her. He sat opposite her and explained that the baby’s carriage would not fit by his desk, but that he could see her there since nobody else was waiting. She agreed, and the two of them settled her payments. The man was quiet, and polite, and was the first person she’d seen that day that hadn’t treated her badly. It sparked some kind of hope within her; *maybe not everyone is bad*, she let herself think.

An hour passed, and Dessie had finally settled all of her debts, just in time for Robin’s patience to run thin. As Dessie stood up to shake the gentleman banker’s hand, Robin began to kick her feet angrily in the baby carriage, grumbling incoherently as she did so. Dessie’s eyes widened as men from around the bank all turned to look. With a quick handshake, she thanked the banker and ran out of the building as quickly as possible. As soon as the fresh air hit Robin, she fell silent, and Dessie stopped for a moment to take a breath.

“Well, I suppose it’s time to say goodbye,” Dessie said quietly, looking down at Robin in the baby carriage. At just nine months old, the baby was blissfully unaware that

anything at all was going on. “One more stop, then the station,” she told her, a small sad smile on her face. Robin stared up at her aunt, her eyes wide. “I hope this new life is worth it,” Dessie said. “I just want you to be happy.”

She pushed the baby carriage away from the bank and further down Main Road, through the city center, and toward the cemetery at the end of the town. She looked around as she walked, taking in the sights as she made what was likely her last journey through San Francisco. She passed the saloon that her father and husband used to drink at, the shop where she spent her first allowance, and the dressmaker where she got her wedding dress designed.

A wave of sadness coursed through her and she felt the sting of tears in her eyes. She sniffled and returned her attention to Robin in the baby carriage who had, yet again, fallen fast asleep. Dessie couldn't help but smile gently down at her. The young babe was so sweet, and even when she decided to throw tantrums in the bank office, Dessie would do absolutely anything for her. One look at Robin reminded her of why she was leaving her home.

She blinked away the tears and crossed the road to the small cemetery where the soldiers who had lost their lives in the war had been laid to rest. Since it was a Union soldiers' cemetery, it was small and that meant that it was usually quite quiet. Dessie liked that—she felt like she actually had the space to mourn. She stepped through the gap in the wall that lined the cemetery and wandered along the small pathway which meandered through the graves. Her husband had been buried right at the back of the graveyard, which only provided her with further comfort when she came to visit. It was much more private.

After a few minutes of walking, she reached his grave. Pulling the baby carriage off of the path, she placed it near the tombstone and gently dropped down to her knees in front of it. She placed one hand on it, feeling the smooth cold stone beneath her hand. She smiled at the familiar sensation.

“Hello, honey,” she said, tears springing to her eyes. “I won’t be able to visit again, at least, not for quite some time. I have to try and give Robin a better life, you see. Here, everyone looks at us like we’re sinners.” She shook her head and tears began to fall down her cheeks. “I need to make sure she doesn’t grow up in that kind of environment...goodness knows what it’d do to her. So we’re leaving town, and, well, I don’t know when I’ll be back. Or if I’ll be back, for that matter. I know you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me, Thomas. You were always a kind man. I’ll miss you,” she sniffed and let go of the tombstone. With one last glance over it, she brought her fingertips to her lips and kissed them, and then pressed her fingers against the rock once more. She pushed herself up from the ground, standing on shaky legs, and looked down at the tombstone. She felt her lip quiver and desperately pushed away the feelings.

“Be strong,” she told herself out loud. She took a deep breath, letting the warm air fill her lungs before slowly exhaling. “Let’s go,” she said, her voice full of a determination that she did not quite feel. She grabbed the baby carriage and pulled it back onto the path, and then began the walk to San Francisco station. The entire walk, she repeated the words in her head that her sister had said to her on her wedding day.

*It’s scary now, but this is the first step towards your happy ever after. The first seed sown in a new ranch is always frightening, but it can grow into something wonderful.*

She hoped that this seed would grow into something wonderful. She really needed a slice of wonderful right now.





# Chapter Two

*14th September 1868*

*The Rapp Ranch, Outskirts of Provo, Utah*

Mary Rapp sat in her makeshift wheelchair on the porch of her home, watching out over the fields as her son Zachariah worked diligently, sowing seeds for the winter wheat. She enjoyed watching him work on the ranch; it reminded her of her husband, and it seemed to be the only time that he was ever truly happy. When he was in the house, he seemed to be constantly on high alert.

She knew why, but she always wished that he'd relax a little, and enjoy himself. It seemed like wishing for that was fighting a losing battle, though, the older he got. He appeared to be getting more and more stuck in his ways. It had reached the point that his best—and only—friend had reached out to her. Michael had spoken to her about a month or so ago about his fears that Zachariah was going to end up alone if he kept on this path. Mary agreed; she knew that Zachariah had very few people in his life as it was, and he seemed to show absolutely no interest in letting anybody else in. He wouldn't even leave the ranch.

When she spoke with Michael, the two of them agreed that the one thing that would really help Zachariah was a caring woman. If somebody other than his mother and Michael were to show him affection, perhaps he'd let down the walls that he had built around his heart. Mary hoped so, anyway. The issue was that they could not think of a way to get Zachariah to meet a woman on his own terms.

He hid anytime anyone new visited the ranch, and he relied on everyone else for anything that needed to be done off-site. Michael had tried to bring up the matter of marriage with him a few times, but each attempt was met with what he could only describe to Mary as “pained anger”.

So, they decided that their only option was to place an advertisement for a mail-order bride. They placed it in numerous papers across Utah, as well as a few papers out of state, and waited. Within a week, they had numerous responses. They’d described Zachariah as a tall, muscular man with vibrant green eyes and sandy brown hair, and explained that he owned a ranch, cared for his mother, and was incredibly hardworking and dutiful, so it was no surprise that plenty of people were interested. One response in particular, though, caught Mary’s attention in February. It read:

*Dear Zachariah,*

*I find it heartwarming that you care so dutifully for your mother. She must feel incredibly lucky to have a son so kind. I myself have had to do plenty of caring throughout my life, so I know the toll that it can sometimes take on the soul—I do hope you find time to care for yourself, too.*

*I am Belle, a 20-year-old woman from San Francisco. I am a widow, and I have a daughter who has, thankfully, survived her father. I am well-equipped to help around the house and to help with your mother. I am a capable cook and enjoy losing myself in the day-to-day business of running a house, but I am also more than familiar with the workings of a ranch and would be happy to lend a hand should the need arise.*

From the opening paragraphs alone, Mary had been intrigued. She'd shown Michael, and the two of them had agreed. They continued to exchange letters with Belle for a few weeks, and then eventually agreed that she should come to Utah to meet Zachariah. She was due to arrive there in a day or so, and Mary was filled with excitement.

But they had yet to tell Zachariah.

Michael had tried, several times, and Mary had tried to think of ways to casually bring it up in conversation, but the two of them knew that it'd only lead to Zachariah's anger. They'd tried instead to just warm him to the idea of getting married, but that had been equally as unsuccessful. The two of them knew that he needed to be gently nudged in the right direction.

Otherwise, he was going to just continue as he was. Mary couldn't bear to see that. Michael was supposed to try to tell him one last time when they were both on the ranch the day before, but Zachariah had not said anything to her when he came in that night, so Mary doubted that it had gone well. She'd find out soon enough—Michael was due to visit her, as she'd requested that he come to speak to her before the arrival of Belle in a day's time.

As she waited for his arrival, she let her eyes fall closed for a moment, basking in the warm September sunshine. It fell across her face, warming her to her very core. Opening her eyes again, she glanced back over at her son and exhaled sadly. All she wanted for him was a happy life like she had been able to have. She didn't feel that was too much to ask. Before she could think much more about it, she heard Michael's footsteps as he jogged up the porch stairs.

“Mornin’, Mrs. Rapp,” he said heartily. She craned her neck around and smiled at him.

“Morning, Michael. Say, could you be a dear and turn this chair around for me?” she asked. She could stand and walk to a bench on the porch, but the stress of planning Belle’s arrival had taken its toll on her back. Trying to navigate the best way for Michael to slip off of the ranch to collect her, their desperate efforts to warm Zachariah up to the idea of marriage, debating whether or not to tell him or to leave Belle’s arrival as a surprise—the stress had been unbelievable. She was grateful to have had Michael’s help throughout it all, though. In her condition, she certainly could not have done it alone. Michael rushed over to her wheelchair and spun her around, then sat on a bench opposite her.

“So, how did it go yesterday?” she asked eagerly, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees. She watched Michael intently, hoping that perhaps she had misread the situation, but she knew that was incredibly unlikely.

“About as well as you’d expect,” Michael said with a groan. “He was furious that I’d even mentioned marriage. I didn’t even get to the point of suggesting he consider mail-order, or that he might enjoy it...” He ran his hand over his face and shook his head. “It was futile.”

Mary let out a long sigh and shook her head exasperatedly. She should’ve known that her son would just get upset. He was very sensitive about this kind of thing.

“Of course,” she replied. “Well, we can just keep trying.”

Michael nodded and tilted his head to one side slightly.

“We don’t really have the time,” he said. “I think our best bet is to just bring her here and tell him that way. He’d find it much harder to tell us no if she was already here, I reckon. He’s not a bad man, I don’t know that he’d be able to turn away a young woman who had moved all that way for him.” He scrunched his eyebrows together as he spoke as if he were trying to convince himself as well as her. Which was just as well, because Mary was trying to do the same thing.

It was true that Zachariah would find it harder to object to the presence of someone who was already there. She’d raised him better than that. On the other hand, she didn’t want him to feel as if he were being ambushed. She knew that this was the right decision, that he needed to marry, but should they give him more say in the matter? She found herself wishing her husband were still around to help her to decide. He always knew what to say in moments like this.

“Do you think that’s wise?” she asked.

“I’m not certain that any of this is wise,” Michael replied.

“I suppose not,” she agreed. “I...I do think your plan is our best bet, though.”

“Really, you do?”

“Mmhm. Zac is far too stubborn for his own good. If we tell him, he’ll only tell us to cancel her arrival. But he is not getting any younger, and he’s clearly in need of some

company.” She looked out across the field at Zachariah as he worked away steadily. “I think we just do it.”

Michael nodded and followed her gaze.

“Alright then, we won’t try to tell him.”

“It’ll be the surprise of his lifetime,” Mary said with another small sigh. “I hope he forgives us.”

“This is the right thing to do, Mary,” Michael said softly. He looked at her with calm, reassuring eyes, and she nodded back with a gentle smile.

“Oh I know, it’s just—well, he doesn’t make it easy.”

“I know,” Michael replied with a small chuckle. “He makes it everything but.”

“So, when is she due to arrive?” Mary asked. If it was going to be a surprise, they needed to make sure that their plan was airtight.

“Tomorrow, just after noon. I’ve got to run into town for ranch business anyway, so he won’t suspect anything,” Michael answered. “Not that he notices when I’m gone anyway.” He rolled his eyes. “That man cares about one thing and one thing only at the moment: his wheat.”

Mary chuckled. Zachariah had been working even harder than usual for the past few days. She’d had to remind him to

stop and eat, he'd become so engrossed in his labor. It was impressive, but it did sometimes scare her. What would he do if she wasn't there to remind him to eat, bathe, and drink on days like those? It was another reason she wanted to find a woman to care for him. Mary wouldn't be there forever.

“Well, let's hope that we can change that,” Mary replied. “I'd love for him to have something else to care about the same way he cares about the darn ranch. Seeing him work so hard is great, but it just reminds me of how lonely he must be. It breaks a mother's heart.”

Michael studied her sadly, then looked back out at the ranch.

“I can imagine,” he said. “But promise me one thing, Mary?”

Mary's eyebrows came together across her forehead and she eyed Michael expectantly.

“Please don't blame yourself, for how he is. Or for how this whole mail-order bride thing goes down. You've been nothing but a wonder to him,” he said softly.

Mary felt the sting of tears in her eyes and held her hand out to Michael. He'd been a part of their family for as long as she could remember; he was a few years older than Zachariah and had worked for the family from a young age. She often saw him as another son, and moments like this made that feeling even stronger. Michael placed his hand in hers and she squeezed his hand gently.



“Thank you, Michael,” she replied, a small smile on her face.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied. He returned her squeeze and then moved his hand away. “So is there anything else we need to arrange?”

“I don’t think so, we have a spare room, you’ll collect her from the station...We should be all right,” Mary replied. She thought for a moment, wracking her brain for anything else worth mentioning. She had a feeling that she’d missed something important, but for the life of her she could not remember. Something had come up while they’d been hatching this plan, she was sure of it. “There was something. But it’s escaped me.” She shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I’m sure it wasn’t important.” Michael smiled reassuringly.

“It...It feels like it was,” she replied. “Something I’ve been meaning to tell you. It came up whilst we were finding Zachariah’s wife. Oh, darn it, what was it?” she sighed. She traced her thoughts back, thinking to when they first began to place their advertisements. She’d bought a newspaper, one with the ad in, and had seen something. She just could not quite put her finger on it.

*Oh come on you daft old woman, what was it?* she cursed herself. Desperately, she tried to think about holding the newspaper in her hands. The advertisement that they’d placed had been in a small box in one corner of the paper, and on the other side of the sheet, there had been a much larger box with an advertisement that had caught her attention...*That was it!*

“Oh!” she exclaimed, making Michael jump out of his seat.

“Oh?” he repeated.

“In the paper, the Provo paper, I bought it the day that the advertisement was posted. There was another advertisement in it. Eli Dickinson is looking for ranches to buy, near Provo, in Provo...He’s making moves to buy up as much land as possible. We can’t let Zachariah know—you know how he feels about Eli,” She shook her head. “And likewise, Eli is a nasty piece of work and if he hears about how well Zac’s made the ranch work...”

Michael’s eyes widened and he gulped audibly.

“Oh dear,” he replied. “Yes, they need to be kept apart, definitely. The last thing Zachariah needs right now is a reintroduction of that fool.”

“It’s better for all of us if we keep Eli’s work a secret from him,” Mary agreed. Michael glanced over to Zac in the fields, chewing his lower lip. “It’ll be okay,” she tried to reassure him.

“I just don’t like keeping things from him,” he said.

“It’s a bit late to worry about that, isn’t it?” Mary replied. “You know it’s important. He and Eli will just destroy one another. They’re dangerous when they’re after one another.”

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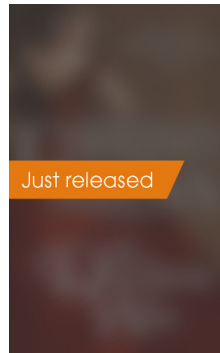
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