

A HOPE SPRINGS STORY

CHOICES OF THE

Heart



SARAH M. EDEN

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CHOICES OF THE
Heart

SARAH M. EDEN

Mirror Press

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Chapter One

Baltimore, Maryland

1876

Sophie Kingston couldn't say with any degree of honesty that she was living her fondest dream. But neither was she truly unhappy. She'd lived all her twenty-five years in Baltimore, and, though her family had moved to Boston two years earlier, she'd been able to remain in the city she knew so well. She lived with a family friend, a widow of significant standing in local society and of even more significant wealth. Mrs. Millicent Archer had taken her on as something of an unofficial companion.

Sophie's parents had abandoned all hope of their "odd" daughter making a matrimonial match amongst Baltimore's wealthy and influential. She had never been courted or shown any romantic attention. Indeed, the only attention she seemed to receive from anyone in Baltimore society tended toward confusion and discomfort. Her family had all but abandoned the idea of her making *friends* amongst that set. But Mrs. Archer had taken a liking to her. And Sophie liked her in return.

"Miss Kingston." The butler presented her with two letters before sketching a quick bow and continuing down the corridor.

A glance at the letters indicated one was for Mrs. Archer, as the vast majority of correspondence arriving at their home was, but the second was addressed to Sophie herself. No one ever wrote to her other than her sister, Dinah.

Sophie checked the watch pinned to her dress. Three o'clock. Mrs. Archer would be in the sitting room, working on her stitching. Their days were very predictable. While Sophie had once imagined herself living a more adventurous existence, she didn't dislike the somewhat repetitive life she lived now.

Mrs. Archer looked up as Sophie approached.

"You've received a letter." Sophie held it out to her.

"Wonderful." Mrs. Archer set aside her stitching and accepted the letter. After a quick perusal, she said, "It is from Joseph."

Her only child, Joseph, lived in Wyoming Territory, though he still ran the family shipping business through telegrams, letters, and annual visits to Baltimore during the winter. Except, he'd not come as expected a few months earlier. His wife was pregnant and not feeling well. She could not have made the journey, and he'd not wanted to leave her.

Though Mrs. Archer had insisted she understood and was not upset, Sophie had seen her disappointment. She had been disappointed herself. The Wyoming Archers had visited the year before and had proven a welcome addition to the usually quiet household.

Sophie sat in the chair she usually did and opened her letter, leaving Mrs. Archer to do the same.

Dearest Sophie,

Mother sends her love and greetings. Life has been busy here in Boston. My William is positioned to win a seat in the state senate at the next election. Our time is filled with campaign events and appearances. Mother and Father are quite proud of him and eager to assist.

The letter went on for two pages in like manner: Dinah's expounding on her family's accomplishments and their parents' subsequent delight and involvement. Her sister wasn't arrogant or a braggart. She was sincerely eager to share her life with the sister the family had left behind. Dinah gave Sophie her only glimpse into the life they were building there. Without her.

Joseph Archer's letters to his mother were always quite sincere and lifted her spirits. He could, in person, give the impression of coldness. But Sophie had been granted the opportunity to watch him interact with his mother and, more telling still, his wife and children. He had a warm and loving heart. And, despite having to forego his usual visit to Baltimore, he'd not neglected to write to Mrs. Archer.

"What is the latest from Joseph?" Sophie asked.

"His Katie is feeling better. The local doctor says all is progressing well."

That was good news.

"His oldest has completed her schooling, as much as is offered in such an out-of-the-way corner of the country." Mrs. Archer lowered the letter, her forehead wrinkling in thought. "She was such a good student and genuinely enjoyed school. I wonder what she will do now."

"How old is she?"

A moment of quick calculation passed. "Emma must be fifteen. That is difficult to believe."

"Time goes by very quickly, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Archer sighed. "Too quickly, it seems. Not having them visit this year feels like missing a quickly-disappearing chance to spend time with Emma. Not many more years and she will be grown with a family of her own. I fear I'll seldom see her after that, if at all."

No matter that Mrs. Archer was active in Baltimore society and was visited regularly by her many friends, the woman was often lonely without her family nearby. Sophie understood that all too well.

Mrs. Archer's friends had embraced Sophie, though their age difference was something of a barrier. And Sophie accompanied her benefactress to countless society events. She did not want for company. But she missed her family. She missed people her own age.

She would have missed being more herself, but that had not been permitted for a very long time. Over the years, she had been declared everything from an oddity to an overly free spirit. Her family had firmly suggested but never required she conform, neither had Mrs. Archer. But Sophie's peculiar approach to life had not proven an asset in the eyes of Baltimore society. She had kept herself to more sedate and prim behavior since being taken in by Mrs. Archer. The last thing in the world she wanted was to embarrass the woman who had shown her such kindness.

"Joseph has mentioned the journey from Baltimore to Hope Springs is not as harrowing as it once was." Mrs. Archer made the declaration in the tone one used when contemplating something beyond what one was discussing.

"He has undertaken it with little children," Sophie said. "It mustn't be dangerous or truly treacherous."

"If children can manage the journey"—Mrs. Archer looked to Sophie once more—"perhaps an old woman could."

That was an interesting observation.

"That comment would make me wonder if *you* were contemplating a westward trek," Sophie said, "except you are not an old woman."

Mrs. Archer smiled at her fondly. "I am not so young as I used to be. And I will be even less so when next Joseph and his family come to visit me, assuming they're able to. As his family grows, so do the complications of such journeys."

“Are you truly contemplating going west?”

“I will have to ask Dr. Norwood if he has any significant concerns. But, barring anything literally life-threatening, I don’t know if he could entirely dissuade me.” Mrs. Archer squared her shawl-draped shoulders. “If my family cannot come to me, I don’t see why I can’t go to them. I have determination and fortitude, and my health is good. And, if you are willing, I would not be making the journey alone.”

Sophie perked up on the instant. “You would wish for me to join you?”

“I would like nothing better.”

It would likely be a week or two of train rides and stagecoaches, of questionable accommodations in unfamiliar corners of the country. And there was no predicting what they might find upon arriving in Hope Springs. The journey would, without question, be exhausting. And it might very well be dangerous.

With a spreading grin, Sophie said, “I would like nothing better.”



Hope Springs, Wyoming Territory

To say Burke Jones had been born in poverty would have been a shocking understatement. He had been raised in an orphanage in Peoria, Illinois where there’d never been room enough or food enough. He hadn’t the first idea who his parents were. Burke had assigned himself a birthday, not knowing what his actual one was.

When he was little, he’d dreamed of running away. But as he’d grown, those dreams had changed. He had formulated a means of leaving the cold indifference of the orphanage behind for good by one day becoming a respected and successful doctor.

Now twenty-eight years old, he was, in fact, a doctor. In a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, and more than half his patients were animals. It was hardly the prestigious practice he’d passed those cold and lonely nights dreaming about. And it came nowhere close to the level of prosperity he’d insisted to his fellow medical students he would one day claim.

Still, he liked his work and the people he looked after. He was building a stable and dependable life for himself.

At the moment, he sat in the humble home of one of the local farmers with a three-year-old little boy on his knee. He bounced the child a bit, smiling to reassure him. “And how are you feeling, Matthew? I see all your spots are gone.”

“No more spots,” Matthew said.

Burke searched as he spoke. Chicken pox was a relatively minor experience for most who contracted it, but he did want to make certain this little one was well recovered. The boy’s infant sister had contracted the illness as well, which had been far more worrying.

Of the child’s mother, he asked, “Is Claire still fever-free?”

“Yes, for two days now.” She looked at him as she spoke, though she was entirely blind. She was also English, something that required some getting used to in a town populated entirely by either Irish immigrants or Americans. “Both children seem their usual selves now.”

“Good. Good.” He was satisfied with Matthew’s recovery. He lifted him into his arms as he stood. “You will be pleased to know, Matthew, that all of your cousins who’ve been sick with this are doing much better.”

“Even Eoin?” the boy’s mother pressed. “He is so tiny still. We’ve worried about him.”

“He’s been better the last twenty-four hours. I’m going to look in on him when I return to the inn.” Burke’s home and infirmary adjoined the town’s inn, both built only two years earlier. Eoin’s parents ran the inn. “After I look in on the Archers and their children.”

Cecily, these children’s mother, shook her head and sighed. “This sure spread quickly, didn’t it?”

“It did, indeed.”

He was bid farewell. Matthew seemed genuinely sad to see him go. Burke had worked since coming to Hope Springs to earn the trust of the children. Helping them when they were ill or injured had proven difficult in the extreme before they’d learned to not be afraid of him.

Burke drove his one-horse buggy down the road, passing familiar farms and quickly recounting in his mind any health concerns he knew of in the resident families. Hope Springs was not a large town, but it was big enough to keep him busy.

Just on the other side of the bridge that spanned the Hope Springs river was the Archer farm. Joseph and Katie had a growing family, a picturesque farm, and every bit as much wealth and influence as Burke had once dreamed of claiming. They employed both a housekeeper and a farm hand and owned nearly all the land in the valley. They were also genuinely good people, which Burke knew from experience was not always the case with the rich and influential.

He was greeted as warmly at this house as he had been at the more humble home he’d just left. They had three children, and one on the way. Their oldest, Emma, had avoided the town’s most recent brush with chicken pox by virtue of having had it before. Her younger sister and brother had not.

Little Sean rushed over to him, and Burke scooped him up. He was nearly four years old now but had been quite small when Burke had first come to Hope Springs. Time had gone quickly in many ways.

The middle Archer child, nine-year-old Ivy, bounced into the room. Even sick, the girl had more energy than anyone Burke had ever met. She was a delightful handful.

Their father was most certainly out in the fields. But their mother and oldest sister, Emma, joined the younger children in the next instant.

“Why, Dr. Jones, how good of you to look in on us.” Katie, their mother, spoke with the distinctive flavor of Ireland.

“I wanted to make certain your two youngest are spot and fever free, that Miss Emma’s arm is feeling better, and that you are well.” Emma had sprained her arm a few weeks earlier, and Katie’s pregnancy had not been without difficulty.

“We are very fortunate to have you, Burke Jones.”

And he was truly fortunate to be the doctor for this town and the surrounding ones. Before it had been unexpectedly offered to him, he’d all but given up hope of using the medical degree he’d fought so hard to earn. He’d found in Hope Springs a town that desperately needed him. The sight of Katie’s now-fingerless left hand served as a recurring reminder of how dire their situation was before his arrival.

“When can I go back to school?” Ivy asked, tugging at his coat. “I’m missing all the best games.”

“If you truly are spot-free, and you aren’t running a fever, you could return tomorrow.”

Ivy spun about, stopping after a few revolutions to look at her sister. “I get to go back to school.” There was something very teasing in the declaration.

Emma tipped her chin at a proud angle. “That is because you are still a child.”

“You are only fifteen,” Ivy tossed back. “That’s not so grown up.”

Katie put an arm around her oldest, who was now as tall as she was. “It is only difficult because it’s new. You’ll sort out what to do next, you will.”

Emma sighed, clearly not convinced. To Burke, she said, “My arm feels much better.”

“I’m glad.” He looked to Katie. “And you?”

She rested a hand on her clearly pregnant belly. “Hale and hardy.”

“Good.” He turned to Ivy, still twirling about.

“No spots. No fever,” she said confidently.

Burke bounced Sean. “How are you, little one?”

“No spots,” the boy said. “No fever.”

A quick confirmation from their mother was enough for him. She had lost a little sister to illness many years earlier and was not one to take sickness lightly. That Katie was not worried meant Burke had no reason to be.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you,” he said as he handed the boy to Katie. “You know where to find me.”

“It is a very convenient thing that you’ve a permanent location now,” Katie said. “It used to be such a struggle to sort out where you were from hour to hour.”

That was a fine thing, indeed. And the rent he paid on the space he used was within his means; another miracle. In time, his income might even expand enough for supporting more than just himself—perhaps even a family of his own. It was a difficult thing for him to even imagine.

Soon enough, he was back in his buggy making his way to that “permanent location.”

The inn had been built out by the stagecoach road. A hill of decent size hid the town from view when one was at the inn. Hope Springs preferred it that way. The town stayed peaceful and quiet and small, while still reaping many of the benefits of stage passengers breaking their journey there for a night.

It had taken nearly all of the two years since the inn was completed to convince the stage line to adjust their schedule and route so that the inn at Hope Springs could be an overnight stop. But doing so had proven beneficial for both the stage company and the innkeepers.

The proprietors, Patrick and Eliza O’Connor were inside and waved him over when he entered. Passengers weren’t expected that day, so the inn was quiet.

“Have a bit to eat, Burke.” Eliza was the only other Englishwoman in the area besides Cecily O’Connor, her sister-in-law. But where Cecily spoke with an almost aristocratic flare, Eliza would’ve sounded entirely at home on the streets of London.

“I’ve dropped in to check on the children. I’ve food enough on my side of the wall.”

Patrick, who was repairing a chair on the far end of the public room, clicked his tongue in a sound of warning. “If you keep rejecting her offer of food, she’ll start to think you don’t care for her cooking.”

“Impossible,” Burke said. “No one makes a mince pie like she does.”

Eliza lifted her youngest child into her arms, a boy of not yet a year old, and carried him over to where Burke stood. “He’s still a bit pale and sleeps more than usual, but the spots are gone, and he’s not been running a fever.”

“That seems to be the order of the day.” Burke studied the little boy and didn’t see anything truly alarming. “Are you feeling a bit poorly still, Eoin?”

The child’s name was easy enough to say—it sounded precisely like Owen—but he’d needed to be told a few times how to spell it. The Irish in Hope Springs worked hard to keep their traditions alive, down even to the spelling of their names.

The little boy watched him but didn’t make a sound. That wasn’t unusual. He was every bit as quiet as his sister had been at the same age. She had learned to like and trust Burke. Eoin would as well, in time.

“Is Lydia improved?” he asked Eliza.

“Yes. But she keeps telling Patrick that she’s not so he’ll cuddle with her. She has him wrapped around her finger, I’m afraid.”

That wasn’t surprising. Patrick’s connection to Lydia had begun almost the moment she and her mother had arrived in Hope Springs. The bond between him and the little girl he loved as his own was inseparable.

Burke checked on Lydia and was satisfied with both children’s recovery. The worst had passed.

“A letter came for you.” Eliza handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

She bounced Eoin gently in her arms. “Thank *you* for taking such good care of the little ones.”

“It is my pleasure.” Burke stepped out of the inn once more, then crossed to the south side of the building to the door that led to his portion of the building.

Only once he was inside, alone behind closed doors, did he let his shoulders droop with exhaustion. Some days were better than others, but he was often tired.

Burke set his medical bag on the little table in the entryway he’d placed there for that purpose. He hung his coat on its hook, his hat on its peg, then crossed to the doorway of his sitting room. It also served as an examination space, but there was no one there just then.

He sat in his wingback chair, letting himself slump a bit. He took a deep breath and listened to the quiet around him. In the distance he could hear the smallest hint of Patrick’s hammer. Sometimes, when the O’Connor children cried or laughed, he could make out the sound. When the public room was busy, he could hear that as well.

He didn’t mind. He liked it, in fact. Noise was familiar to anyone who grew up in an orphanage. So was loneliness.

Burke opened the letter he still held in his hand. It was from Alexander Montgomery, a friend from his medical school days. They’d finished their studies at the same time. Alexander was now a doctor in Chicago with a thriving practice.

Burke,

I was pleased to read in your last letter that Mrs. Callaghan’s lungs are continuing to prove strong. It seems the treatments you have prescribed are proving efficacious.

I’ve given some thought to your lack of access to ether. I have not yet thought of any alternatives. I believe your best course of action is to do all you can to obtain even a small supply of it.

I have easy access to it in Chicago. As I have considered coming to see you in the wilds of the West and experience frontier medicine for myself, perhaps I might bring you medicines you are struggling to obtain.

A month or more might pass before I’m able to pull myself away from my practice here. But if I’m able to, I will make the journey.

I’m looking forward to seeing you again.

-Alexander

Alexander was going to visit? Here in Hope Springs?

Burke swallowed down the lump of apprehension growing in his throat. There was work still needing to be done to complete his infirmary. He’d made improvements over the past two years as he’d been able. But it was hardly ready for evaluation.

He’d done more all those years ago than imagine himself as a doctor. He’d been so certain he would be an *important* one who made a very real difference in the world. He’d been certain he would end each day knowing he’d changed things and feeling satisfied with what he accomplished. He would have reason to be proud. He’d bragged about that to Alexander and his other friends, to the point they’d teased him about it.

For just a moment, he considered writing back with an excuse for his old friend not to make the journey. But Alexander meant to bring him medicine he could not obtain otherwise. He could not turn up his nose at that offer.

Alexander was coming. He would see for himself how short of the mark Burke had truly come. It would be a reckoning; one he wasn’t entirely ready to make.



Chapter Two

Wind was a constant in Wyoming. Therefore, so was dust. Burke spent time every day sweeping it out of the entryway of his home, knowing it'd be back again soon enough.

There was something of a metaphor in that. So much of his work didn't really "keep." He would see the town through an illness, but eventually there was another. He'd attend to an injury down the Red Road, only to hear of another down the Irish Road, followed by another out at one of the ranches. That was the nature of doctoring. But he did sometimes wonder how much of a difference he was truly making.

He swept the afternoon's pile of dust out his front door and onto the porch. He then swept it off the edge and out amongst the dirt—dirt that would soon enough be blown back inside.

Eliza O'Connor was on the porch of the adjoining inn, doing precisely the same thing. "It never stops, does it?"

"Not ever."

She rested her broom upright and leaned a little against the handle. "Did you fight this much dust in Chicago?"

All the town knew Burke had undertaken his medical schooling in that city. "Nowhere near as much."

"We battled damp more often than dust in England," she said.

He'd heard from the Irish in town that their homeland was similar. Every place had its joys and challenges, he supposed. In the orphanage, he had experienced far more of the latter.

Eliza's gaze settled on the southern horizon. Her eyes narrowed. Burke looked in that direction as well.

A cloud of dust billowed into the sky far in the distance. They'd come to know that sight well; the stage was approaching.

Would this be the one Alexander was on? Surely not. He'd said he needed to make arrangements first. There'd not been enough time since the letter arrived for Burke to make further improvements to his humble infirmary. He hoped that meant Alexander hadn't managed to work things out on his end either.

"Let me finish your sweeping," Burke offered. "That'll give you a moment to prepare for the new arrivals."

"I know you've plenty of urgent matters to fill your time," she said. "Sweeping my porch is hardly as urgent as working on your convalescing rooms. You've mentioned that need a lot lately."

It had weighed heavily on his mind ever since Alexander's letter had arrived. "The dust on your porch might not be as urgent as my uncompleted rooms, but it's far easier to address."

Eliza smiled a bit. "Who am I to deny you an easy task in the midst of difficult ones?"

What she labeled "difficult" he'd been finding "impossible." For two years he'd spent every free moment and available penny continuing the work of completing his infirmary. Yet, he still lacked

furnishings, medicines, and equipment. His own bedroom was so sparsely furnished that it bore a depressing resemblance to the space he'd occupied in the orphanage.

There was so much to do. Sweeping a porch would be a welcome escape from the weight of it.

Eliza stepped back inside to make her preparations. Burke moved to the inn's portion of the covered porch and set himself to the task at hand. It was easy to think while sweeping. He could order the items in his mind.

The local merchant had procured a few more powders for him as well as apothecary jars. There was room in Burke's cabinet for them already. He had received more nails and wood so he could build the bed frame needed in the third room. He needed shelves and bedside tables and stools for sitting and examining in those rooms.

He finished his sweeping just as Eliza stepped back out once more. The stage was rumbling up to the inn. He pulled the doors closed so the pounding hooves and spinning wheels wouldn't send dirt onto Eliza's clean floors.

Heaven help him if Alexander was on this stage. He'd spend the entirety of his friend's visit making excuses for how short he'd fallen from the mark they'd set for themselves all those years ago.

Burke crossed back to the section of porch in front of his home and infirmary in the same moment the stage came to a halt.

After a moment, the dirt kicked up by its arrival settled once more. The driver hopped down and pulled open the coach door. Burke held his breath.

Out of the stage climbed a young woman with fly-away hair, noticeably fine clothing, and a somewhat frantic expression. She rushed immediately to Eliza. The two discussed something in low tones.

No one else stepped out of the coach. Was she the only passenger?

The new arrival came rushing to where he stood. "You're a doctor?"

"I am."

"The lady I'm traveling with has taken ill. Can you help her?"

He nodded. "I will certainly do all I can."

Patrick had already joined the driver in assisting the only remaining passenger from the coach. Burke reached them just as she emerged. He did a quick assessment. Likely in her sixties. She appeared healthy other than a pallor and weakness that was, no doubt, the result of the illness the younger woman had mentioned. She was weak enough that she was struggling a little to stay on her feet.

"See her to the first room at the top of the stairs," he instructed the men. "I'll fetch my bag and be directly behind you."

He followed close behind them, taking up his bag as he passed its spot near the door. The younger woman was right on his heels all the way up the stairs. Though she didn't ask any questions, he suspected she had plenty.

Burke entered the room and sat on the stool beside the bed where the ailing traveler lay. His rooms were too small for anything but a bed, a bedside table, and a single stool. He'd debated, when the building was being constructed, on opting for fewer rooms that could be larger, but felt, in the end, should the town experience something truly awful in which he needed to tend to as many people as possible, he would be grateful for more beds.

He took the older woman's hand in his and used her wrist to check her pulse. "If you feel equal to it, tell me what you are experiencing."

"I don't feel well." The words emerged quiet and difficult.

"Conserve your strength," he said. "If your traveling companion offers any explanation you feel is inaccurate, let me know." He looked to the younger of the two women. "First, what is her name?"

"Millicent Archer."

Patrick, who hovered in the doorway, looked as struck by that as Burke was.

“We have Archers in town,” Burke said.

She nodded. “We’ve come to visit them.”

Burke turned his attention to Patrick. “Fetch Joseph.” He looked to the younger woman once more. “And your name?”

“Sophie Kingston.”

Having a name helped build confidence. That was crucial in new patients. “Tell me all you can of”—the older woman wore a wedding band—“Mrs. Archer’s condition.”

“She was fine until we reached the train station two days ago. She felt a little odd after supper and wished to lie down. The next day, I suggested we delay our departure on the stage, but she wouldn’t hear of it. By last night, she was utterly miserable.”

Burke felt the glands along Mrs. Archer’s neck. “Miserable in what way? Specifics are helpful.”

“She’s not managed to keep down anything she’s eaten. She’s shifted between feverish and shivery. She says she is having horrible stomach pains.”

He addressed his next question to Mrs. Archer. “Are your pains high in your abdomen or low?”

“Both,” she whispered.

“And have you experienced other difficulties with your intestines beyond not ‘keeping down’ your food?” The woman put him too much in mind of the very prim and proper well-to-do ladies he’d attended sometimes in Chicago to dare approaching so delicate a subject without carefully chosen words.

“Yes.”

He checked her for fever and found she was not overly warm. That was a good sign.

“Please tell me what I can do to help,” Miss Kingston—he assumed her lack of a wedding band meant *Miss* was the proper form of address—begged.

“She ought to have remained in the hotel by the train station. There is a fine doctor in that town who would have looked after her.”

Miss Kingston sighed. “I did try to convince her.”

“Next time, please try harder.”

She did not appear to appreciate that advice *at all*. But he hadn’t time to soften his unintentional blow.

“Please go back over to the inn and ask Mrs. O’Connor to bring Mrs. Archer some broth. Then have her show you where the water pump is and bring up a bucketful. I suspect your ‘traveling companion’ is parched as well as ill.”

“She is more than my traveling companion,” Miss Kingston said.

“I assumed you would have called her your mother if she was.”

“She’s not my mother.”

“Aunt?”

Miss Kingston shook her head.

“Cousin?”

“No.”

Burke turned his attention back to his patient. “I am not likely to guess the answer, it seems.”

“Next time, try harder.” With that, she left.

Under his breath, Burke said, “That was not a favorable first impression.”

“For you or her?” Mrs. Archer asked, voice as quiet as ever.

He allowed a little smile. “For either of us.”

She offered a weak smile of her own. “She is a good person, kind to her very heart. But life has asked a great deal of her.”

Burke took Mrs. Archer's hand once more, checking her pulse again. "I suspect, ma'am, life will ask a bit more of *you* the next couple of days. But I have every confidence you will recover with rest and foods that will be gentle on you."

"Was it something I ate, then?"

"I cannot say with complete confidence, but that would be my guess."

She closed her eyes and released a slow, heavy breath. "I knew when we left Baltimore that we would endure some privation. I suspect I underestimated how meager everything would be out here."

Meager was a good word, really. And she would find Hope Springs offered less by way of comforts than even the mediocre ones she'd found upon alighting from her long train ride. Based on her clothing and jewelry and fine way of talking, this very room likely felt little better than a prison or a hovel.

"When Miss Kingston returns, she can help you dress in your night clothes. I realize it is still the middle of the afternoon, but you will be more comfortable dressed down, and rest is of utmost importance right now."

"Will there be a place for Sophie to stay while I am convalescing?" Mrs. Archer asked.

"Of course. She can either occupy the room next to this one—it has only a bed, but it's conveniently located—or she can claim a room at the inn. The O'Connors run a well-maintained and respectable establishment; she would be comfortable there."

Mrs. Archer accepted that with a silent nod. She didn't ask any further questions or make any comments as he continued checking her for anything he might have missed. In the end, he felt confident she was, indeed, suffering from the ill-effects of something undercooked or a bit spoiled, coupled with the strain of travel. She would feel fine as feathers in a day or two.

Miss Kingston returned with a bucket of water, as requested. Burke used it to fill the chipped pitcher he kept in the room. He needed to obtain a couple more so each room would have one. There were so many things left to do. And he had no idea how much time remained to do them.

After a moment, with instructions to give Mrs. Archer water to drink, he slipped out and left the two women to see to the matter of Mrs. Archer's comfort and clothing.

He reached his sitting room and sat in his chair a moment. The ailment was a minor one, easily seen to. Mrs. Archer would recover; he'd no doubt about that.

I underestimated how meager it would all be.

She hadn't meant the observation unkindly, but it had hit its mark. He was grateful to the people of Hope Springs for allowing him to build a practice in their town. But it *was* all very meager. Seeing it through the eyes of someone who regularly experienced the kind of establishment he'd once dreamed of claiming, drove that home a bit, dredging up some of the doubts he never seemed able to fully shake.

The door to his home opened and, in the next instant, Joseph Archer, trailed closely by Patrick, stepped into the sitting room.

"I'm told there's someone here who has come to visit me." He looked completely confused. This relative of his, then, hadn't made her arrival known ahead of time.

"Yes," Burke said. "A Mrs. Millicent Archer."

Joseph's mouth dropped open. Shock pulled at all his features.

"I take it she is not unknown to you."

"Hardly. She is my mother."

Patrick whistled low. "Your own mother, is she? I'd not've thought her the sort to make such a journey based on what I've heard you tell of her."

"She is *not* the sort," Joseph said. "Not at all. And by herself even."

"She wasn't entirely by herself," Burke said. "There is a Miss Kingston with her."

Looking even more shocked, he sputtered, "Sophie?" Shoulders dropping and sighing seemingly without meaning to, he said, "Did *she* arrive in one piece?"

It seemed that was not the expected situation. “She did. And quite distraught over your mother’s health.”

“As *you* do not seem distraught, I have not continued to be,” Joseph said. “Have I interpreted the situation correctly?”

Burke nodded. “I suspect she ate something that did not agree with her, then did not allow herself to rest and recover from the strain of that, coupled with the exertion needed to make such a long journey.”

Joseph shook his head and paced away. “I cannot believe she undertook this without so much as a word to me.”

“She sounds a bit headstrong, your ma,” Patrick said. “Are you fully certain your people aren’t Irish?”

“Katie has asked me that very question more than once.” His pacing took him past Burke’s chair once more. “My mother will be well, though?”

“I haven’t any doubt on that score. Once she is changed into her night clothes and comfortably situated, you can see her and reassure yourself.”

They weren’t made to wait long. Miss Kingston arrived in the sitting room, hair still mussed and fine clothing a bit ruffled. Burke suspected she didn’t usually look so catawampus.

Joseph spotted her before she seemed to notice him. “Sophie.”

She smiled broadly. “Hello, Joseph.”

“What in heaven’s name are the two of you doing here?”

“Your mother missed you,” was the answer. “Not knowing when she might have the chance to see you again, she decided to make the journey herself.”

“And you didn’t talk her out of it?”

Miss Kingston tossed her hands in the air. “Why is it everyone is so convinced today that I could talk her out of something she’s set her mind to? You’ve known her all your life, Joseph. How successful do you suspect I would have been?”

A hint of repentance touched his expression. “She is a difficult ship to turn, isn’t she?”

“Sometimes impossible.”

“Please forgive my graceless welcome,” Joseph said. “I am still in shock and a bit worried. Allow me time to wrap my mind around this, and I suspect I will be far more logical about it all.”

She, too, seemed to soften. “She does seem better. And I’ll do anything I can to help her.”

“I’m going to go look in on her,” Joseph said, making his way to the doorway. “In the meantime, listen to Dr. Jones and do whatever he recommends.”

She tipped her head a bit to one side. Her eyes narrowed. “You trust him that much?”

Joseph paused long enough to answer, “Implicitly,” before rushing up the stairs.

He trusted him *implicitly*. It was a reassurance Burke needed more than he’d realized. Alexander’s letter had tossed him into deep waters of doubt. He was struggling not to drown.



Chapter Three

“Joseph will see to all his mother’s expenses and all of yours,” Eliza told Sophie. “You really don’t need to work off any debt.”

“He made certain I knew that. I’m offering to help because I am miserable when I’m idle. The Archers are visiting with Mrs. Archer, and I’m not needed there. Please put me to work. I’d be indebted *to you*.”

“There’s always work to do,” Eliza said. “Especially on Tuesdays.”

“Why Tuesdays?”

“The stage stops on Tuesdays, and the local folks come by to play music and entertain the travelers.”

“They do?” She peeked through the kitchen door and out into the public room. Sure enough, people had gathered in a corner, several instruments among them. “Will they be disappointed that I am the only stage passenger here?”

“Not at all. They gather even when there’s no one here. Music has been a healing balm in this town. I suspect it’ll always be an important part of life here.”

Music had been important in Sophie’s life as well, though she wasn’t able to indulge in it often. She liked to sing but had been told any number of times that her talent was only sufficient to render her efforts uncomfortable. She didn’t wish to embarrass more people than she already had during her brief years amongst Baltimore’s wealthy and influential.

“A great many people here in Hope Springs come from Ireland,” Eliza said. “Gathering to play tunes in the local pub is a way of life there. Our little inn, here, has taken on that role.”

“You’re not Irish,” Sophie said. “I’d guess English.”

“You’d guess rightly. My husband, though, is near about as Irish as they come.”

“Does he join the musicians on Tuesdays?”

Eliza nodded. “He plays the fiddle, and quite well too. He also has a fine singing voice.”

“I like to sing.” Why Sophie shared that part of herself so readily, she couldn’t say.

“Do you? You’re welcome to join the musicians tonight if you’d like.”

“Oh, no. I don’t sing in public.” Not anymore, leastwise. “But I will enjoy listening. *While I work.*”

Eliza laughed. “I suspect you’re a little stubborn.”

“‘Single-minded’ was the term my father always used.”

“The most helpful task I could give you is to look after the little ones,” Eliza said. “Patrick will wish to play with the musicians, and I’d appreciate being able to put away the supplies our merchant’s son delivered earlier.”

“I’d be delighted,” Sophie said. “I like children, and I don’t get to spend much time with little ones.”

On a blanket on the floor, the O'Connors' two children sat contentedly. They, no doubt, were quite accustomed to the arrangement, growing up in the inn as they had. The older of the two, a girl likely about four years old, played with a doll. Her baby brother lay on his stomach, attempting valiantly to pick up a wooden block.

Sophie had only just arrived at the blanket herself when the girl called out, "Papa!" Her tone was not one of alarm, so Sophie didn't think she'd caused the girl any distress.

Patrick looked over from his place among the musicians. "What's the matter, mo stóirín?"

The little girl's answer was a pout.

"Are you wanting to sit by me during the music tonight?" He sounded every bit as Irish as his wife had declared him to be.

The girl nodded, her pout only growing.

"What of your wee brother? He'll not wish to be left alone."

The poor girl looked ready to cry with disappointment.

"I'll keep an eye on the boy," Sophie said.

"You needn't do that, Miss Kingston."

"It'd be a pleasure, truly. I like children, and I enjoy music. And if it'll help your wife see to her tasks for the evening, all the better."

Patrick scooped up his daughter, who smiled at him with absolute adoration in her eyes. As he carried her over to where the musicians were gathered, he rubbed his close-cut beard against her cheek, and she giggled.

On the blanket, poor Eoin watched his father and sister's departure with utter dejection.

"Have they abandoned you, sweet boy?" Sophie picked him up, smiling and hoping he accepted the stranger who was suddenly holding him.

He watched her closely but didn't object. With thick black hair and big blue eyes, he was a shockingly beautiful baby.

"Eoin's taken a liking to you." Eliza paused as she walked past. "He isn't always trusting of people he doesn't know."

"I suspect he's not entirely certain of me yet." She bounced him a little. His expression didn't change.

"Where'd Lydia get herself off to?"

Sophie felt certain that was the little girl's name. "She's with her papa."

"Of course she is. Those two are regular peas in a pod." Eliza's gaze slid to her husband and daughter. "He sure loves that little girl."

"And he sure looks like this little boy," Sophie said.

Eliza nodded emphatically. "We ought to have simply named him Patrick for how much they look alike."

Sophie continued to gently bounce her armful. "Were both your children born in this country?"

Eliza nodded.

"And did you come to Wyoming directly from England?" Sophie asked.

"No. I lived for a time in New York. I don't know how that city compares to Baltimore."

"They are likely not terribly different." Sophie rocked Eoin. He'd stopped watching her with suspicion but was far from truly relaxed. "Baltimore is quite large. There are some who are well-to-do, many who are comfortable, and a great many who struggle. Some people are happy, some are miserable."

"Which were you?" Eliza asked.

"Happy most of the time. My family wanted to see me turn heads in Baltimore society. Unfortunately, I did so for all the wrong reasons."

With a barely concealed look of amusement, Eliza whispered, "Oh, dear."

“Oh, yes. I was something of a disaster.”

Eliza took up a crate beside the front door and motioned for Sophie to accompany her as she returned to the kitchen. “I’ve only known you a couple of hours, but I can’t imagine you were such a failure as all that.”

“I could tell you stories, Eliza O’Connor.”

With a mischievous grin, she said, “I hope you will.”

From the public room they’d just left, a jaunty tune was struck up.

Sophie listened a moment. “They are very good.”

Eliza nodded. “And when one of our pipers joins, they are also very loud. We thought Mrs. Archer might not appreciate the droning of pipes while she’s recovering, so they are not participating tonight.”

“Can they truly be heard in the doctor’s infirmary?”

“They can be heard throughout the valley.”

Sophie wandered back into the public room, Eoin seemingly content in her arms. The musicians grinned at each other as they played. Laughter was ample. One among them would toss out a tune and the rest would jump in. Those who didn’t know how to play it would tap along to the beat or sing if they knew the words.

Little Lydia watched her papa with the sweetest smile. Eoin perked up anytime Patrick sang, obviously recognizing the sound of his father’s voice.

Listening to the musicians was a joy. How tempted she was to join them, if only to tap on a table in time to the music. She even knew a couple of the songs they chose and could have sung along. But she didn’t dare. She’d made a commitment when accepting Mrs. Archer’s offer of housework and support. Not being an embarrassment was an important part of that commitment.

Into the gathering came Dr. Jones. He dipped his head to the musicians as he passed but didn’t pause to enjoy the music.

Sophie watched him as he crossed the room. She’d not taken much time to study the man when they’d first arrived that afternoon. Too much had been happening, and she’d been far too worried. Now, with the immediate crisis passed, she could do so.

He was handsome; there was no denying that. He was also quite somber and focused, to the point she wasn’t certain if he ever smiled. She’d known men like that in Baltimore. They’d always made her feel very gauche and graceless.

Dr. Jones stopped directly in front of her; she, apparently, being the person he’d come to talk with. “The Archers will be returning to their home. Emma wishes to remain and look after her grandmother but isn’t certain what needs to be done. I could only offer medical insights, nothing pertaining to Mrs. Archer’s preferences or comforts.”

“Emma doesn’t need to remain,” Sophie insisted. “I’m happy to look after Mrs. Archer.”

“She worries when people are ill,” Dr. Jones said. “Helping her grandmother will ease her mind.”

Sophie could appreciate that. And she wouldn’t argue.

Eoin was handed over to his mother, and Sophie followed the doctor back to his side of the combined inn and infirmary.

“Is Mrs. Archer doing better this evening?”

He dipped his head. “She is.”

“Seeing her family has helped, I’m certain. She missed them.”

“Loneliness takes a toll on a person,” he said.

There was a great deal of truth in that.

“I suspect that is the reason Mrs. Archer was so adamant about making this journey,” Sophie said. “Family means a lot to her.”

They climbed the stairs.

“Do you have family here in Hope Springs?” she asked him.

He motioned her into the room where Mrs. Archer was staying. “I don’t have family anywhere.”

It was not a declaration made in bitterness or anger. It was almost emotionless. *Almost*. Underneath his indifferent façade, he seemed a little sad. There wasn’t time for pressing further; he walked away without another word or comment. Perhaps she had upset him, after all.

The last thing she wanted was to create discomfort between Mrs. Archer and her current doctor. Back in Baltimore, Dr. Norwood had spent decades building a rapport with her. Until they were back in his care, trust between Mrs. Archer and Dr. Jones was crucial. Sophie would need to do better in future interactions.

“Sophie, have you noticed how very mature my granddaughter is?” Mrs. Archer asked from her bed.

“I have.” She gave Emma a smile. “You really have grown up quite a lot in the last eighteen months.”

Sophie had already been living with Mrs. Archer the last time her son and his family had visited. Emma was fifteen years old now and was growing into a decidedly pretty young woman. Her hair had darkened and thickened. Her brown eyes were soft and lovely. She carried herself with more maturity than most girls her age, but she’d also passed through more struggles than most.

“I’ve finished school since the last time I saw you,” Emma said. “Our preacher’s wife is the schoolteacher, and she said I’ve learned all she can teach me.”

“What have you been doing with your days?”

“I help Cecily O’Connor create her Braille books. And I work sometimes at the mercantile. And the elder Mrs. O’Connor has been teaching me to make Irish food.”

“And now,” Sophie added, “you get to spend time with your grandmother.”

Emma smiled broadly, looking to Mrs. Archer with very real fondness. “I was sad not to be able to come see you in Baltimore this past winter.”

“I was so sad not to see you that I came all the way here.” Mrs. Archer held her hand out to the girl, who took it gently. “As soon as the doctor says I am strong enough to do so, I mean to spend weeks at your house with your family. We have as much time together as we would have in Baltimore.”

“Mama will like that,” Emma said. “If only because you might keep Ivy occupied enough to give her a bit of peace.”

Mrs. Archer laughed. “Your sister always was very spirited.”

“That hasn’t changed,” Emma said with a smile.

“I’ve learned that, on Tuesdays, the musicians in town gather here at the inn to play music,” Sophie said. “We can come sometimes to hear them.”

“Oh, I would like that,” Mrs. Archer said.

Emma sat on the edge of her grandmother’s bed. “And on Saturdays are the *céilís*. We never miss those.”

“What is a *céili*?” Sophie asked, pouring a glass of water for Mrs. Archer.

“It’s a party like they used to have in Ireland, with music, dancing, food, stories. We’ve been going for years.”

“Sounds delightful,” Mrs. Archer said.

“And even more delightful would be you getting some sleep,” Sophie said. She met the girl’s eye. “If you’ll pull the blanket up and over your grandmother, then we’ll be certain she’s not cold.”

Emma obeyed without hesitation.

“Dr. Jones said the room next to this one is available,” Sophie said. “If you’d like to stay in that one, Emma, you’ll be nearby if your grandmother needs you.” She would have insisted on that role herself, but she suspected the girl wanted to stay. Sophie would find a room at the inn.

They left the door to Mrs. Archer's room a bit ajar and slipped into the next one over. Sophie's traveling trunk was in there still. That, however, was something of a stroke of luck. She was able to provide Emma with a nightdress to wear, since she'd not brought any clothes of her own.

"It sounded like the Tuesday musicians were at the inn when you left," Emma said.

"They were and playing the loveliest music."

"You should hear the music they play when all of the instruments are together. All the town comes to the *céilís*, and not exclusively for the food."

"The entire town?" That sounded delightful.

"Well, almost. Sometimes people don't feel well or are working on other things and miss a week. And, then there's Finbarr. He's never there. He's never anywhere anymore."

"Who is Finbarr?"

"He used to work for Papa. He was our friend when we were little. But he has his own house now and no one sees him anymore. Not even his family."

"Is he shy?"

Emma shook her head. "He just likes to be alone."

This town had weekly parties, talented musicians, a pub-like inn, a wealthy East Coast businessman, a shockingly intriguing doctor, and, apparently, a resident hermit.

Hope Springs was proving more interesting by the moment.



Chapter Four

Burke ought to have been working on the needed additions to his infirmary—furniture and shelving and such—but he had a patient convalescing in one of the rooms and her family members trickling in and out. Disturbing her rest was not advisable.

So, he was on the other side of the dividing wall, helping Patrick O'Connor make similar improvements at the inn. Money was hardly abundant in Hope Springs, and this dream of Eliza and Patrick's was taking time to be realized.

Burke sanded the corners of a chair Patrick had finished piecing together that morning. His friend and neighbor was already building another. From Patrick, Burke had learned to make furniture, a skill he'd not had before. And in return, Burke had taught him more about caring for ailing animals. As the inn was charged with the keeping and care of a team of the stage company's horses, knowing how to keep the animals in good health was crucial.

Beyond being useful to one another, though, they'd grown to be good friends. Burke hadn't had that in a long time. He kept in touch with Alexander but hadn't seen him in years. From all Burke had learned of Patrick's history before returning to his family in Hope Springs, that man had wanted for friends as well.

"I thought Joseph was going to topple right over when he realized his ma was here all the way from Baltimore," Patrick said with a laugh. "And he seemed even more shocked that her companion had arrived whole."

"That still strikes me as odd. Miss Kingston seems reliable and calm headed. But that does not seem to be Joseph's impression of her."

"Have you sorted out her connection to all of them?"

Burke shook his head. A great deal about Miss Kingston remained a mystery.

"Miss Emma is doing a fine job looking after her granny, from all I can tell," Patrick said. "You might have yourself the makings of a fine nurse there."

The oldest Archer girl was reliable as the day was long, and she had a good head on her shoulders. But Burke had learned over his three years in Hope Springs that she worried tremendously when people were unwell. There was no telling if those anxieties would prove too much when tending to patients who were in a bad way.

"My Eliza's been a bit nervous with Miss Kingston here," Patrick said. "She and Mrs. Archer are the most elegant people we've had at our inn. Likely the finest we'll ever have. Joseph's been one of us for so long, 'tis easy to forget that he has claim to that too."

"I had a patient in Chicago not long after I finished my schooling whom Mrs. Archer reminds me of. She, too, was quite flush in the pocket and, as Mrs. Archer seems to be, a good sort of person. She also paid me generously enough for me to purchase the doctoring bag I am still using." That had been the best sort of surprise. "The well-to-do patients were in no way more important, but when they were generous, it was a very helpful thing."

"The grandest building I ever worked on was the viceroy's residence in Ottawa." Patrick had traveled about as a builder before settling down in Hope Springs. "The people who call that building

home have more money than the likes of you and I will ever see. Yet, I can't say those of us who toiled at that building site were paid terribly well."

Burke nodded slowly, his mind filling with far too many similar remembrances. "Generosity from the wealthy is welcome, but stinginess seems more common."

"A full shame, that."

"And yet," Burke continued, "there are folks like your family who haven't a great deal to their names, but what they have they share willingly and readily."

"M'parents and siblings are good sorts, though I say it m'self. They gave me hope when I hadn't any of m'own."

The entire O'Connor clan had made Burke feel welcome in Hope Springs from the very first. He was deeply grateful for that. And Patrick and Eliza had become friends, which he'd needed. Still, there was a hole, a gap in his life.

Patrick's family offered him the hope and reassurance he needed. Burke didn't have any family to speak of. And he felt that lack more often than he cared to admit.

During the brief silence between them, Miss Kingston arrived in the public room. She'd arrived a bit disheveled the day before. She'd since put herself to rights. And yet, something about her didn't entirely fit the prim impression she was giving. A few tendrils hung wild from her very properly styled hair. Her fashionable dress was paired with very sensible shoes rather than elegant ones. Her eyes darted about the space with an eagerness that contradicted the sedate expressions most of her station adopted.

She was so very intriguing.

"Good afternoon." She smiled at them and crossed directly to them. "I've come looking for a task."

She was a decidedly direct person, there was no mistaking that.

"How are you with a hammer and nails?" Patrick asked.

"I haven't the first idea." Miss Kingston made the admission without any indication of embarrassment. "But I'm willing to try my hand."

"You'll end up pounding your hand, is what you'll do." Patrick barely held back a laugh. "Sanding'd be a safer choice."

"I've never done that before, either, but I'm a quick study at most things." Miss Kingston watched them both with seeming eagerness.

"Why is it you're not looking after Mrs. Archer?" Burke asked. He needed to know if his one and only patient had been left alone with no one to answer her call should she be in distress.

"It seems half the town is looking after Mrs. Archer," Miss Kingston responded. "The younger Mrs. Archer, all three of her children, a Mrs. Dempsey, whom I've not met before, as well as a Mrs. O'Connor, are all up there attempting to be in the room with our ailing patient, despite there not being nearly enough space for so many people."

"The rooms may be small and humble, but they're adequate."

Her brow pulled in confusion. "I wasn't insulting your rooms."

Why was it she managed to put his back up so quickly? It had happened before in the twenty-four hours she'd been in Hope Springs. He didn't dislike her; not at all. But she had him on edge.

"Have you any idea *which* Mrs. O'Connor is visiting?" Patrick asked.

Miss Kingston smiled. "Not your wife. That is the extent of my ability to identify her."

"Your options are a lady who wears green-tinted spectacles, one who is a bit older than I am with a sweet disposition, or a woman old enough to be my mother."

"Because she *is* your mother," Burke said.

Amusement sat entirely naturally in Miss Kingston's expression. "The woman visiting upstairs was not wearing spectacles, and, while she was quite lovely, I suspect she is not the sweetly disposed woman of about your age."

“Ma, then.” Patrick smiled fondly. “I’d wager she heard someone new had arrived and couldn’t contain her curiosity.”

“Their arrival put Miss Emma out of a job, though.” Miss Kingston looked to Burke. “I suspect she was not overly pleased to be relieved of duty.”

Burke nodded his agreement. “Losing the ability to help as much as she has since last night is likely a disappointment to her.”

Miss Kingston took up a bit of sanding paper and stood next to him. “What do you need me to do?”

“You truly mean to help us make furniture?” Burke had known a few socially prominent people over the years—those he’d treated in Chicago, those who’d made a point of coming to the orphanage to see if their charitable donations had been put to good use, those who’d turned up their noses at him when he’d attempted to find his place after medical school—and they’d never shown the slightest inclination toward physical labor.

“Emma is not the only one who is disappointed to not have a useful occupation.”

Interesting. She might have looked more polished than she had upon her arrival in Hope Springs the day before, but there remained an unpredictable liveliness about her. She kept still but gave every indication of preferring to be on the move.

“The sanding’s meant to take off any jagged bits or sharp edges,” Patrick said. “No real trick to it.”

“Perfect.” Miss Kingston sat herself on the other side of the chair Burke was working on and began mimicking his efforts. “You’ll tell me if I’m doing this wrong?”

“If you’d like,” Burke said, keeping his focus on his work.

“When do you suppose Mrs. Archer will be well enough to relocate to Joseph’s home?” she asked as she sanded the edge of the chair.

“Likely tomorrow. She’s doing quite a lot better today.”

“Emma said there is a party of some kind on Saturday. Will Mrs. Archer be well enough to attend?”

“That’s our weekly *céili*,” Patrick said. “It’ll be out on my da and ma’s land, since the weather promises to be good.”

Miss Kingston paused her sanding, her expression turning contemplative. “Does it grow terribly cold at night? She might not be well enough to endure a chill.”

That would likely not be Mrs. Archer’s biggest objection to the weekly gathering. Or Miss Kingston’s. “The *céilís* aren’t much like the soirees you’ll have attended in Baltimore.”

She looked over at him. “I can’t imagine they’re anything sordid, or else Emma wouldn’t have spoken of them with familiarity and approval.”

Burke shook his head and could see that Patrick did the same.

“’Tis families gathered for music and dancing and merrymaking,” Patrick said. “Nothing unseemly in it.”

“It’s not very staid and proper, though, either,” Burke said.

She did hesitate at that. He wouldn’t want Miss Kingston and Mrs. Archer to arrive at the *céili* and feel uncomfortable or make the town, who loved their Saturday gatherings, feel self-conscious. The warning had been well worth giving. Regardless of what the women chose, they’d not be caught unaware.

Miss Kingston chatted, mostly with Patrick, as they all worked. She was an easy conversationalist. That would make her time in Hope Springs more pleasant.

Aidan O’Connor, one of Patrick’s nephews, stepped inside the inn. He was sixteen and done with his schooling. Most days he helped in the fields at home, but now and then he looked in on his aunt and uncle at the inn.

“What brings you ’round, Aidan?” Patrick asked.

“I heard the doctor had a patient.” Aidan, like many of the children born here to Irish families, carried hardly a hint of their ancestral homeland in his manner of speaking. “I thought maybe he could use some help around the place.”

“Emma Archer’s been here looking out for the patient,” Burke said. “She’s her grandmother, in fact.”

“Oh.” Aidan shifted about a bit awkwardly. “Emma’ll do a good job.”

“Yes. I have every confidence in her.”

Patrick eyed his nephew with something of a grin. “Could it be you heard Miss Emma was here and thought you might snatch a bit of her company?”

Aidan tucked his hands in his trouser pockets and eyed his uncle with a bit of annoyance. “Ain’t like that at all.”

“At *all*?” Patrick sounded on the verge of laughter.

The poor boy looked in need of an escape.

“I received a few apothecary jars in the last mercantile delivery,” Burke said. “They’re in a crate in the corner of my sitting room. If you have a few minutes to unpack those, I’d appreciate it.”

Aidan nodded eagerly and slipped back out of the inn.

“Is the boy truly sweet on Emma?” Miss Kingston asked.

Patrick shrugged. “I can’t say with any certainty. But they’re near in age and Miss Emma’s been turning a number of heads among that set lately. Couldn’t resist a little teasing.”

“I’ve known her since she was little and Joseph was making the trip back to Baltimore on his own with his daughters. I can hardly believe how much she’s grown up just in the last year or so.”

“How long have you known the Archers?” Burke never had sorted her connection to them.

“All my life, really. Though I’ve only lived with Mrs. Archer for a little over two years now.”

She lived with Mrs. Archer. So, likely an honorary daughter of sorts or an informal lady’s companion.

“Our families were friends in Baltimore. But my family now lives in Boston, and Mrs. Archer’s family is here. So, rather than being entirely alone, we look after one another.”

A family friend who was, if Burke were to guess, like family herself. And both claimed exalted positions in Baltimore’s high society.

Hope Springs was going to be quite an adjustment for them.

And *they* might very well prove an adjustment for the people of Hope Springs.



Chapter Five

“There’s nothing wrong with having a few peculiarities, but it’s best if you don’t indulge in them around those who would not understand.”

Sophie’s parents had issued that well-intentioned warning on more than one occasion. She didn’t think they’d been embarrassed by her tendency to jump at new things or throw herself eagerly into interesting pursuits. But neither had they appreciated the comments she’d received or the way her oddities had convinced people to reject her. She felt certain they’d suggested she hide her eccentricities for her own sake even more than theirs.

They would likely have a few things to say if they could see her just then, helping make a chair in a humble inn beside a tiny town out in the wilds of the west. She, however, was enjoying herself immensely.

She couldn’t sort out Dr. Jones, though. He had a friendly manner about him. He’d helped Mrs. Archer without hesitation and had accepted Sophie’s help, as well as Emma’s, without looking down on their lack of experience. He seemed a good sort, but there was an unmistakable discomfort about him when he interacted with her. And he’d warned her about being out of place at the town party so often and so pointedly that she couldn’t help but think he didn’t want her to attend. Why was that? What possible objection could he have?

He kept very quiet as they worked. Fortunately, Eliza wandered by now and then, and Patrick filled in a lot of the silences. None of the moments between them became truly awkward.

They’d only been at their work for a short time when a wagon came to a stop in front of the inn. The public room had large windows, offering a view of both the road and the distant mountains.

A woman climbed down off the wagon seat. She didn’t come inside the inn but went directly to the infirmary door.

“It’s likely she’s looking for you, Doctor,” Patrick said.

“She didn’t appear entirely calm about it either.” Dr. Jones had already stepped away from the chair and was making his way outside.

Unsure if she would be of any help but wanting to do what she could, Sophie followed. The moment they emerged on the porch, the man who’d been driving the wagon, and who was climbing down himself, spoke.

“We’ve brought the children, Doc. They’re feverish and sluggish. They ain’t talking much. We’re worried about them.”

Dr. Jones nodded. “You did the right thing, Lorenzo. Let’s get them inside and see what we can find out.”

Lorenzo took a child from the wagon bed. Dr. Jones fetched the other. The two men carried the children inside. Sophie hesitated on the porch, not wanting to cause trouble and wishing she knew what would be best.

Over his shoulder, the doctor said, “If you don’t mind, I could use your help.”

It was as unexpected as it was welcome. She followed through the doors and into a sitting room. Tucked up against one wall was a little table, beside which was a cabinet containing jars and tins and various instruments. She'd not seen this part of his house, Mrs. Archer having been taken directly to a room above to lie down.

The woman Sophie had seen climbing from the wagon was there, apparently having been talking with Aidan. They both turned to look as everyone entered.

"You found the doctor," the woman said to Lorenzo, whom Sophie guessed was her husband.

Dr. Jones sat the child he was carrying on the table and motioned for Lorenzo to do the same.

The two children looked to be the same age, twins, most likely, and somewhere near three years old. Their deep brown eyes took in the scene, but there was a decided lethargy about them. Sophie didn't know what they looked like when feeling well, but she was certain their current pallor was not natural.

Dr. Jones was as quick and expert at checking their temperatures and pulses as he'd been with Mrs. Archer. He used the same calm and reassuring tone he had then. It was a fine skill for a doctor to have. It likely made treating people easier.

"How long have they been feeling poorly?" he asked.

"Only a couple of days now," the children's mother said. Her words were rushed and clipped. Her brow pulled fiercely. "They were so much worse this morning, so we headed out straight off. It took a couple hours to get here."

Dr. Jones nodded. "I'm glad you came."

"And we're glad you're here," the man said. "Before you came, we were on our own."

"I'm afraid for them, Doc," their mother said.

"I'll do all I can, Flora."

Dr. Jones continued his examination. He asked questions: how often had they been sick of late, what were they eating and drinking, was anyone else living near them feeling poorly? Lorenzo answered most of the questions, while Flora grew more distressed. Sophie put an arm around the woman, hoping to offer some silent reassurance.

"I can help," Aidan said. "Tell me what you need, Dr. Jones. I've been working on the cabinet and shelves, so I know where lots of things are."

Dr. Jones took him up on the offer with no hesitation, no insistence that he was too young or too inexperienced. Aidan proved an able assistant, though he did occasionally not know what it was the doctor was asking for. Still, Dr. Jones was patient, and Aidan was not easily ruffled.

After a time, the doctor asked Lorenzo to pick the children up once more. He held one child in each arm, their little heads resting against his shoulders.

Dr. Jones turned to Flora. "Our first aim is getting their fevers down. Then, we need to make certain they have some nourishment. We'll start with bone broth and move forward from there."

"Are they in danger?" Flora asked, her voice quivering.

Sophie squeezed her shoulders.

"Now that they're here, I can do everything possible for them." Dr. Jones spoke gently but with authority. "Once we bring their fevers down, everything else will improve."

Flora nodded. She leaned a little bit against Sophie.

Lorenzo, still holding his children in his arms, said, "You tell us what to do, Doc. We'll do it."

"Take them upstairs. The second door at the top has an available bed. We'll tend to them there."

"Can you give them any powders?" Aidan asked.

"The powders I have aren't intended for little ones. They'd pose too great a risk." Dr. Jones offered the explanation without embarrassing the boy for his well-meaning but inadvisable idea. "I can, however, make a tisane that is safer for them. I'll do that once they're settled."

They all headed upstairs.

Sophie walked at Flora's side. "Everyone here has great faith in Dr. Jones. The children could not be in better hands."

The woman nodded. "We all praise the day he arrived. Hope Springs lost half the town to fever on account of not having a doctor to help them. Everyone in the surrounding area is grateful to have one now."

Joseph's late wife had died of a fever. Perhaps, it was the same one Flora referred to.

They passed by Mrs. Archer's room. None of her visitors had left.

Sophie accompanied Flora into the room, where her children were settled on the bed. Dr. Jones met Sophie's eye. "You'll have to let Miss Emma know this room is being used."

She would be disappointed not to be able to look after her grandmother, but she had too good a heart to resent the room being used for such an important purpose.

To Aidan, Dr. Jones said, "Take a bucket out to the water pump and bring it back full. We'll need water to cool the children."

He rushed to fulfill the directive. Flora moved to her husband's side, who set an arm around her shoulders.

"We're likely to keep them here for a day or two," the doctor warned.

Lorenzo nodded. "We suspected we wouldn't be hurrying back. We've all we need in the wagon."

"The room beside this one is empty. I don't mean simply that there's no one using it; I mean it is literally empty. There's no furniture or anything."

Lorenzo didn't look the least upended by that. "We can pass a night or two on a floor, especially if it puts us near the children."

"Everyone can take it in turns to look after them," Dr. Jones said. "Then no one has to go entirely without sleep."

"You already have a patient," Flora said. "We don't wish to take you away from her."

Here was a worry Sophie could assuage. "She's much better. All that remains for her to do is to rest, and she can do that without the doctor's attention. Dr. Jones, in fact, is certain she will be leaving in the morning."

Lorenzo released a tight breath. Flora pressed a hand to her heart, brow still pulled but some of the tension lessening around her mouth.

"Undress the children," Dr. Jones said. "As soon as Aidan returns with the water, we'll begin cooling them off."

The parents set to the task.

Dr. Jones crossed to Sophie. "Thank you. Flora needed comfort, and I didn't seem to be offering as much of it as was needed."

"Well, I don't know enough about doctoring to have offered information or treatments. But I do know how to give support."

"Is that part of your role with Mrs. Archer? You offer her reassurance in the storms of life?"

Sophie almost laughed. "That proverbial shoe is very much on the proverbial other foot."

That seemed to surprise him. "I haven't yet decided if you talk at cross purposes intentionally or if you are simply a very confusing person."

She smiled at that. "And I can't decide if you are blunt on purpose or if you are simply a very straightforward person."

He seemed to study her. "I don't know how long you will be in Hope Springs, Miss Kingston, but I doubt it will be long enough for you to sort out all the mysteries you're likely to come across."

"Are there a great many, then?"

He nodded and didn't look away.

"And would sorting them out prove dangerous?" She wasn't sure if she liked the idea or not.

“I would say difficult more than dangerous.”

Excitement bubbled a bit. “I think you will discover, good doctor, that I am terribly good at puzzles.”



Chapter Six

The Campo children were at the infirmary for two days. Their fevers broke within hours of their arrival. By the end of the first day, they were eating. By the end of the second, they were tired but restless. And the next morning, the family packed up and returned home.

As was common, Burke had been paid in kind. Few people in the area had ready cash. Fortunately, Lorenzo Campo was as handy with a hammer and nails as Patrick O'Connor. He'd spent the second day of his children's convalescence, knowing they were on the road to recovery, out back of the building, using the boards and nails Burke had set aside for the purpose of making a bed frame for the third room in Burke's infirmary.

He had the rope needed for stringing the bottom of the bed. He had the heavy canvas for creating the mattress and tick. Any number of farmers in the area could sell him straw for stuffing them. He still hadn't the number of stools he wanted or water pitchers, but those were secondary to having a bed for an ailing patient to lie on. The shelving and sitting room bench he wanted were even further down his list.

With the bed frame made, he was that much closer to having his infirmary put fully to rights. Everything might actually be ready by the time Alexander arrived. Burke would be able to hold his head high.

In the meantime, though, he had patients to look in on. He grabbed his doctoring bag and slipped out onto the porch. As always, he left a note on the door telling anyone who came by where he'd headed. Doctors weren't afforded a great deal of privacy. They needed to be found at a moment's notice.

That bit didn't bother him, though. He'd not ever had time or space to himself, so he didn't miss it. And he'd always wanted to be a doctor, which he now was. He had more reasons to be proud than disappointed, yet sometimes he fought precisely that.

He headed to the stables. The very back stall held his horse; the hardworking animal had been an expensive but very necessary purchase. His buggy he'd procured secondhand, thank the heavens. He'd not have been able to afford it otherwise.

Patrick was in the stables. "Where're you off to, Burke?"

"I haven't looked in on Mrs. Archer since she left the infirmary. I want to make certain she's doing well."

"Best make certain Miss Kingston's doing well while you're there." Patrick tossed him a look that was a little too knowing and a lot too amused.

"She is not the one who was ill."

"And yet, she's the one you've mentioned the most the last two days."

Burke led his horse from its stall. "She was very helpful with the Campo children."

"So you've said." Patrick never was one to let a chance to tease go to waste.

"I was grateful."

“So you’ve said. Seems to me she’s caught your attention.”

Burke gave him what he intended to be an aridly dry look and received two hands held up in surrender as a reply.

“I’ve put a note on my door,” Burke said. “Should anyone come looking for me, send them to the Archer place.”

“And if *Miss Kingston* comes looking for you? What should I do then?” So much for surrender.

“Keep your mouth shut, that’s what you should do.”

Patrick grinned and laughed unrepentantly. He was a good sort. Despite his tendency to badger, he and Eliza were the best of neighbors. Life might not have turned out exactly as Burke had imagined over the years, but it was far from terrible.

Dust kicked up behind the buggy as he set his horse to a trot in the direction of town. He didn’t think he’d ever grow tired of the view he had of the Hope Springs valley as he crested the hill separating it from the inn. Fields spread out in all directions dotted by farmhouses. The town itself boasted only three buildings, but they were rather picturesque. Compared to Chicago, it hardly counted as a town. But he liked it.

The Archer farm was the first one past the schoolhouse. It sat at the fork in the road, a wooden bridge to one side spanning the Hope Springs river.

Burke was shown inside by the housekeeper. Mrs. Archer was in the sitting room, dressed finer than anyone in Hope Springs ever was. The Archer home had always been neatly furnished and impressive. But having her there made it feel... intimidating.

“Burke.” Katie was in the sitting room as well and smiled as he approached. “’Tis a fine thing for you to look in on us.”

Emma sat among them. As was common for her, she simply smiled and kept her peace.

“Dr. Jones.” Mrs. Archer greeted him with a dip of her head.

“How are you feeling?” He set his bag on the desk beneath the nearby windows and moved the slat-back chair to face the settee.

“Much better, thank you.”

“Do you mind if I undertake a quick and unobtrusive evaluation?”

She shook her head. Even that minute gesture dripped with sophistication. How was it the well-to-do managed to make mundane things formidably elegant?

He took refuge in the knowledge that he was currently undertaking a task at which he was something of an expert. He had confidence in his abilities as a doctor, and that steadied him even when he felt terribly small.

He set his fingers on her wrist beneath her lace cuffs and studied her coloring, satisfied that she was neither overly pale nor flushed. The Irish in town were so naturally pale, he sometimes couldn’t be certain how they were feeling. Out on the ranches, the cowboys were, as was the case throughout Wyoming Territory, far more diverse. Many came from generations of Mexican equestrians. There were a significant number of Black cowboys. All the ranch hands and cattle runners worked hard and were frustratingly stubborn about seeking a doctor’s care when they needed it. He’d worked hard to earn their respect and trust. More than once, Burke had silently thanked the heavens that his time in Chicago had been spent in many different areas of the city, treating a wide variety of ailments, and coming to know a great many people. Too many doctors had only a narrow frame of reference and it cost far too many people their lives.

“Have you been eating as you normally do?” Burke asked Mrs. Archer.

“I have. And my body does not seem upset about it.”

“And have you been feverish?”

“I have not.”

Burke leaned back in his chair, though he kept his posture very proper. That had been required of them during sponsor inspections at the orphanage. He didn’t think he would ever be able to slouch in front of influential people.

“I would say you have recovered quite well,” he said. “I’m glad of it.”

“As am I.” Katie sat beside her mother-in-law.

That brought Burke’s evaluating gaze to her. “How are *you* feeling?”

“I’ve been a little tired today, but ’t isn’t anything worth fretting over. All seems well.”

He nodded, then looked to Emma. “You’ll tell me if she’s ever not well and being stubborn about it?”

Emma laughed lightly. “I will.”

“Does every doctor employ spies?” Katie asked, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“When they have a town full of obstinate people, they do.” Only after offering the quip did he remember there was a new person in the room whose sense of humor he was not yet familiar with.

He looked to Mrs. Archer, bracing himself for disapproval. But she seemed entirely unbothered by it. That had been a stroke of luck.

A sudden commotion toward the back of the house pulled all their eyes in that direction. In the next moment, Ivy Archer and Miss Kingston came rushing in the room. Both grinned broadly, laughing and a bit out of breath.

Miss Kingston looked every bit as topsy-turvy as she had upon arriving at the inn a few days earlier. The sight tugged oddly at his heart.

Seems to me she’s caught your attention.

Burke pushed that aside. Patrick liked to needle him; that didn’t mean Burke had to put any store by it.

Miss Kingston made a valiant effort to smooth her hair and look dignified. She mouthed an apology to Mrs. Archer.

“We went to see Finbarr’s house,” Ivy declared with enthusiasm. “And then we ran back. I was faster than Sophie.” She spun in place, then dropped onto the floor and sprawled on her back. “I was *so* fast.”

Burke eyed the dramatic display. “Ivy is clearly recovered from her chicken pox.”

“How are the Campo twins?” Miss Kingston asked. “I’ve worried about them.”

“They went home this morning,” he said.

She sighed, the sound one of sincere relief.

“Did you see Finbarr?” Emma asked, though whether she posed the question to Miss Kingston or her sister Burke wasn’t certain.

“From a distance,” Miss Kingston said. “Ivy pointed him out to me.”

Her voice a bit quieter, Emma asked, “Did he say anything?”

From her position still stretched out on the floor, Ivy answered, “Finbarr *never* says anything.”

If only that were more of an exaggeration than it actually was.

Burke rose from his chair and moved to stand beside Miss Kingston. He quietly asked, “Did Finbarr look whole and healthy?”

“He was at a considerable distance, sitting on a fence with his hat pulled low. Ivy called out to him, but he didn’t answer. We were far enough away it was possible he didn’t hear, especially over the sound of so many bells ringing.”

“He has bells of varying pitches tied at the edges of his property,” Burke explained. “The sound helps him orient himself.” The sound might have kept him from hearing Ivy’s greeting. It was just as possible he did hear and was choosing to keep a distance. “Did Finbarr have his dog with him?”

Miss Kingston nodded. “Sitting on the ground by his feet. A beautiful animal that took note of us there but made no effort to abandon the young man.”

“Madra is very loyal to him.” And a comforting companion.

Finbarr seemed to have found contentment in his isolation. Still, it worried Burke, as a doctor, to not know if the young man was unwell, in body or spirit.

To the room in general, he said, “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to walk out to his place myself. See how he’s doing.”

He was bid farewell as he grabbed his doctor’s bag. He’d reached the entryway when Miss Kingston joined him there.

“Do you mind if I go along?”

“I don’t mind, though I’m not certain why you’d want to.”

She shrugged. “I have discovered there is absolutely nothing for me to do here. The house is well looked after. Mrs. Archer is fully occupied with her family.”

“And I am a better option than being bored?”

“Something like that.”

He supposed that was fair. “I should warn you that I am not nearly as fun of a companion as Ivy.”

“I don’t think anyone is. That girl is a bundle of joyful energy.”

They stepped out of the house, making their way toward the river. The day was fine and the weather cooperative. It would make for a pleasant walk.

“The Archers tell me the weekly *céili* is tomorrow,” Miss Kingston said. “They are excited to attend.”

“Are you?” Burke asked.

“Excited to attend?”

He nodded.

“I am. I’ve never been to an Irish party, and Ivy makes it sound like an absolute delight.”

“It is a *humble* delight,” he said.

She eyed him as they turned to follow the river; it, rather than the road, led to Finbarr’s farm. “You continually warn me about the party, all but saying you don’t think I ought to go.”

It was the thought he’d had, but hearing her put it so bluntly gave him pause. “I have been to a couple gatherings like those you would have known in Baltimore. I know how different they are from what you’ll find tomorrow.”

“And you think I will disapprove?”

“I hope not.” That was nothing but the truth. “And I further hope you won’t be miserable there, Miss Kingston.”

“Please, call me Sophie. All the Archers do, and I suspect all of Hope Springs will as well.”

He nodded his acknowledgement. “And most everyone calls me Burke or sometimes Doc. The children mostly call me Dr. Jones.”

“Burke. That’s a lovely name.”

“Thank you. I chose it myself.”

Why he so thoroughly enjoyed her look of intrigued shock, he couldn’t say. But he *did* enjoy it.

“I was left as an infant at an orphanage in Illinois. Foundlings who didn’t have a name were assigned a surname—I was given Jones—and that was the only name we were known by. When I was five or six, I decided I wanted a first name as well. So, I chose one.”

“And that’s what they started calling you?”

“The other children did. The matron and caregivers did not. I was always ‘Jones’ to them.”

The wind whipped around strands of her light brown hair. “There is something so dismissive in refusing to call someone by the name they prefer. It tears away at their very identity.”

He nodded and sighed. “I don’t suspect they were overly concerned about such things.”

“Then they oughtn’t have been entrusted with the care of children. Concern for a child’s wellbeing should be a prerequisite.”

He didn't often talk about that part of his life. But having someone agree so quickly with his assessment of the experience was proving a comfort.

"What about you? Is Sophie a family name?"

She nodded. "My grandmother's. I think my family hoped by naming me after her I would be inspired to be very well behaved."

"Did their theory prove a good one?"

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. "You saw my arrival with Ivy. What do you think?"

"I think you brought some joy to a child. That is a credit to you."

She no longer fought the smile. "I like you, Burke Jones."

The declaration proved more gratifying than he would have guessed, certainly more than he cared to admit. Patrick would have instantly seized on that if he were nearby.

Their steps had taken them to the edge of Finbarr's land. It was marked by a large rock, one flat enough for sitting on and enjoying a rest from the day's labors. Finbarr was there, doing precisely that.

The dog laying on the rock beside him lifted its head as Burke and Miss Kingston approached. The protective creature eyed them closely but didn't move a single inch from Finbarr. The young man's head turned in their direction, apparently having heard their approach.

"Good afternoon, Finbarr," Burke greeted.

A moment passed. Finbarr sometimes needed time to piece together who he was hearing. "Dr. Jones."

"And Miss Kingston is with me. She is here visiting the Archers."

Finbarr took off his wide-brimmed hat, holding it against his chest. The scars marring his face and neck were less red and angry than they'd once been, but they were still impossible to miss. He dipped his head. "Miss Kingston."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Finbarr."

"How do you know the Archers?" the young man asked.

"I'm a family friend from Baltimore."

Burke studied Finbarr as they talked. He looked well enough. Physically, he seemed hale as ever. His eyesight, they'd known for years, would not return. And the thick scars on his neck added stiffness to each movement of his head. But his weight was good. His shoulders weren't slumped. His hair was ginger, so his skin tended to pink up in the heat, but beneath that, his coloring was nothing concerning. He ran a hand over the fur of his four-legged friend with every indication of being fully at ease with his circumstances.

"Are the Archer children recovered from their chickenpox?" Finbarr asked.

"They are," Burke said.

"And Katie's feeling well? No problems with the baby?"

"None. I suspect she'll reach her time in the next month or so."

Finbarr nodded. "And Miss Emma's wrist?"

For a person who never interacted with anyone, he knew precisely what was happening at the Archer home. Finbarr had once worked for Joseph as a farmhand. From what Burke had been told, he'd been a big brother and a dear friend to the Archer girls. It really wasn't surprising he still took an interest in them.

"I have been invited to the *céili* tomorrow," Sophie said. "Ivy assures me it will be the highlight of my entire life."

A little smile pulled at Finbarr's scarred features. "She hasn't changed."

"Will we see you at the *céili*?" Burke asked.

With that, all hint of lightness disappeared. Finbarr set his hat on his head once more. He took up his cane, stood, and stepped away from the rock. Madra, loyal dog that she was, moved to sit on

the ground beside him. "I have things to do."

"Surely you could step away from home long enough to join the town." Burke didn't mean to push him into anything, he simply wanted to sort out, if he could, what it was that kept Finbarr away. Health, after all, was more than the physical.

Finbarr set the tip of his cane against the ground in front of him. Madra stood, suddenly entirely alert. The positioning of the cane was, apparently, a signal to the dog.

"A pleasure gabbing with you, Miss Kingston. Dr. Jones." Sweeping his path with the cane, Finbarr walked away.

"What happened to him?" Sophie asked quietly.

"Have the Archers ever mentioned to you a fire here in Hope Springs?"

"Mrs. Archer did. Emma and Ivy lost a friend, and they and Katie nearly lost their lives."

Burke watched Finbarr disappear into his house. "He tried to save their friend but was caught in the fire. The barn collapsed on the two of them. She was killed, and he was badly burned. He lost nearly all his sight."

"The reason for the bells and the cane and likely the dog?"

"Yes."

"And is that why he keeps so much to himself? He's still hurting from the grief of that?"

Burke sighed. "I wish I knew. He seems less unhappy now than he did when I first arrived. But he's more isolated."

"And you, as a doctor, can't leave that mystery unsolved, since it relates to his wellbeing."

"You told me, at my infirmary, that you are very good at puzzles." He met her eye and hoped she saw his sincerity. "If you can solve this one, you'll have the gratitude of every person in Hope Springs."



Chapter Seven

Sophie approached the farm of the elder O'Connors with tremendous excitement the next evening. She had been told that *this* Mr. and Mrs. O'Connor were parents to the many Mr. and Mrs. O'Connors throughout Hope Springs. They also had two daughters with different surnames but the same family connection. They were grandparents to many of the area's children. And they played host to the entire town once a week for the parties termed *céilis*.

Though Burke had warned her that this would not be a sophisticated party, she couldn't imagine the warning was truly necessary. She'd always felt tremendously out of place at the fine gatherings in Baltimore. They had required such strict adherence to protocol that she had found herself holding back every instinct she had while at them. And even that had proven insufficient.

Everyone could tell she didn't truly belong there. She'd struggled to make friends. She'd certainly never been courted. In the end, it had seemed best to remove herself and find a situation that worked better. Life with Mrs. Archer had proven precisely that.

She liked Sophie as she was and didn't require that she be perfect in her efforts to be properly genteel. When they were out mingling amongst the height of Baltimore society, Sophie was able to rein in her exuberance; she loved Mrs. Archer too much to embarrass her.

Hope Springs was not a large town, but the area surrounding the O'Connors' home was filled with people. Everyone in Hope Springs must have been there. She'd been told that, out on the outskirts of the valley, there were cattle ranches. Some of those in attendance must have come from there. In Baltimore, when people spoke of cowboys, it was always in romanticized terms. They were more like knights of the round table than real people. But here, among them, they became precisely that to her.

This town of farmers and innkeepers and ranchers and cowboys felt more authentic than any of the fine sitting rooms and concert halls of Baltimore ever had.

Mrs. Archer found a seat on a chair near an open area that Sophie suspected was reserved for dancing. A group of musicians had gathered to one side and were tuning their instruments. With Katie seated beside her mother-in-law, Sophie felt confident she could slip away and explore a little. Her footsteps took her to tables laden with food. Some of it she recognized—cakes and fried chicken and tarts—other things were new to her. She suspected those unfamiliar things were offerings from the Irish families, food they'd eaten in their homeland that was not common in America.

"You are welcome to anything that strikes your fancy," Eliza O'Connor said, having come to stand next to her. "Everyone brings something, so no one is burdened by it. And everyone eats their fill."

She struggled to imagine some of the people she knew in Baltimore making such an offering out of sheer kindness. Food at their gatherings was meant to impress, and few of them would be impressed by a pot of bean soup.

Eliza waved someone over. The woman with a small child on her hip smiled as she approached.

"Maura, this is Sophie Kingston. I don't know if you've met her yet."

She offered a hand in greeting, which Sophie shook enthusiastically. “Welcome to Hope Springs, Sophie. I suspect you’re the Miss Kingston who has come with Mrs. Archer.”

Sophie nodded. “If there’s another Miss Kingston hanging about, I’d surely like to meet her.”

Maura smiled in acknowledgment of the jest. Sophie’s attempts at humor had not always been appreciated back home.

Two other women were waved over. One was Mary Dempsey, who had visited with Mrs. Archer during her first day at the infirmary. The other was introduced to her as Ciara Fulton. The two women were the O’Connors’ daughters. In short order, Sophie was introduced to sisters-in-law, neighbors, and families who lived down what was termed the Red Road. She’d been at this party a matter of minutes and already she was made to feel entirely welcome.

Eliza helped her select a few things from the tables, explaining what those items she didn’t recognize were. And, soon enough, Sophie was seated beside Mrs. Archer again with a small plate. She shared the food eagerly with Mrs. Archer, who also was intrigued.

“Everyone I asked, Katie, said your berry tarts are the highlights of this party each week.”

Katie smiled. “They are something of a specialty of mine.”

“And the cinnamon bread?” Sophie held up the slice Eliza had insisted she try.

“Mrs. Johnson. She brought it to the first *céilí* she attended and it has been a favorite ever since.”

They all knew each other so well. This must have been a wonderfully friendly place to live.

She’d not been seated for more than a few minutes when a man in a green bowler hat stepped out into the open dancing area and addressed them all in a booming Irish voice. “Neighbors, welcome. We’ve the usual gathering this week, but for the first time in some time, we’ve new arrivals among us. And you all know what that means.”

The crowd laughed and lightly applauded and nudged each other.

Sophie hadn’t the first idea what he was hinting at.

Katie reached over and patted her hand reassuringly. “This tradition catches new arrivals unaware every time. I, personally, think Seamus”—she motioned to the man in a bowler hat—“enjoys surprising them, which is why he offers no warning. It’s nothing nefarious, I swear to you. They simply play a song of welcome, and the new arrivals lead the dancing.”

“Oh, is that all? That sounds lovely.”

“It is for most people. But once in a while someone arrives who is bashful or doesn’t enjoy dancing. The other rule the town likes to enforce is that the new arrival has to dance with someone who isn’t also a new arrival. I suspect it was originally decided upon to help people meet each other, but sometimes it makes things uncomfortable. No one’s been able to talk Seamus out of it.”

“If someone truly objected...?”

“The town would never allow anyone to be tortured, at least not anymore.”

Sophie laughed lightly. How she was coming to love this little place that she’d only been in for a few days.

“Mrs. Archer, Miss Kingston.” Seamus motioned them to join him. “It’s for you to begin the dancing. Best choose a companion.”

Mrs. Archer didn’t hesitate but turned to face Joseph, who stood not far off. The bow he offered her was so perfectly executed that Sophie couldn’t help picturing him in many of the fine ballrooms in Baltimore that she had found so uncomfortable. Joseph was one of those chameleons who could adapt to most any situation. Sophie, on the other hand, was trying to find *any* place that fit.

Mrs. Archer was situated, but Sophie still needed a partner. She knew Patrick would have danced with her, but he was sitting amongst the musicians. She thought for a moment she might choose Katie and Joseph’s little boy, Sean. He wouldn’t have the first idea how to dance, but there would have been absolutely no pressure that way. Then her eyes settled on Burke, and she knew in an instant he was the one she was going to ask.

She made her way to where he stood, fully expecting him to smile or nod in acknowledgment. He watched her warily. Perhaps he didn’t wish to dance. Perhaps he didn’t wish to dance *with her*.

“I’m supposed to choose someone to dance with,” she said.

“And you want to dance with me?” He seemed surprised.

“Certainly. Unless, of course, you’re a terrible dancer.”

That brought a teeny bit of a smile. “I don’t promise to be graceful or good, but I will try.”

“Won’t we make quite the pair? I have been told more than once that I’m not terribly graceful.”

“The people of Baltimore sound lovely,” he said in a voice as dry as stale bread.

With that one comment, he earned a place high on her list of people she adored.

The musicians struck up a tune, one she didn’t recognize. It was lively and bouncy. Mrs. Archer clearly hadn’t the first idea how to dance to such a thing. Joseph, as was characteristic, was patient and reassuring. In the end, he snagged the assistance of his little son to lighten the situation, and the three of them simply bounced about.

Burke, despite his protestations, proved himself a good dancer. He talked her through the steps, and she improvised as necessary.

The rest of the town joined in after a moment. They were surrounded by happy voices and joyful dancing. How much better she liked this than the extremely proper version of it she’d known in the past.

Burke hooked an arm around her waist and spun her about, her dress flaring and bits of hair flying loose. She looked at him, meaning to laugh at the odd sight she no doubt presented. But seeing the enjoyment in his eyes, a lightness she’d not seen before, caught her up short.

He was handsome; she’d realized that as soon as she’d met him. But he’d been handsome in an almost daunting way. The laugh on his features and the abandon with which he danced made him more human, more relatable, more intriguing.

His eyes met hers, and he smiled—not flashy or grand, but friendly—and her heart flipped a bit. It had been a long time since that had happened.

She managed to push aside her unexpected reaction and enjoy the remainder of the dance. Little missteps and even slight collisions were hardly noticed, and, if they were, received nothing but grins and friendly laughter.

The tune came to an end. Everyone cheered and applauded. Burke looked to Sophie, suddenly as unsure as he’d appeared when she’d first asked him to dance with her.

“You warned me this party would be very different from the others I’ve attended.”

He sighed a little and nodded.

“You were right. It is so much better.”

That brought surprise to his expression followed by obvious relief. When doctoring, he had an air of earned confidence. But, apparently, at parties much of that disappeared.

That change in him stayed with her even after she’d retaken her seat beside Mrs. Archer, and he had disappeared into the crowd. Perhaps the change was simply unexpected. Perhaps it struck her with such force because it was unfamiliar.

“That was a different sort of dancing than I have ever done,” Mrs. Archer said.

“Different in unpleasant ways?” Sophie was almost afraid of the answer. She’d enjoyed every moment, but if it met with Mrs. Archer’s disapproval, she wasn’t sure what she would do. Not for the world would she give the woman a reason to be embarrassed by her, but she would be sad not to participate again while they were in town.

“There is nothing wrong or inappropriate in it,” Mrs. Archer said. “I cannot imagine any of our Baltimore acquaintances approving, though.”

Oh, dear. “Would you rather we not participate?”

“I’m not certain I have enough energy to participate.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “But, if you are enjoying the dancing and music, I think you should take in every moment of it.”

Sophie sighed with relief.

“And,” Mrs. Archer continued, “should Dr. Jones ask you to dance again, do. The two of you make a very handsome couple.”

Sophie didn't blush often, but she was certain she did then. Mrs. Archer was likely teasing, but Sophie found herself hoping her friend and substitute mother was at least partly in earnest.

Burke Jones was tugging at her more than she'd expected him to.



Chapter Eight

The O'Connor family had grown so much in the past few years that their weekly family gatherings were now held at the inn. Burke had a standing invitation to join them, which he often did. The gathering held the day after Sophie's first *céilí* quickly proved one he likely ought to have skipped.

"You've spent any number of *céilís* sitting out every dance," Patrick said with far too much amusement in his voice. "Miss Sophie is here one week and you're up on your feet in a heartbeat."

"She asked me," Burke said. "I've not ever refused when asked."

"You've also not ever smiled at a dancing partner like you did last night." Patrick's brother, Tavish, who bore the most startling resemblance to him, joined in the jesting.

Ian, another brother, was not far behind. "And kept your arm about her waist a bit longer than was needed."

The family patriarch and his sons and sons-in-law grinned unrepentantly as the teasing continued. If Burke hadn't known that the O'Connors lovingly taunted each other just as mercilessly, he might not have taken it well. Amongst this close-knit family, poking fun was a sign of affection and acceptance.

This time, though, their jests were confusing.

He understood why they'd latched onto the topic—he really didn't dance often at the *céilís*—but he couldn't even begin to sort out his feelings toward the lady in question. He liked her; he wouldn't deny that. And he felt a pull to her, though he didn't mean to let Patrick know as much. But what was the point of thinking beyond that?

She came from Baltimore's high society, with connections and an influential family, and would return to it soon enough. *He* had given himself a name because he had no family, no history, and no actual identity. *She* lived in Mrs. Archer's no-doubt grand palatial home. *He* was struggling to put to rights his rustic infirmary in the middle of nowhere. *She*, despite her protestations, danced with agility and enthusiasm. *He* was as awkward and bumbling as a newborn calf.

"You lads leave the good doctor alone." Mrs. O'Connor eyed her sons, husband, and sons-in-law with the fierce expression of a mother seizing control of her wayward family.

Burke bowed and offered a very officious, "Thank you."

His "tormentors" laughed and shook their heads good-naturedly before turning their attention to each other.

Mrs. O'Connor slipped her arm through Burke's and led him a bit to the side of the large public room. "Katie tells me you looked in on our Finbarr a few days ago. How is he?"

"He was out of his house, which seemed a good sign. He talked to me briefly. Asked after the Archer children."

Mrs. O'Connor nodded. "He always did care a great deal about them."

"And I think it shows he hasn't entirely cut himself off from everyone."

“I worry about that.” Her shoulders drooped a little. “No one sees him anymore. Though Madra is good for him, he can’t be happy tucked away as he is away from every person who loves him.”

“If it sets your mind at ease, he did not seem unhappy.”

She studied him. “But he likely also didn’t seem *happy*.”

Burke couldn’t disagree with that. “I wish I could offer you a more detailed and expert assessment. I don’t know him as well as you do.”

“Sometimes I’m not certain I know him anymore, either.”

He didn’t like how heavy her expression had become. Easing worries was an important part of his job. “Living on his own is a new experience. He may simply still be adjusting.”

“He has lived there for over a year,” Mrs. O’Connor said. “I don’t think he is still adjusting. I’m all but certain this distance from us is what he wants.”

“When I first arrived in Chicago to undertake my medical education, I fully embraced the life of a hermit. I had lived all my life in a loud and chaotic orphanage. The idea of space enough to breathe appealed more than I’d expected it to.”

She smiled a little. “Our family can be a bit suffocating.”

Burke patted her hand. “Give him time. I believe he’ll come back to you when he’s ready.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Mrs. O’Connor didn’t often slip from her usual optimism. Seeing her struggling now pulled fiercely at the heart.

“I don’t believe this town will give up on him. Neither will this family.”

“I suspect Emma Archer has.” Mrs. O’Connor sighed. “None of us blames her—he caused her such pain, there’s no denying that—but it still breaks m’ heart a little. They’d such a sweet connection. Seeing it still severed is a reminder of how much pain they’re both in. If only he’d let his family love him. We could help him so much.”

“I did, in time, outgrow my need for isolation,” Burke said. “I made some very good friends in school, many of whom I’m still in contact with.”

“Did you?” Seeing a bit of hope re-enter her expression did him good.

“One of them, Dr. Montgomery, is planning to come visit Hope Springs.”

Mrs. O’Connor turned and faced her family. “Dr. Jones has a visitor coming. Another doctor.”

That sent the room into a flurry. Excitement over a new arrival mingled with insistence that the new doctor be brought to the *céili* and invited to a family gathering. Questions were tossed out. Alexander might not find Hope Springs impressive, but he would certainly find it enthusiastic.

In the midst of the avalanche of inquiries, Sophie stepped inside the inn. The O’Connors’ focus turned immediately to her. She was forthwith supplied with a place to sit, a plate of food, and words of sincere welcome. Burke was treated to a few too many knowing looks from the O’Connor men.

“The *céili* yesterday was delightful,” Sophie declared. “I don’t think I have ever left a social event as exhausted as I did last night.”

“Then we consider the night a success,” Tavish said.

“Don’t grow too confident,” Sophie said with a twinkle in her eyes. “Now that I know exhaustion is your goal, I intend to come fully rested and ready to outlast everyone.”

The family laughed and accepted her challenge. How quickly and easily she fit among them. Burke had needed more than a year to really find his place in Hope Springs. He was stumbling in comparison.

She looked so at home among them. Her lovely smile never wavered. Her beautiful gray eyes danced with delight. Even when she’d arrived in Hope Springs, her appearance a bit scattered on account of her journey and her worries, she’d been startlingly pretty. No one seeing her could think otherwise.

“Are the parties you’ve attended in Baltimore as enjoyable as ours here?” Eliza asked.

“Not remotely,” Sophie insisted. “But only because they do not have Katie’s berry tarts.”

That earned her a laugh. She smiled ever more broadly. The O'Connors liked to tease him about the pull he felt to her, but how could he help feeling it? She was personable and beautiful and clever.

"Did you know our Tavish grows those berries?" Mr. O'Connor said, beaming with pride.

"Truly?" Sophie appeared sincerely impressed.

What would that be like? Having a father who was proud of him? Being impressive to even high society women?

It seemed Burke was confused about more than just his reaction to Sophie. He felt upended about absolutely everything.

While the O'Connors were distracted, he slipped from the inn and across the covered porch to his own front door. The house beyond was quiet. That seemed the way of it: either silent or chaotic, with little in between.

He let himself in and wandered to the sitting room. Alexander's visit was looming. He had plenty to do before his friend's arrival and a rare quiet evening in which to work on it, yet he couldn't seem to summon the motivation.

Through the wall separating his home and infirmary from the inn, a burst of laughter echoed. The O'Connors were always lively when they were together. It was a nice sound. It added something to what was often a lonely space.

He wanted to convince Alexander, when he arrived, that this practice and life he was building was exciting and impressive and satisfying. He wanted to believe it himself.

But he was struggling.



Chapter Nine

Sophie had visited the inn every day since Sunday. She had found in Eliza O'Connor a ready friend and in Patrick O'Connor something of a brother. How odd it was that she had been in Hope Springs only a week and already felt as welcome as she ever had in Baltimore. She planned her visit on Tuesday to coincide with the weekly music session. There were two stagecoach travelers breaking their journey there that night.

The musicians seemed particularly excited to have an audience. Eliza seemed particularly busy.

"Please let me help," Sophie said. "I haven't any experience, but I'm eager to learn and like being helpful."

"I won't turn you down," Eliza said. "Supper is ready to be taken out to the stage passengers in the public room. If you'll do that, I can go upstairs and make certain their room is ready."

Sophie took on the task without hesitation. She carefully carried the two large plates, generously filled with Eliza's famous cooking. She set them on the table where the travelers were sitting. They thanked her, though their eyes wandered quickly back to the musicians.

"Who'd have thought there'd be such talent at such an isolated inn," the man at the table said.

"They really are remarkable, aren't they?" Sophie said. "Makes for a nice way to pause a journey."

"It does," the woman said.

"There seems to be such a variety of people in this little place. The couple who runs the inn are from England and Ireland, if their voices are any indication. I heard among the musicians someone who sounds as if he's from somewhere in the South. You sound like you're from the East."

Sophie nodded. "I am. I'm from Baltimore."

"You're a long way from home," the woman said.

"Strangely enough," Sophie said, "I feel like I've finally come home."

The woman nodded and smiled. "It's a fine thing to find an inn like this that feels less like a lodging house and more like a home."

It was a good description. Sophie had heard from many that the town, itself, preferred to keep those traveling more or less unaware of the rest of the town. So she chose not to discuss Hope Springs and what it offered. But she had no hesitation praising the inn. "The O'Connors do a fine job here. It's appreciated by everyone who stays."

She left the guests to enjoy their meal and listen to the music. She slipped over closer to the musicians. The O'Connor children were nearby, no doubt so Patrick could keep an eye on them while he played. They looked perfectly content.

The musicians' water pitcher was all but empty, so Sophie snatched it up and returned to the kitchen. The water barrel Eliza filled each morning for use throughout the day was empty, so Sophie took up two buckets and made her way to the pump in the back.

Not far in the distance she could see Burke. He stood under a tall roof, beneath which was a pile of straw. He was putting that straw inside of something, though she couldn't quite make out what it was.

She'd crossed paths with him each time she'd come to the inn the last couple of days. But unlike at the *céili*, he'd been distant and even a little bit cold. She couldn't make heads nor tails of it. Had she done something to upset him? Had he decided so quickly that her company was not as desirable as he'd thought at first? Others had reached the conclusion in the past, but it usually took more than a week.

She pumped water into one of the buckets as she watched him working. She liked Burke Jones. She'd not known him long enough for that liking to be described as anything bigger, but it was sincere. Why, then, did it bother her so much that he was pulling away? She'd certainly shrugged off rejections before. Maybe it was just that, otherwise, she felt so accepted in this town. She'd let her guard down; rejection now would hurt more.

She had both buckets filled before coming to any conclusions where Burke Jones was concerned. She had jokingly told him the previous week that she was good at puzzles and meant to piece together his. That declaration now felt overly confident.

Sophie took one bucket in each hand and began walking back toward the inn. The load was heavier than she'd anticipated. Perhaps she ought to have done this one bucket at a time. After a few steps, she set them down, allowing herself to rest. But when she reached down to pick them up once more, another hand slipped in the way. Burke had come over.

"Let me carry one of them," he said. "Water's heavier than it seems."

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't realize you'd seen me over here."

"I saw you."

"Then why didn't you say something? Offer a greeting?"

"Why didn't *you*?"

That was fair enough, she supposed. "Are you going to come listen to the musicians?"

He shook his head. "I need to finish stuffing this mattress and tick. Today's arrivals came without complaints or concerns, so I've a rare bit of time to myself. It's hard to say when that will happen again."

"You didn't have patients last night, either," she said, "but you still didn't come over to the inn and spend time with us."

"There's always work to do. I was seeing to it."

They'd reached the back door. She studied him a moment. "If I didn't know better, Burke, I would think you didn't want to spend time with me."

He opened the door and motioned her through. "Ask anyone hereabout. Keeping to myself is an old established pattern of mine."

"I have asked people, and they've said that hasn't been the case with you in a while."

He set his bucket on the worktop. "Well, I'm re-adopting it."

On that declaration, he left.

He hadn't spoken with any unkindness, and yet she felt the sting. She realized she didn't know him well, but she felt she understood him enough to recognize that it was a strange declaration for him to make. She had heard from the O'Connors that when Burke had first arrived, he'd been a bit quieter, a bit more withdrawn, and a bit less social, but he'd opened up more over the last year. He still was not the storyteller that Seamus was, or the eager dancer that Ivy had shown herself to be. But he enjoyed the people of Hope Springs, and he interacted with them regularly.

This change was decidedly odd. And it was made even more so by the fact that he had, until the last two days, been increasingly friendly with her. They'd walked out to Finbarr O'Connor's house, talking about their lives and experiences. He'd been kind and friendly while they danced at the *céili*. And now, suddenly, he was firmly embracing his solitude. Was this, truly, the result of something she had said or done?

She dumped the buckets of water into the barrel in the kitchen, then filled the water pitcher. She carried it back out into the public room, setting it amongst the musicians. They thanked her with nods of acknowledgment.

Sophie walked past the table where the travelers were sitting and asked if there was anything else they needed. They insisted there was not, so she sat herself on the patchwork quilt with the little ones. Current Baltimore fashions included too large a bustle—made large by a crinolette worn beneath the skirt—for a woman to even imagine sitting on the floor. But she'd left off the crinolette the last few days, wearing only the smaller and softer bustle supports beneath her dress. None of the women of Hope Springs wore bustled dresses. Joining them in *their* fashions had given her more physical freedom.

Eoin had grown less distrustful of her over the days she'd been coming by, and he crawled onto her lap. She held him and bounced him about as the musicians continued a jaunty tune. Lydia spun in a circle, singing along, though she clearly didn't know all the words. It was a lovely sight and wonderful feeling. The musical evenings she'd attended in Baltimore might've been more sophisticated, but they didn't match this one for sheer joy.

The only thing marring it was the question that hung over her mind regarding Burke. Sophie was accustomed to rejection, but she didn't enjoy it. The experience was made ever more poignant by the fact that, in every other respect, Hope Springs had been a reprieve from the weight and worries of Baltimore.

Eliza returned to the public room. She spotted Sophie sitting on the floor with her children and smiled broadly as she crossed to them.

"Well, wouldn't Baltimore society be surprised to see you sitting on the floor?"

"Honestly," she said, "they likely wouldn't be terribly surprised. I've something of a reputation for being odd."

"Well, Hope Springs has something of a reputation for enjoying people who are a bit odd. I'd say you came to the right place."

Sophie felt the truth of that.

Eoin reached out for his mother, and she scooped him up. Lydia was perfectly content to continue dancing. Sophie got to her feet as well. She brushed the dust off her dress.

To Eliza, she said, "If there isn't anything else I can do for you, I think I'm going to go visit Dr. Jones."

Eliza looked intrigued. "Are you? He seemed a bit unsocial last evening. And the evening before that."

"And the evening before that," Sophie added dryly.

"Could be he's a bear with a sore paw at the moment." Eliza spoke in a tone of warning.

The Sophie who made her home in Baltimore would have taken that warning and kept a distance. The Sophie she had discovered in Hope Springs meant to take the risk.

She slipped to the back of the inn once more and made her way over to where Burke was. He looked up as she approached but didn't say anything. She stood near him, set her hands on her hips, and did her best impression of Eliza's friendly boldness. "What did you mean when you said you are re-adopting your habit of avoiding people?"

"I think the phrase is self-explanatory," he said.

"Then why are you doing it? No one seems to be able to sort out that mystery."

"You told me you enjoy puzzles. Perhaps I'm simply choosing to present you with one."

"The only thing that has changed in recent days is me. You were social and enjoying your neighbors when I arrived, and now you've gone back to avoiding people. Did I do something?" Sophie's temerity was surprising even her.

Burke shook his head as he resumed his work putting straw in the large flat bag. "I simply have a lot I'm working on. I don't have a great deal of time for distractions."

She fought a smile but wasn't certain she was successful. "You find me distracting?"

He looked up at her once more. The surprise there gave way to a bit of amusement. “Yes. Though there are other things too.”

“I don’t have to be the entire list, I’m simply glad to be on it.”

He laughed. She chose to see that as an encouraging sign.

“Can I help you with whatever it is you’re working on?” she asked.

“It’s not particularly hard work, but if you don’t have gloves, you’ll get splinters. And I only have the pair I’m wearing.”

“I could hold the... bag”—she wasn’t certain that was the right descriptor— “while you put the straw in.”

“It’s a tick for the bed in the third room,” he explained. “If you’d be willing to hold it open, I won’t say no.”

She offered to help with something she hadn’t the least experience with, the sort of thing her friends and family in Baltimore would’ve been shocked to come across let alone participate in, and twice that evening her offer had been readily accepted.

She took up the open edge of the tick and held it up. He kept at his part of the effort, moving a bit quicker than he had before. She hoped that meant she was proving helpful.

“Why is it that the things you need to be working on have become so urgent?” she asked. “You’ve been here a couple of years now, and from what I’m told only lately have you become so earnest about fixing it.”

“It’s not so much fixing as finishing. I’ve been slowly accumulating what I needed but wasn’t quite done yet.”

“And have the unfinished bits been causing you difficulties?” she asked.

He shook his head. “But it needs to be done.”

“Why now?”

“A friend of mine is coming to visit, a fellow doctor I met while we were both students in Chicago.”

“And you are required to have a finished infirmary for him to visit?” Sophie wasn’t certain she understood.

“I’d like him to see what I’ve built here, what I’ve accomplished. Arriving to find an unfinished infirmary would be—” He searched around for the word.

“Accurate?” She suggested a bit dryly. “There are challenges to being a doctor on the frontier. You don’t have ready access to supplies. The people you take care of aren’t wealthy. Even with that, you have made tremendous progress.”

“You don’t understand,” he muttered, applying himself more readily to his efforts.

“What don’t I understand?”

“Dr. Montgomery has a practice in Chicago. His infirmary is impressive and the envy of every doctor we know. He treats important people and is doing important work. We used to talk about where we saw ourselves going as doctors, what we meant to do with our lives. He’s doing it, and I’m... here.”

“When he comes to Hope Springs, you want him to see that you’re a success and doing important work?”

“Exactly.”

“And if you had one room in your infirmary that wasn’t furnished, he wouldn’t see that?”

“He’s a good person,” Burke said, “but he’s accustomed to a finer way of life.”

“He’s arrogant?” Sophie asked.

“No. He’s not.” Burke kept at his work, turned a bit away from her. “But I worry a little that he wouldn’t see the people here in a generous light. If his first impressions can be positive, he’d be more likely to approve.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “The problem isn’t that *he’s* an elitist, it’s that *you* are.”

That stopped him in the middle of moving an armful of straw. He met her eye with a look of utter confusion.

“You’re perfectly fine being part of this community, taking care of them, feeling a part of them until someone more impressive sees you. The very thought of that has you reassessing them. You’ve evaluated them in light of your friend’s success and have deemed them an embarrassment.”

“That’s not it at all,” he insisted.

“Then why are you avoiding *them* in order to do work meant to impress *him*?”

“Having this done will help them.”

“Feeling like their doctor’s ashamed of them won’t help at all.”

He stood, almost like a man at a mark. “I’m not ashamed of them,” he said, his voice quiet and his tone a little uncertain.

“Then why do you care what this visiting doctor thinks?”

“I don’t want to be a failure,” he said. “Everyone at that medical school was convinced I would be. I didn’t have the education they did. I didn’t have their backgrounds or a family who cared what happened to me. I didn’t even have a real name. The years I was there were spent listening to people predicting that I would fail. I don’t want them to be right.”

“Do you feel like a failure?” she asked.

“More often than I care to admit.”

She released her hold on the fabric of the bed tick and moved closer to him. “In the eyes of this town, Burke, do you think you are a failure?”

He shrugged and didn’t say anything.

“Have you listened when they talk about you? They are overwhelmed with gratitude for you and the work you do and the lives you save. To them, you are so far from a failure that they would probably be shocked to hear you say that. They may not be ‘important’ like the people in Chicago, but you are important to them. And until you decide that success can look different from what you imagined in Chicago, no amount of furnishings are ever going to be enough.”

“Sophie!” Eliza’s voice echoed from the back of the inn. They both turned and looked that way. “Lydia’s hoping you’ll come dance with her.”

“Tell her I’m coming.” Sophie looked back to Burke. “You are working so hard to impress someone you haven’t seen in years and, in doing so, are neglecting the people who make this a home for you. That is a rare thing, Burke Jones. Don’t throw it away.”



Chapter Ten

“...you are avoiding them in order to do work meant to impress him...”

“...feeling like their doctor’s ashamed of them won’t help at all...”

“...until you decide that success can look different from what you imagined in Chicago, no amount of furnishings are ever going to be enough...”

Sophie’s words didn’t merely stay with Burke over the following days, they pierced him.

Burke didn’t want to believe he was ashamed of the good people of the Hope Springs valley. He admired them in so many ways. He was grateful to them for giving him this practice when he had lost all hope of building one.

When Ryan Callaghan, a member of the extended O’Connor family, had come across Burke, he had been working as a clerk in a mercantile, having come west on the promise of a job that had not materialized. Burke had all but abandoned the career he had worked so hard to prepare for. Without references, without knowing for certain he was good at what he did, Burke was given a chance. And though it had been rough going the first little while, he had found a home here.

Why, then, was he doing just as Sophie had insisted and working so hard to make this place seem like what Alexander would expect it to be? Why was he trying so hard to change things, to hide the struggle he’d had?

His assessment of himself fluctuated widely as he pondered those questions. Sometimes he was convinced that he was, in fact, embarrassed of the place where he worked. Sometimes he felt, with sadness, he was every bit as arrogant as she had claimed he was. But most of the time, he couldn’t escape the hard truth that he, who had overcome every obstacle, who had fought for every opportunity he had, was terrified. And he had been terrified his whole life.

He remembered all too well the predictions of his failures, the insistence even while he was still at the orphanage that a child with nothing to recommend him wasn’t going to amount to anything. Those long-ago words of cruelty dogged his heels because, deep down inside, he feared they might still prove true.

He didn’t see Sophie for days. She looked in at the inn regularly, but he kept to his side of the wall during those visits. He had people in town and out at the ranches he needed to look in on. He had some people stop by the infirmary in need of his help. And he kept working on the projects needed to put the place to rights. The distraction wasn’t quite enough. His mind was still heavy with her words.

The evening of the next *céili* arrived. Burke spent a full hour debating with himself about attending. He was overwhelmed with questions, lost in his own confused thoughts. He was embarrassed, ashamed. He had, though he’d tried to convince himself otherwise, been neglectful of the good people of Hope Springs in his pursuit of the appearance of perfection. He worried so much about what Alexander would think that he hadn’t stopped to realize how the people of Hope Springs would feel if they knew. They deserved better than that.

Not attending the *céili*, though, wasn’t likely to go unnoticed. The townspeople would wonder why he wasn’t there. How could he explain himself? If he told them he was in the midst of a crisis

of identity, he risked undermining their confidence in him. Neither was he willing to lie.

So he pulled himself together and made his way to the O'Connor farm for the weekly gathering.

The doubts that grew as he approached dissipated when he arrived. He'd been overwhelmed by the enormity of these gatherings when he'd first come to Hope Springs. He'd lived for years in Chicago, which was louder and noisier and busier than this valley ever would be. And he'd grown up in an orphanage, which was more chaotic than anyplace he was likely to ever live again. Looking back, he suspected his worry had stemmed more from the feelings of joy and connection and family that the town had exuded. That wasn't something he was familiar with.

He was welcomed warmly as he arrived that night. The town was genuinely glad to see him. He had come a long way in three years. This town and its inhabitants had become more than just neighbors to him. They'd become close friends.

His steps took him to where Patrick stood, holding his daughter. "Good to have you here tonight, Burke. We've not seen much of you these last days."

"Good to be here, especially since I hear Eliza brought mince pies. I couldn't have asked for better neighbors than you."

Patrick grinned. "On account of the pies or because we're such grand people?"

With a look of overdone seriousness, Burke said, "The pies."

Patrick laughed. Little Lydia joined in. This family really were the very best of neighbors. Burke was fortunate to have them.

Patrick spotted Eliza. "Lydia, mo stóirín, will you stay with the doctor while I dance with your ma?"

Lydia nodded and made the transfer without objection. That alone was a heartwarming reminder of all that had changed. When he'd first met the little girl, she'd been painfully unsure of him. He'd made enough progress that he had every faith she would feel confident coming to him with illnesses and injuries in the years to come. He'd made that progress with all the children in the area. Their parents, too.

He sat with the little girl on one of the chairs surrounding the dancing area. He suspected she would enjoy watching her parents as they danced. The seat he chose was directly beside the elder Mrs. Archer.

"Do you mean to dance tonight?" he asked her.

"I've only just caught my breath from last week," she said with good humor. "The style of dancing here is not quite what I'm accustomed to. There's nothing wrong with it, mind. I simply haven't the vigor that the people of Hope Springs have."

"They are lively, aren't they?"

"*They?*" she asked, looking at him. "Do you not consider yourself one of them?"

The observation caught him off guard. He always did refer to the people of this valley as "they" and not "we." Did he still think of himself as an outsider?

"It seems my question has upset you," Mrs. Archer said. "I hadn't meant it in any hurtful way."

Burke shook his head. "It's not anything you said. I've been pondering a lot of things lately."

"Thinking too much is a good way to get yourself in trouble." Again, Mrs. Archer smiled lightly. He suspected that, if not for her almost aristocratic upbringing, she would have been quite funny. The people of fine society tended to aim for subdued more than entertaining.

His eyes wandered to where Sophie stood amongst a group of local women, smiling and laughing. She didn't quite fit that high-society mold. She wasn't loud or obnoxious, but she certainly was not withdrawn.

"Miss Kingston's very lively."

"*Here,*" Mrs. Archer added.

"What do you mean by that?"

"In Baltimore, she's quiet and extremely proper," Mrs. Archer said.

“I can’t even imagine that,” Burke said.

“She wasn’t always like that. During her first few years of accompanying her parents and sister to various soirées and socials and balls, she had more of the exuberance you’ve seen here. But such a thing is too often frowned on in those circles. She learned very quickly to hide that bit of herself. After her family moved to Boston, she came to live with me. I thought she might return to her former enthusiastic self, but she hasn’t. I understand why. One can only endure so much rejection before one’s goal becomes to avoid it at nearly all costs.”

And with that, Mrs. Archer added another thing to Burke’s list of truths to ponder.

Too many rejections changed a person. It made one want desperately to avoid more. Perhaps that was part of what he was struggling with. He’d been rejected by nearly everyone he’d ever known. Though he knew, logically, that there were many reasons why he might have been left at the orphanage with no hint as to his identity, there was part of him that felt that as a rejection. Not knowing the *why* had proven a struggle over the years. Perhaps if the rest of his life had included more encouragement and solid foundations instead of further humiliations, he might have managed to come to terms with that. Instead, it haunted him.

He and Mrs. Archer settled into a long silence as the dancing continued. He didn’t know what she was pondering, but his mind refused to leave the topic that had occupied it since Tuesday night. What was he running from? What was he afraid of? What would it take for him to feel like he was enough?

Never in all his life had he met someone who had tossed him as easily and quickly into the depths of self-reflection as Sophie Kingston had in one single conversation.

There was something remarkable about her; the puzzle every bit as enormous as the one she insisted he presented.

Patrick came by and claimed his daughter after the song ended. By then, Burke had come to a decision. A new song was beginning, and Sophie didn’t have a partner. He rose from his seat, excused himself to Mrs. Archer, and crossed to where she stood.

Heavens, he was nervous. She might reject him, and he would deserve it. He hadn’t exactly been friendly and welcoming the last little while. But he hoped she would give him a chance.

“Will you dance with me?” It wasn’t a very elegant invitation.

“Do you really wish to?” She looked surprised, even a little confused, but she didn’t look displeased. He chose to see that as a good sign.

“I do.”

She nodded. Her gaze on him narrowed as they walked down toward the dancing. “I wasn’t certain if you would even come tonight. I know you have a great deal you’re working on before your friend visits.”

“I also know I’ve been a bit neglectful of the town,” he said. “And I’m determined to work on that.”

“Truly?”

He nodded. “There needs to be a balance. I’m determined to find it.”

“That seems a good first step.”

“At the moment”—he smiled, a little embarrassed—“I’m focusing on the steps of the dance. No point embarrassing myself further.”

“Further?”

He held his hands out, this being a dance that began that way. “Embarrassment is not an unfamiliar thing.”

She laughed. “That, Dr. Jones, is something we have in common.”



Chapter Eleven

Maura Callaghan, one of the O'Connors' daughters-in-law, was the reason Burke had originally been brought to Hope Springs. She had lived for many years in New York and had contracted a lung disease working in a factory there. It was her husband, Ryan, who had found Burke in the mercantile near the train depot and convinced him to come and treat her. She was doing far better than she had been when he first arrived. He made a point of checking on her regularly, making certain there wasn't anything more she needed. Factory-damaged lungs couldn't be healed, but they could be helped.

He'd just finished looking in on her and was making his way back up the road when he came across Sophie. When making his rounds in the town he usually brought his buggy. But that day he'd wanted to enjoy nature and had left it at the inn.

He greeted her, and she smiled. He found that encouraging.

"Are you on your way back to the Archers'?" he asked.

"I am."

"Would you mind terribly if I walked alongside you?"

Her smile grew. It was a fine thing that, though she had been a bit put out with him a week earlier, she seemed to have not held it against him.

"The weather is very fine today," she said. "Though it is windy."

He nodded. "It's *always* windy in Hope Springs."

"I'm told it's quite cold in the winter."

"It is. But, having lived in Chicago, I'm not unfamiliar with cold."

"Baltimore can be frigid as well. There are times when ice falls instead of snow."

"I suppose, in matters of weather at least, Hope Springs is not terribly different from the big cities we come from."

"Did you like living in Chicago?" she asked.

It was not a question he had to ponder. "I liked a lot of things about Chicago."

"What were the things you liked most?"

"I liked that I met so many different people with different backgrounds. I learned a lot from them. I liked all the buildings, watching how the city changed and grew. I didn't get to attend often, but I thoroughly enjoyed going to the theater and listening to orchestras. And while I do enjoy the comfort of wearing simple clothes, there was something nice about dressing to the nines now and then."

Sophie nodded in a way that indicated not merely understanding but complete agreement. "Baltimore boasts those same things, and I love them. And while the balls and soirees I have attended there were tamer than the *céilís* here, I did enjoy them."

“There are a lot of things I miss about Chicago, and most of those things couldn’t be found here, no matter how much the town grows or how much time passes.”

She turned a searching gaze on him. “Could it be that part of the reason you sometimes feel like your life here is lacking is because of the things you miss about Chicago? Going to the theater, listening to orchestras, being surrounded by interesting buildings?”

He hadn’t really thought about that. “I suppose it could be. But, even with all that, the thing that brought me the most satisfaction was the work I did as a doctor, helping people and saving lives. The rest was secondary to that. And I help and save people here.”

“Then, you have what makes you happiest, just not what adds to that happiness.”

“What is it that makes you happiest, Sophie?” he asked.

“Being with happy people and trying new things. And I’m never happier than when I can hear music and when I can laugh.”

“Why is it you deny yourself those things when you’re in Baltimore?”

That added surprise and confusion to her expression.

“Mrs. Archer told me a little bit about your life in Baltimore,” he confessed. “Why is it you’re so different there than you are here?”

“Being myself caused a lot of difficulties. I tried to be more authentic, I truly did. But in the end, it was far easier and far more comfortable to conform when around other people.”

“And has that worked?”

She nodded. “Things are a lot better.”

“Better for whom?”

Sophie always seemed to have ready answers, but she didn’t to that question. She walked beside him, silent, her brow pulled in deep thought. Burke didn’t press the matter. He knew perfectly well the mental jumble caused by having one’s assumptions called into question. He was still experiencing that himself.

After a long moment, she said, “It’s better for Mrs. Archer. My mother spent years having to defend me to people who were critical of my odd behavior. She loves me, and I don’t think she begrudged the effort, but it *did* take effort. Mrs. Archer has been kind to me. She took me in when I was very much alone in the world. Saving her the burden of explaining me to people makes things better for her.”

He couldn’t entirely argue with that. But he had the very real impression that Mrs. Archer would not be bothered by that “burden.”

“And in many ways, it’s better for me too,” Sophie said. “My mother wasn’t the only one who expended time and energy in my defense. I was forever apologizing and explaining. I would sing at a musical evening, and though I enjoyed it in the moment, the next week would be spent in an exhausting effort to smooth things over.”

“Do you like to sing?”

“More than my actual talent warrants.” She looked amused enough that he wasn’t worried she was embarrassed or hurt by the recollection. “Ability is more valued than enthusiasm in the circles I am part of in Baltimore.”

“That seems a shame.”

“As I’ve heard Patrick say more than once, ‘It is what it is.’ And, more than a shame, it is so very tiring. I reached the point where I dreaded the idea of going to new soirees and events. Subduing some of my exuberance has made those excursions more comfortable and less wearing.”

“But are you truly happy in Baltimore?”

“I am, really. I do like all the things we were talking about. And I do enjoy the social gatherings. I simply have to tiptoe more carefully there. I love Mrs. Archer. She’s become family to me. In her house, I can be myself. I can relax in ways I didn’t even with my own family. She’s alone in Baltimore, and so was I. I like to think I’ve been as good for her as she has been for me.”

“But, outside of her house, in Baltimore you can’t be who you really are.”

“It’s a compromise, yes, but some sacrifices are worth making.”

A compromise. In describing her own life negotiations, she had managed to describe his. There were always compromises and sacrifices. In Chicago, he’d had all those interesting things surrounding him, and the chance to do a variety of doctoring work, but he hadn’t had his own practice, neither had he suspected there would be one. Those, mostly, went to his colleagues who had connections.

In Hope Springs he had his own infirmary. He was responsible for the entire area. He helped a lot of people, and though he wasn’t as challenged as he would have been in a big city, there was a lot of variety from day to day. He treated not merely the people but the animals as well, which added an extra degree of complication. But, here, he hadn’t those extra things he enjoyed about Chicago.

As Sophie had so rightly said, there were compromises. It seemed he needed to decide which were worth making.

They had crossed over the wooden bridge that traversed the Hope Springs river and were at the edge of the Archer farm. Along the riverbank came Finbarr with Madra beside him as always.

“Finbarr,” Burke said. “It’s Dr. Jones. Good to see you.”

Finbarr swept the ground in front of him with his cane as he approached. Madra nudged him a bit farther from the river’s edge. “Dr. Jones, you are exactly who I was hoping to find.”

“Well, then, this is a stroke of luck. Miss Kingston is here with me.”

Finbarr dipped his head, though he clearly didn’t know quite where she stood. “Miss Kingston.”

“A pleasure to see you again, Finbarr. I need to hop over to the Archers’. I told them I would help prepare lunch.”

She continued on, leaving Burke to address whatever it was that had sent Finbarr searching him out. The fact that he so seldom did, made the moment a bit worrisome.

“What can I help you with, Finbarr?”

“I think I have a splinter in my hand. As near as I can tell there’s no edge of it poking through the skin, so I can’t get the blasted thing out. It’s been a couple of days, and it’s starting to really bother me. I realize that’s a thing most don’t need a doctor’s help with...”

This was an aspect of Finbarr that hadn’t changed since Burke’s arrival. He was both frustrated and a little embarrassed by the things he struggled to do on account of his loss of sight. Cecily, his sister-in-law, had lost her sight as well, and had told the O’Connors it could be a long struggle for him to adapt and make his peace. Finbarr had improved, but he obviously still grappled with it all.

“I have my bag with me,” Burke said. “The sun is out and bright today. I can take a look at it right now. With any luck, I can quickly get out whatever is in there.”

Finbarr held out his left hand, palm up. It wasn’t hard to tell where the splinter was—a large bit of his hand was red and swollen. It wasn’t so bad that Burke worried about infection but enough that it was clear the splinter was causing difficulties.

“Any idea where you picked it up?” Burke asked taking hold of Finbarr’s hand, eyeing the sore more closely.

“A fence post,” Finbarr said. “I was hooking the rope to it and caught my hand on a jagged bit.”

Cecily and Patrick had devised a means for Finbarr to work in his fields without getting lost. It was an intricate system of fence posts and ropes, bells that sounded drastically different from each other hung in various places. Madra stayed with him as well and had shown herself more than capable of nudging him in the correct direction. Thus far, the approach seemed to be working.

“I can get the splinter out without too much trouble,” Burke said. “It *is* beneath the surface. You couldn’t possibly have removed it yourself. In fact, it’s deep enough, I think anyone would struggle to get to it without the right tools.”

“You might very well be lying to me, but I appreciate it. Being a bit helpless grows tiresome.”

Burke hunched down and opened his bag. Madra sniffed the air around him, eyeing Burke closely. The sweet dog was never aggressive, but she was decidedly protective of Finbarr. Having,

apparently, decided Burke was not a threat, Madra stretched herself over Finbarr's feet and laid her head on her paws.

"How are things coming along out at your place?" Burke asked while searching through his bag. "Do you still like your house?"

"I do like it. There's something to be said for living on one's own. For a long time, I didn't think that would be possible."

"Too much isolation isn't good for you," Burke warned gently.

"It doesn't feel like 'too much,'" Finbarr said. "I like the space. I like the quiet. Sometimes, being alone is exactly what a person needs."

Burke stood once more, a small blade and a pair of tweezers in his hand. "No one ever sees you anymore."

"I don't *see* anyone either." His lips tipped up a bit. Finbarr didn't used to be able to joke about the ways his life had changed.

"I'm going to get this splinter out, but it'll likely hurt a bit."

"Do what you need to, Doc," Finbarr said.

Burke made a little cut alongside the deeply embedded splinter. Finbarr winced but didn't flinch. Still laying atop her beloved master's feet, Madra lifted her head and watched Burke with suspicion.

"How's your crop?" He had found it best to keep his patients talking when he was causing them pain. It was a good distraction.

"The crop's healthy, I think. Joseph took a look at it a couple of days ago. He didn't have any concerns."

"So, you still interact with Joseph?"

"Now and then."

Burke pulled the splinter out. It was a decent size. He was surprised Finbarr had gone as long as he had without getting help. Burke wrapped a bandage around Finbarr's hand.

"Next time, don't wait to come see me. Splinters are easier to address than infection."

Finbarr nodded. "I will."

"And if you don't want to make the trek all the way to my infirmary, ask Joseph. I'd wager, most of the time, he'd be able to get out a splinter."

"I'll think about it." Finbarr was so reluctant to abandon his isolation.

"Do you get lonely out there on your own?" Burke asked.

"Sometimes," Finbarr said. "But I need the space and the quiet more than I need company."

"Meaning, it's a sacrifice worth making."

"It is."

The significance of that was not lost on Burke. No one looking in on Finbarr's situation would think he could possibly be happy. But, at the moment, it was the compromise he needed to make.

"Having space of your own is worth missing out on being around other people," Burke said. "What if it stops being worth it?"

"I guess I'd have to rethink some things."

Rethinking. Sometimes, it seemed that was all Burke did anymore.



Chapter Twelve

Sophie had celebrated birthdays with any number of people over the years. None had shown even a modicum of the excitement Ivy Archer overflowed with at the arrival of her birthday. Her family planned a day of celebrations. Katie baked a cake. And they warned Mrs. Archer that, as tiring as the *céilis* could be, they were nothing compared to what would descend upon the Archer home. Mrs. Archer didn't seem the least worried. She, after all, had made houseroom for Sophie, who could be exhausting in her own way.

For her part, Sophie was excited. There was something so freeing about life here. She hadn't worried even once in the last weeks about being overly exuberant.

Joseph returned from his work out in his fields a little early that day in order to celebrate with his daughter and family. Ivy rushed to him as he stepped into the sitting room, and he scooped her up off the floor and spun her about. It was not a sight one would ever see amongst the wealthy and influential of Baltimore. Yet, it came very naturally to Joseph Archer out here. Sophie appreciated seeing it. She felt a little less unsure of her own transformation here in the expanse of the West.

"Have you had a good birthday so far, Ivy?" Joseph asked.

"I have."

He set her on her feet once more but kept her hand in his. "It's not yet time for your birthday dinner or your cake. What would you like to do in the meantime?"

Without hesitation, Ivy declared, "I want to play tag!"

Joseph's eyes darted to the others in the room. "Has she proposed this idea to the rest of you?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," Katie said. She rose carefully, setting a hand on her very rounded middle and using the other to support herself on the arm of the chair she'd been sitting in. "But it is Ivy's special day. We'll do what she wishes to do."

Joseph moved to where his wife stood. He watched her with concern. "I don't know that a rousing game of tag is quite the best idea for you right now."

"And I suspect, Ivy,"—Katie looked to her little girl—"your granny's not quite up for it either. But Sean will have a grand time. I daresay Emma will participate."

Ivy's nostrils flared even as her expression turned annoyed. "Emma's too grown up for games. Especially since Grandmother came. She's fancy now."

Sophie hunched down in front of the girl. "Well, I daresay I am fancier than Emma, and I am excited to play tag. I haven't since I was a little girl."

"Were you good at it?" Ivy asked, excitedly.

Sophie nodded firmly. "I was the very best."

"Pompah will play with us!" Ivy said. "Finbarr used to play with us, but he's never here anymore."

"If you're going to play a game involving a heap of running, we'd best do it outside," Katie said.

Everyone agreed, and soon enough the entire family and Sophie were out in front of the house. A chair had been brought out for Mrs. Archer and another one for Katie. They were set beside one another on the porch. Emma sat on the steps directly in front of her grandmother and mother.

True to Ivy's evaluation, Emma didn't seem likely to participate. She had been spending a great deal of time with Mrs. Archer. But Sophie saw in it something different than Ivy did. Ivy attributed it to Emma's wanting to be very fine and proper. Sophie saw loneliness in her expression. She would wager Emma had missed her grandmother and was enjoying every moment she could with her. After all, eventually Sophie and Mrs. Archer would be returning to Baltimore.

They'd not yet begun their game when Burke's buggy came rolling over the wooden bridge. Ivy rushed out toward the road, stopping before putting herself in harm's way. She jumped up and down and waved her arms about.

Burke pulled his horse to a stop. "Good afternoon, Ivy. Are you waving me over because you need something or because you're wanting to chat?"

"Today is my birthday, Dr. Jones."

Burke smiled. "Happy birthday. I believe you are ten years old now?"

Ivy nodded. "I've waited my whole life to have two numbers in my age."

"Are you having a grand party to celebrate having two numbers?"

"We are." She looked back over her shoulder to Joseph, who stood not far distant. "Pompah, may Dr. Jones join our party?"

"You are the birthday girl. You may have any guest you wish to have."

Ivy bounced with excitement. "Stay, Dr. Jones. Stay and have a party with us."

"I could stay for a little while."

Sophie's heart did odd things at that declaration. It bounced every bit as much as Ivy did. It had been doing that more and more often when she thought of him and when she was with him. She'd found enough similarities between the two of them that she'd come to think of him as someone she could relate to and understand.

They were both struggling to decide what they wanted in life and how best to get it. They were both grappling with the weight of compromises and sacrifices. He had lived in and been happy in a big city, but found aspects of his very different life in this very small town that he loved as well. He was kind, not just to her and Mrs. Archer, but to the people of Hope Springs, and especially to the children.

And he liked the person she was in Hope Springs, the *real* her, the one she had to keep hidden in Baltimore. With him, she didn't have to make that compromise.

He soon had his cart and horse safely taken care of alongside the house and joined them all.

"We're playing tag," Ivy said. "Not Katie, on account of her baby. And not Grandmother, on account of her being very old."

Mrs. Archer hadn't missed that comment, but far from being offended, she held back a smile.

"And Emma isn't playing, on account of she's grown up and fancy now."

Emma ignored the jab.

"Well, I believe I would do very well playing tag with you." He was as good as his word.

The game of tag began, and he was an eager participant. Sophie had bragged to Ivy about being an expert, but she was, in all actuality, not overly experienced with the game. Still, she loved the idea of being able to run, laugh, and spin about with no one deciding that made her embarrassing or improperly behaved. She threw herself into the game with a lifetime's worth of longing and lost opportunities.

Sean, being only three years old, was at a distinct disadvantage. When he grew frustrated, his father picked him up and they played as a team. Ivy proved a fierce competitor. Every one of them was tagged by her in close succession.

It didn't take long for the adults to begin running out of energy, while Ivy herself didn't look at all worse for wear. Knowing she would never catch the girl, when it was Sophie's turn to do the

tagging, she set her sights, instead, on Burke. With a little bit of clever maneuvering, she managed to grab hold of him.

"I caught you," she declared, holding fast to his sleeve.

He slipped his other arm around her, laughing. "I knew if you tried to chase me, I was going to get caught. I haven't played a game like this in so long, I fear I am woefully out of practice."

"You're fortunate," Sophie said, "I'm woefully out of air."

He laughed again, and she happily joined in. She released her hold on his sleeve but rested her hand on his arm. He didn't pull away.

"I think we can put this on the list of things Hope Springs has to offer that Chicago and Baltimore don't," he said.

Her lungs hitched. Warmth spread to her cheeks. "Put *what* on the list?"

"Playing games with children in wide-open spaces."

Disappointment sat like a lump in her chest. She'd thought, for one fleeting moment, that he meant holding her like he was, standing so near each other. She needed to rein in her thoughts before she inflicted on herself the very rejection she most wanted to avoid.

"Would your visiting friend consider the local doctor being pulled into impromptu games with children a mark against this place?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Do *you* appreciate this part of it?" She told herself she was asking him only about the game. But she wasn't. She meant so much more than that.

"I do."

Her voice quieter than she would have preferred, she said, "I appreciate it too."

"Will you miss this freedom when you go back to Baltimore?"

She would. And she would miss *him*. Best nip that thought in the bud.

Sophie turned her gaze to Ivy, who was standing a bit away, watching them with a smile. In a voice loud enough to be heard by the others, she said, "You and I are both taggers now, Dr. Jones. I think we should catch the birthday girl."

Ivy giggled and ran again. Burke released his hold on Sophie, and she ignored the feeling of loss that accompanied it. They chased after Ivy. Little Sean laughed as they went past.

"Help us catch her, Sean," Burke said.

Joseph, carrying his son, joined in. They were able to corner and catch Ivy relatively quickly. Sophie suspected the girl let them do so. Burke scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She laughed and laughed.

Did Burke realize how much the children of this valley loved him? She was certain he'd had a chance to treat children when he was in Chicago. But in so large a city, was there any chance to come to know them this well? Had he been part of their lives outside of their moments of illness and injury?

"I think you'd best let the adults rest a bit from our game, Ivy," Joseph said. "You can open your presents while we catch our breath."

Burke set Ivy on the steps next to her sister.

"Presents?" Ivy asked, her tone and expression a little too innocent.

"You know perfectly well you have presents," Emma said with a little bit of a laugh.

Emma bumped her sister with her shoulder. Ivy bumped her back. The girls were in such different stages of life that they sometimes seemed to have little in common. There were moments like this one when it became clear that they still loved and cared about each other. In time, Ivy would get older, and she and her sister would relate more to each other again.

"You have presents from your grandmother, from Sophie, from your ma and I," Joseph said.

"And from me," Emma added.

“And your father has a present for you that Finbarr asked him to deliver,” Katie said.

That sent both girls spinning about to stare alternately at Katie and Joseph.

“Finbarr sent me a present?” Ivy couldn’t have sounded more excited.

“He’s never forgotten about your or Emma’s birthdays,” Joseph said. “I don’t imagine he’s going to start.”

“And I don’t imagine he’s ever going to come back here,” Ivy said.

“He might, someday. When he’s ready,” Katie said.

“What if he’s never ready?” Emma asked.

“Then that would be sad indeed,” Katie said.

Joseph slipped into the house, no doubt to collect the presents Ivy was going to open.

Emma asked Katie, “Does Papa see Finbarr very often?”

“No,” Katie said. “But when he does, Finbarr asks after you girls.”

“He did precisely that the first time I met him,” Sophie said.

Emma looked to her. “You’ve met him?”

“I have seen him twice,” Sophie said. “Both times, I was with Dr. Jones.”

Burke nodded. “In fact, I saw him only a couple days ago. He had a splinter in his hand that needed removing.”

“How was he otherwise?” Katie asked.

“He seemed content.”

Katie shook her head slightly. “Content is not the same as happy.”

“But it’s better than he was before,” Emma said. “It’s better than miserable, even if he’s only not miserable because he’s keeping away from all of us. *Most* of us,” she quietly corrected.

The presents arrived, and Ivy was very quickly distracted. Emma, however, didn’t seem to recover her spirits.

Sophie stepped a little bit aside, motioning for Burke to do the same. “Do you know why Emma concerns herself so much with Finbarr?”

Burke nodded. “From all I’ve been told, they were once quite close. Finbarr looked on her as something of a little sister, and she adored him. They had a falling out and never have regained what was once there. I think she grieves that.”

“And he is never around anymore. She likely feels that even more acutely when she hears that other people interact with him, but she never does. It must seem, at times, like he’s avoiding her specifically.”

“To be completely honest, I suspect he might be. The chasm between them is connected to his injuries and his loss of sight and the mental anguish that accompanied it. I think the fact that she is connected to that made it even harder for him to repair what was damaged between them.”

“They’re both hurting so much. Don’t you sometimes wish pain like that could be addressed as easily as a splinter?”

He took hold of her hand. Her heart skipped a beat.

He squeezed her fingers. “You have a good heart, Sophie Kingston. And a good head on your shoulders. That is a remarkable combination.”

“I can’t think of a single person who has ever told me that.” She wasn’t feeling sorry for herself; she was simply stating the truth.

“That’s likely because the people of Baltimore aren’t permitted to see it.”

“It’s more a matter of they don’t wish to see it.”

“And yet, you make it your home.”

“Compromises,” she said with a sigh.

“Someone once told me recently that when a compromise is no longer worth making, that’s the time to rethink our assumptions.”

“Who told you that?”

“Finbarr.”

He slipped his hand from hers and made his way back over to the festivities. Her mind spun on that revelation. A young man, who was hurting in innumerable ways, whose struggles made hers seem insignificant, understood a truth she herself had not recognized. Sometimes, the sacrifices that have been worth making, even for a long time, stopped being worth it.

But rethinking those assumptions in her life meant rethinking everything.



Chapter Thirteen

Burke hadn't energy enough to go to the *céili* that Saturday evening. There had been a great many patients in and out of the infirmary, and he'd traveled out to one of the ranches to see to a cowboy with a badly cut arm. By the time he'd returned to his own house, he was exhausted. So, he stayed there, and promised himself a quiet evening instead.

That was one advantage of being in Hope Springs. In Chicago, there'd been almost no opportunities for quiet. Even when he'd stayed in the small apartment he'd called home, the noise of the city was loud enough that it permeated the walls. Here, one could truly have peace.

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about the question Sophie had posed, and the subsequent ones that had arisen in his mind as a result. There were things he liked about both places. There were things he would miss in choosing one over the other. He simply had to decide which things mattered most.

In that moment, though, he meant to simply relax and lift from his shoulders the weight of the day.

He leaned his head back against his chair and closed his eyes. He might have drifted off to sleep if not for the knock at his front door. That was a difference here in Hope Springs versus working in the hospitals of Chicago. In that big city, when he'd been home, he was home. Here, he was the doctor at all hours of the day and night.

He rose from his chair and crossed to his front door. Sophie stood on the other side, smiling. Warmth settled on his heart, as it always did when he saw her. The pull he'd felt to her had only grown. Seeing her was, more often than not, the very best part of his day.

"Why aren't you at the *céili*?" he asked.

"I came here to ask you the same thing," she said.

"You walked all that way?"

She shrugged. "I am discovering that I particularly like walking. I don't get to do nearly enough of it in Baltimore."

He stood aside and motioned her in. "Come have a seat and rest for a moment. That was quite a distance to cover."

She didn't object. He walked next to her all the way back to the sitting room.

Since Ivy's birthday, Sophie had visited the infirmary often. He'd called on her out at the Archers', as well. This, though, was the first time they'd been truly alone. There was something comfortable about it, almost familiar.

"If you'd like, I can drive you back to the *céili*. I can hitch up my buggy relatively quickly."

She shrugged as she sat. "I'm not in a hurry. I mostly wanted to make certain you were well."

That was thoughtful of her.

"I am. I stayed behind because I had a long and exhausting day. I wasn't certain I had the energy for a party tonight."

She looked at him with concern. “Nothing horrible happened, I hope.”

He sat as well. “I was simply busy. I have days like that now and then.”

“And is that a mark for or against Hope Springs?”

“Oddly enough, it’s both.”

“These things never are simple, are they?”

He leaned forward a bit in his chair, enough that he could reach her hand where she sat. He took it in his. He loved holding her hand. He loved, even more, that she seemed to like it as well. “There is definitely a great deal to think about.”

“You can’t really be happy if you don’t know what truly makes you happy.”

He threaded his fingers through hers. She smiled softly. She was so comforting, so lightening. How could the people of Baltimore not cherish the person she truly was?

He kept his gaze on their entwined hands. “I’ve found myself wondering what the people I’ve known over the years—both those few who believed in me and all those who doubted—would think of what I’ve accomplished. I wonder if they would think I have reason to be proud.”

“Is that why you want to impress your doctor friend who is coming? If he approves of what you’re doing, you would have an answer to that question?”

“I suppose that’s part of it.”

She leaned forward. The chairs they sat in were near enough to each other that he could see every variation of color in her eyes.

“Don’t you think, Burke Jones, that *your* evaluation of the work you do and the life you lead is more important than anyone else’s?”

“I recognize that it should be, but that is something I fear I’m going to have to keep working on. But do you realize, Sophie Kingston, that being happy with the person *you* are is more important than pretending to be the person *other people* think you ought to be?”

“I’m not the only one who experiences the consequences of how I present myself.”

“You mean Mrs. Archer?”

She stood, which pulled her hand from his. Sophie walked a little bit away, but not with an air of offense or frustration, more like she was sorting something out.

“I’ve decided that, rather than assuming how she feels, I’m going to ask Mrs. Archer. During the journey back to Baltimore, we will have days and days together. This seems like a good topic to fill the miles.”

“And if she says that you being ‘exuberant,’ as you sometimes put it, would in fact be an embarrassment to her, what do you intend to do?”

“I wouldn’t cause her pain for all the world.”

“She means a lot to you.”

“She’s family.”

Burke stood and crossed to her. He took her hands once more. “She is fortunate to have you. Should she grow ill on the return journey, please do what you can to convince her to stop long enough to rest and recover.”

“The fact that she grew ill on the trip here will go a long way toward convincing her to admit if she becomes ill on the journey back. And the possibility makes me glad she’s not making the trip alone. I don’t think she could have anyway, illness or not.”

Burke hadn’t really thought of that. Sophie had come to Hope Springs, not because she herself wanted to visit, but because Mrs. Archer did and couldn’t make the journey alone. It drove home for him just how close he’d come to never meeting her. But it also reminded him that, when Mrs. Archer was ready to return, Sophie would leave too. She would have to. Sophie’s home was in Baltimore. The woman she thought of as family needed her help getting back to *her* home.

Suddenly, all of this felt very fragile.

If he'd learned anything from the O'Connors of Hope Springs it was how to lighten a moment with humor. "Though I risk seeing you storm off in disappointment, I feel I have to tell you that I haven't any of Katie's famous berry tarts here. They are all at the *céili*."

She smiled, her eyes dancing with laughter. "Well, then, I'm certainly not staying."

She pulled free and pretended to storm past him.

He reached out and snatched hold of her arm as she passed. "Please don't go."

She looked at him once more. The length of their outstretched arms separated them, but the meeting of their eyes seemed to draw them closer.

"You want me to stay?" she asked.

"I very much do." He realized, as he said it, that he meant more than that moment. He knew she had to leave, but he wanted her to stay. He wanted her to stay even though he didn't know if *he* wanted to stay. But he also knew she couldn't remain. Baltimore would eventually call her home.

"I'd like to stay too." Her voice was quiet, her expression earnest.

He closed the distance between them. "The wind is blowing a bit cold out tonight." He spoke in nearly a whisper. "You'll be warmer in here."

"I am quite a bit warmer."

He bent nearer. "So am I."

Her fingers brushed his neck above his collar. He swallowed, but with effort. She raised up, bringing their lips within a hair's breadth.

Burke slipped his arm around her waist, then closed the tiny gap between them. His lips met hers, warm and earnest and longing for her. She hooked her arms around his neck, deepening the unexpected kiss.

The sound of wheels on the ground outside broke the moment. She pulled back, eyes a bit startled, hair a bit mussed. He likely looked as upended.

Sometimes patients arrived at the most inconvenient times.

"I should see who that is." The words emerged a little quivery.

She nodded.

He'd only just stepped away from her and toward the door when Joseph Archer burst inside, his arm around Katie.

"What's happened?" Burke asked, alarmed by the franticness in Joseph's expression.

"She's in labor."



Chapter Fourteen

Word of Katie's impending arrival had spread, and the Archers, along with the entire extended O'Connor family, had gathered at the inn. Mrs. O'Connor and Maura Callaghan were with Katie. Maura, Sophie had been told, was a midwife.

With so many at the inn, Eliza was run a bit off her feet. Though her family would certainly have seen to their own needs and comfort, she clearly wanted them to feel welcome and looked after. She and Patrick did their best to see to everyone's needs. Sophie, realizing there was more to do than those two could manage without warning, did what she could to help. She held little Eoin, keeping him safe and comforted. He leaned against her, his beautiful blue eyes struggling to stay open.

The elder Mr. O'Connor sat beside her. "It's good of you to help Eliza and Patrick. They're a bit overwhelmed, I fear."

"I love being here at the inn. And their children are angels. Helping anyone in your family is my very real pleasure."

"Well, we're grateful for you."

Sophie enjoyed spending time with the O'Connors. They were so welcoming and kind. She couldn't imagine them rejecting someone for being "odd" or "overly enthusiastic."

"What is your connection to Katie?" she asked him. "That the whole family came so immediately, even leaving the *céilí* to do so, indicates she's more than merely a neighbor to you."

"I've considered her a daughter from almost the moment she arrived in Hope Springs. She's allowed me to fill the role of father in her life, and 'tis an honor to do so."

"Does she not have family here, other than Joseph and their children?" Sophie asked.

"She lost most all her family as a little girl, before she left Ireland. And she didn't meet Joseph and his daughters until coming to Wyoming."

"So she was alone when she came here."

"Utterly so." The knowledge seemed to sadden him still.

"Burke has told me a little of his history. He's very much alone as well. He has no family. He never has."

"He's talked of that a bit. We know he grew up in an orphanage."

"And yet, I don't get the impression that he feels as much like family here as many others do. I think he struggles to know what his place is."

Mr. O'Connor appeared to ponder that. "He's not given any indication that he's feeling neglected."

"I don't think 'neglected' is the right word. He's never had family, so I imagine he doesn't even believe it's possible to find one. And yet, I get the very real impression that he needs it more than he lets on."

“We ought to do a better job of showing him our appreciation,” Mr. O’Connor said. “He’s so able and competent. ’Tis an easy thing to forget he’d benefit from the connections we all need.”

Eoin started fussing. Sophie rose, still holding him, but walking about as she cooed softly to him. She suspected the poor boy was tired. It was late, and there was too much happening for him to fall asleep easily. Her steps took her past Eliza, who offered a quick whispered *thank you*.

“My pleasure,” Sophie said quietly.

She bounced the little boy as he drifted in and out of slumber. She wandered from group to group, at times simply listening to the conversations, at times joining in. It was easy to feel at home amongst this family, to feel welcomed and wanted and seen. They had adopted Katie when she had arrived alone without family. Would they do the same for her if she were to stay?

No sooner had the question flitted through her mind than her eyes settled on Mrs. Archer, sitting comfortably in a chair, with Ivy lying on the chair next to her, her head on her grandmother’s lap.

Mrs. Archer would be returning to Baltimore, and she needed Sophie to go with her. She wouldn’t have made the journey to Hope Springs without the guarantee that she could return. And she couldn’t make the journey back without Sophie to help. Furthermore, if Sophie weren’t in Baltimore, Mrs. Archer would be entirely alone. Sophie had seen her sorrow when Joseph’s letter had arrived telling her he was not making his annual visit. The woman would be heartbroken if Sophie abandoned her as well.

The fleeting thought of remaining in Hope Springs had likely been an impossible one anyway. She had grown up in high society. She had no useful skills. What would she even do here? How would she support herself? She didn’t have anywhere to stay. She had something of a reputation for being overly enthusiastic about things. Rushing into the idea of staying had likely just been another example of that.

She would enjoy the time that remained to her here. She would talk with Mrs. Archer about ways she could be more herself when they returned. But she would keep herself to those dreams that were possible.

Eoin had fallen completely to sleep, lying heavy against her shoulder. Patrick happened past in the next moment.

“We’ve a little cradle in the kitchen,” he said in a whisper. “Allow me to take the wee lad in there and lay him down. He’ll sleep better where it’s quiet.”

The transfer was made, and Patrick slipped from the room.

In the very next moment, Joseph and Burke entered through the inn’s front doors. The entire room went silent. Sophie was certain they felt as she did: hoping for the best but knowing the best was not always the outcome.

“Don’t torture us, Joseph,” Mr. O’Connor said.

“We’ve a new member of the family,” Joseph said. “A little girl, and we’ve named her Eimear.”

Enthusiastic declarations of congratulations and delight filled the room. Joseph was all but attacked with handshakes and hugs and smiles all around. The O’Connors immediately began discussing who would get to meet the baby first, who would come next, and how many ought to go at one time.

In the midst of it all, Burke was thanked sincerely and repeatedly, and not just by Mr. O’Connor. Burke nodded and accepted their gratitude, but was sure to tell them that, as midwife, Maura had done far more than he had. Sophie had interacted with doctors now and then. Few were as humble as this man, and yet she’d seen him do remarkable work.

She slipped up beside him. “How is Katie doing?”

“She’s exhausted, as is expected. But there were no complications. And there’s no reason to be worried for her or the baby.”

That was a decidedly good thing.

“Do you know, the comment I heard the most these last few hours was that, between you and Maura, they’d no reason to worry for Katie.”

“I’m glad that proved true. Sometimes, in a delivery, things go horribly wrong.”

“But, having you there increased the chances of everything going right. And you did it even though you’d just completed a whirlwind day of doctoring and could just as easily have left the whole thing to Maura. But you stayed to help in any way you could.”

“The town deserves a doctor who gives his all.”

She took his hand. “They have one already, Burke.”

“They also have a doctor who is asleep on his feet.”

Looking more closely, she could see that he was, indeed, heavy with exhaustion.

“I suspect the O’Connors and Archers are going to have a celebration here. You’ll get more rest if you go back over to your side of the inn.”

“That’s wise.”

She walked with him out of the public room, down the covered porch, and through the door to his house.

“You could go up to your room and simply go to bed. No one would blame you.”

But he shook his head. “Until I’m certain nothing more is needed, I have to be available.”

“Then, at least sit on the sofa. Let yourself rest if not actually sleep.”

He didn’t argue. They walked together into the sitting room, and he sat on the sofa. She sat next to him. His foot tapped a bit, and he shifted positions again and again. He was obviously still a little anxious but trying hard to stay alert.

She leaned against him, suspecting he needed the support. “Lean back and close your eyes,” she gently instructed.

“I’ll fall asleep,” he said.

“Tell me a favorite memory,” she said. “That’ll help keep you awake.”

He shifted again until he settled more comfortably. He leaned his head back against the back of the sofa. Even slouched a little.

She settled more comfortably against him. He laid an arm around her. She pushed from her mind the memory of their earlier kiss. It had been... magical. But reminders of her duty to Mrs. Archer and her inevitable return to Baltimore had brought reality crashing down around her.

“A favorite memory.” He took a deep breath, and then another. “I had a friend at the orphanage. His name was Robert. He told the best stories. He would make them up right on the spot. He would imagine far off places and exciting adventures. We were always the people in his stories. In those imaginings, we lived in big, fine houses and ate all the best food. We had every luxury life could offer.” His voice was getting a little quieter, a little slower. He was probably drifting off. If he was needed, he could be awoken, but she wasn’t sure he would allow himself that freedom.

“Those few minutes, while he told his stories,” Burke spoke slowly, “life wasn’t so heavy for us.”

It was little wonder he put such store by prestige and perceived importance. Whether or not he realized it, since his childhood the idea of such things was his escape. It was his light in the darkness. She suspected he was searching for it still.

Beside her, Burke had grown quiet. Sophie kept her head against his shoulder. She hoped she was offering him comfort. She was certainly receiving comfort in return.

She’d had a realization that night, one that had left her a bit upended. If staying in Hope Springs would have impacted only herself, she would have seriously contemplated remaining. But she needed to go back to Baltimore. She had to for Mrs. Archer. Yet doing so would mean returning to a life where she had to hide some of who she was, where she wasn’t sure she would be as happy as she was here.

She didn’t know how to reconcile herself to that.



Chapter Fifteen

Several days had passed since the Archers' daughter was born. Katie had returned home. Burke had seen a number of patients since then. But he could not clear from his mind the feeling of awakening on his sofa with Sophie tucked up next to him, sleeping peacefully and soundly. It was something he could very easily grow quite accustomed to.

He dropped in at the Archer home after making a call to a family down the Irish Road. He was certain he would have heard if there were any concerns about Katie or the baby, but it wasn't a bad idea to simply have a look for himself.

Biddy O'Connor was in Katie's room when Burke arrived there. Katie was sleeping, and Biddy was tending to the baby.

"How are the mother and child doing?" he asked her.

"Quite well. My sisters-in-law and mother-in-law and I have all taken it in turns to come down here and help her out. And the housekeeper sees to the house and meals. I think Katie'll get all the rest she needs."

Burke nodded. That would be the most helpful thing of all. "And how is the baby? Any concerns?"

Biddy had children of her own and had helped with the new arrivals amongst her extended family. She had experience enough that she would have noticed anything concerning.

"Healthy as can be."

That was reassuring.

Emma poked her head inside the room. She looked quickly at Katie before settling her gaze on Biddy. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked. "I'm happy to help."

"Thank you. But everything's being seen to," Biddy said.

"People don't have to keep coming," Emma said. "I'm here. I don't go to school anymore, so I can help all day."

"'Tis appreciated," Biddy said. "But we've a handle on it."

Emma nodded and slipped back out.

"I suspect Ivy also likes to help," Burke asked.

"She does. Despite being incredibly energetic, she's good with the little one. Katie will have as much help as she could possibly want. And while Sophie is still here, she's helping as well."

While Sophie's still here. Burke tried not to think about how soon Sophie would be leaving. He knew she needed to return home. He knew Mrs. Archer needed her and that Sophie wanted to be with the woman who'd taken her in. But he would miss her. He would miss her terribly.

"Please reiterate to Joseph and Katie that if they need anything at all not to hesitate to send for me."

Biddy smiled. "We all know you can be depended on, Burke. But I will remind them."

He dipped his head and slipped from the room. He'd only just reached the bottom of the staircase and stepped into the sitting room when Mrs. Archer, who was inside, asked him to stop for moment.

He sat on a chair, facing her. "Is something amiss? Are you feeling poorly again?"

"No. My health is quite good at the moment. I've had a telegraph from my physician back in Baltimore, and I would very much like to discuss it with you."

Was she looking to him for insights into a diagnosis or to treat some concern before she made the return trip home? He couldn't imagine what else she meant to speak with him about.

"Dr. Norwood has been our family physician for nearly thirty years now. Joseph was a young boy when we first began consulting him. He treats most of our friends and associates. His is quite an extensive and successful practice. He is, however, getting older and finds himself wishing to retire."

Burke nodded; he'd known many doctors who'd chosen not to continue practicing after several decades.

"I sent him a telegram earlier this week, after watching you very competently and compassionately treat the people of this town. I asked Dr. Norwood if he had anyone in mind to take over his practice."

The beginning of a suspicion began to form in Burke's mind. He refused to let it become whole, though, because disappointment was always harder to endure than pleasant surprise.

"I heard from him yesterday. He said he had not chosen anyone, and that if I knew of a young, competent physician, in whom I have trust and would recommend, he would welcome that burden being taken from him."

"He said that?" The words didn't emerge quite as calm as he would have hoped.

"I think Dr. Norwood is ready to be done. If he can offer his practice to someone who would make a good replacement without having to expend a great deal of energy himself, he would be grateful for it. If you are interested, Dr. Jones, I should very much like to suggest to him that he take you on as his replacement."

"You have that much faith in me?"

She nodded without any hint of hesitation or uncertainty. "You are not only good at what you do, you care about the people you look after. And you have lived in a large city, so that aspect of this new location would not be unfamiliar to you. You are very personable and are good at putting people of varying backgrounds at ease, which I think Dr. Norwood's patients would appreciate."

"I have always tried to do my best," Burke said.

"It shows."

Burke stood and paced a little. The offer had caught him entirely unaware. He would not for a moment have suspected anything like this. And yet, it was precisely what he had dreamed of from the moment he'd first begun imagining a career as a doctor.

He would have a thriving practice. Inheriting one that was already functional and operational meant he likely would have an infirmary that he didn't have to cobble together from loose parts and leftover straw.

And Sophie lived in Baltimore. Sophie would be nearby. Perhaps he could sit with her in a sitting room again, share his memories, enjoy the warmth of her beside him. He could come to know her better. He could hold her. And kiss her. He wouldn't be running out of time; he'd be granted an endless supply of it.

"I realize," Mrs. Archer said, "that you leaving with such little warning would place the people of Hope Springs in a difficult situation. They don't have another doctor or anyone who comes close to your knowledge and expertise. Maura Callaghan could continue working as a midwife, but that doesn't address most of the difficulties they face here."

That was the biggest sticking point of all. He was needed in this valley. Without a doctor to take his place, they would be in real difficulty.

"I'm not in need of an immediate answer," Mrs. Archer said. "I can send a reply telegram indicating that I might know of a doctor who would be a good fit. But I, obviously, will not accept

on your behalf.”

“I cannot express how much I appreciate this. Not only the offer to act as an intermediary, but the fact that you thought of me at all. I’m a humble frontier doctor. I long ago stopped thinking of myself as anything remotely impressive.”

She smiled a little. “That is likely one of the reasons why you are so impressive. You don’t flatter yourself but let your work do the bragging for you.”

“How soon are you returning to Baltimore?” he asked.

“In likely two weeks. Joseph says that is about when the earliest of the crops will begin to be harvested, and while Sophie and I would hardly be in the way, I do think it would simplify things for him if he was not attempting to juggle a brand-new child, a wife recovering from childbirth, the harvesting of his crops, and houseguests.”

“That is very considerate of you,” he said.

“I realize I can come across as priggish. But I am not so unbending as those of my upbringing often seem to be. I suppose I could do a bit better about making sure Sophie sees that. She might feel more at ease, more willing to let her guard down a little.”

He hoped they did have the conversation Sophie meant to undertake. They would both likely learn a lot about each other. Of course, if he accepted this new job, he would likely be making the journey with them. He didn’t know if that would be a help or a hindrance.

His mind continued spinning as he made his way from the house. He came upon Sophie making her way up the porch steps just as he stepped out. He couldn’t think of a better person to help him sort his confused thoughts.

“May I talk with you a moment?” he asked.

“Of course.”

He took her hand in his. That had become the way of things between them. He hadn’t kissed her again since the night he missed the *céili*. Until he knew what their futures held, it seemed irresponsible. “I have just had a very unexpected conversation with Mrs. Archer.”

“You have?”

He nodded as they walked slowly along the path in front of the house. They were headed in the general direction of the barn, outside of which was his waiting buggy and horse. “It seems Dr. Norwood back in Baltimore is looking to retire.”

“He *is* growing older,” Sophie acknowledged.

“Mrs. Archer means to suggest to him that I would be a good choice for taking over his practice.”

“Truly?” She looked surprised. He supposed that was understandable; the offer had caught him off guard too.

“She has confidence in me as a doctor and feels I would do a good job of looking after Dr. Norwood’s patients.”

“They, of course, couldn’t hope for a better doctor.”

He smiled at her, appreciating the compliment. “I would have to sort out what to do about Hope Springs. Without me, they wouldn’t have a doctor, and they need one. There are enough difficulties here that the valley would quickly be in dire straits.”

“Oh.” She sounded every bit as surprised as she had when he’d first told her about the offer. “Then, you have decided to accept.”

“Not decided.” They reached his waiting buggy. Keeping her hand in his, he leaned his back against the side of the vehicle. “I am pondering the offer. I’m sincerely considering it.”

“You would leave Hope Springs?” she asked.

“I would have an infirmary that was already functioning. It would have furniture that I wasn’t required to make from scraps. I wouldn’t be saving every penny trying to obtain the medications I needed, knowing there were some that might be forever out of my reach.”

“And your practice and patients would be impressive.”

“I can’t think of anyone who would consider the Baltimore practice a failure.”

“People like Dr. Montgomery?”

“Or any of the many people who assumed I would amount to nothing.”

Her brow pulled low. “Is that still what is most important to you? That other people approve of what you’ve accomplished?”

“It isn’t just the that. It’s something bigger, something deeper.”

“I know,” she said. “I hadn’t meant to make you feel badly about this opportunity. I really hadn’t. Your memories of Robert’s stories helped me understand something that I’m not even certain *you* understand. Having the comfort that comes from not scraping together a living or a home, the idea of having all you needed and extra, has meant something enormous to you for nearly all your life. It brings reassurance and hope. I can understand how that would be very appealing.”

“But you still don’t seem to truly approve.”

She stepped a little away, shaking her head. “Again, it is not my approval or anyone else’s that should matter to you in these things. You need to see the value in what you do. You need to be proud of and excited about the path you’re taking. *You*, not anyone else.”

“Is it so wrong that I had hoped that you would be excited?”

“Of course not, but that’s not what you were saying. If it were simply a matter of whether or not I was happy for you, that would be a different discussion altogether. But that’s not ever what you say. You’re forever wondering if what you do and who you are is good enough for other people. I wish you could see what the people of this town see, Burke Jones. You’ve always been good enough for them. More than ‘good enough,’ you matter to them. And not just as a doctor. They enjoy having you here. You, the person, not merely the physician. I wish there were a way to help you see that.”

“The people of Baltimore would likely be happy to have me as well.”

She smiled, but something in the expression was a little sad. “I would hope they would be wise enough to be *more* than pleased to have you. I would hope they would realize how fortunate they are.”

“They?” he repeated, realizing he was echoing Mrs. Archer’s question to him a few weeks earlier. “Do you not consider yourself one of them?”

She sighed a little. “Lately, I don’t know what I think.”

And on that confusing declaration, she walked back to the house, leaving him beside his buggy, more confused and more unsure than he had been in a long time.



Chapter Sixteen

Sophie walked with her arm through Mrs. Archer's along the banks of the Hope Springs river. Joseph and Katie's farm was ideally situated for spending a peaceful afternoon enjoying the beauties of nature. Sophie would miss that when she eventually left.

"Joseph has made a fine life for himself here, hasn't he?" Mrs. Archer said.

"He certainly has. He has a prosperous farm and a beautiful family. He's able to still be involved in the business in Baltimore, which is a benefit to both of you. And he gets to live here amongst the friendliest of neighbors, which is a decidedly lovely thing."

"You have grown fond of Hope Springs," Mrs. Archer said.

"How could I not? It's wonderful."

"You will miss it when we leave."

Sophie swallowed against the lump of apprehension in her throat. She'd been carrying a thought, something of a secret with her, and she needed to talk about it to someone. "In all honesty, I'll do more than miss it. I'll grieve. There is a growing part of me that wants to stay."

Far from shocked, Mrs. Archer patted her hand. "I've suspected as much. You're different here, Sophie. You're more like you were in those first couple of years you were going about to various soirees and gatherings. You're freer and happier. It's been wonderful to see that side of you again, but it also has made me a little sad, knowing you'll tuck her firmly away when you go back to Baltimore."

"Baltimore doesn't appreciate her."

Looking as regal and intimidating as ever, Mrs. Archer declared, "Baltimore doesn't *deserve* her."

Sophie smiled broadly. "You are good for me. I don't know what I would have done without you these last years."

"I can say precisely the same thing, Sophie. I think we have been good for each other."

Their path took them to a copse of trees. They paused in the shade, the river babbling beside them, the ever-present breeze rustling the leaves.

"I hope the journey back to Baltimore is easier than the one here," Sophie said. "You have to promise me that you'll tell me if you start feeling unwell. We'll need to stop so you can rest."

"Do you mean to go back?" Mrs. Archer asked.

The question surprised her. "Of course I do."

"There is no 'of course' about it. You have come to love this place enough that you will grieve it. That is not a small thing."

"If I don't go back, you would have to make the journey by yourself," Sophie reminded her. "Though you are an intelligent and capable woman, having a companion increases the chances that, should you need something, you will be able to get it."

“If Dr. Jones accepts the offer that has been made, I won’t be making the journey alone. He would accompany me.”

Sophie hadn’t realized he would be leaving so soon. “If he accepts the offer, he will be living in Baltimore.”

Mrs. Archer nodded. “Which, I imagine, complicates your dilemma a little.”

Sophie could feel herself blush. “How do you mean?”

“I have eyes, Sophie. You’ve grown partial to him. Though you would enjoy living in Hope Springs, having Burke Jones in Baltimore would add some appeal to that side of the country.”

She couldn’t deny that was true. “There’s no guarantee he will choose to go.”

“And there’s no guarantee that if you were both to go back there, you wouldn’t, in the end, regret choosing not to stay here.”

“I would get to be with you, and I would not regret that.”

Mrs. Archer’s expression was soft and empathetic. “I know that. I would love to continue having you with me. But I never expected ours would be a permanent arrangement. I wanted you to know you were loved and valued, that someone cared about you. I never meant it to be a landing place for you, but rather a launching point. If remaining in Hope Springs is the next leg of your journey, I want you to take it. And Dr. Jones coming to Baltimore might be the means of allowing you to. You wouldn’t have to worry about me making the journey alone.”

“You would still be living alone, though. I would feel terribly guilty about that.”

“Oh, Sophie. Guilt is near about the worst reason to make any decision.”

“What about integrity? I gave you my word that I would make this journey with you here *and back*.”

“Never you fear; if staying is what you are meant to do, we will find a means of addressing that difficulty.”

Sophie shook her head. “I never want to be a difficulty to you.”

Mrs. Archer took both of her hands and held them gently but firmly. “Sophie Kingston, you have spent your entire adult life making decisions based on what was best for other people. It is time you gave yourself that same consideration. You need to make the decision that is best for you—not for me, not for your family, but for *you*.”

It was so similar to the chastisement she’d given Burke, that hearing it directed at herself added extra emphasis. She was as guilty of what she had told him he was. They were two peas in a pod.

“I will think about it,” she said.

“Please do.”

Emma stood not terribly far off. Mrs. Archer clearly saw her there as well.

“I’m going to walk back with Emma. Your decision does not need to be made right away, but I suspect it will be more easily made if you have a bit of peace in which to ponder it.”

She crossed to her granddaughter, and the two of them made their way leisurely back toward the house. Sophie sat on the ground beneath an obliging tree, her back pressed to its trunk. It was yet another way in which Hope Springs offered a bit of freedom. She had continued to leave off her crinolette. That allowed her some physical freedom. And she could sit on the ground with no one looking at her askance. These were small things, but part of the larger feeling of freedom here.

If she stayed, she likely wouldn’t see her family again. She might travel back East for a visit now and then. But such a thing took money, and she had no idea if she could even find a job. It was possible her family would make the journey out to see her. But then, they hadn’t made the much easier journey from Boston to Baltimore in the years since they’d moved. She could continue exchanging letters with her sister, and it would be almost as if nothing had changed.

She would miss Mrs. Archer. The woman had become like a second mother to her, and she would grieve the separation.

Though she’d only known Burke for a few weeks, she knew she would miss him too if he went to Baltimore and she stayed in Hope Springs. She would miss him deeply. She would always

wonder what might have become of their connection if it hadn't been severed. If she went back to Baltimore and he did as well, perhaps they would be together. That would be a wonderful thing.

How was she ever to make this decision? There were aspects of each choice that appealed to her, and aspects of each that scared her. No matter what she chose, she would have regrets.



That week's *céili* was being held at the inn, though Burke wasn't entirely certain why. Generally, that move was only made when the weather was uncooperative. But the weather was fine. Still, he wasn't complaining about the convenience. All he needed to do was walk down the porch.

The gathering was lively and exciting. All the valley couldn't fit into the public room, so the party spilled out in front of the inn as well. In winter, when the *céilís* were always held at the inn, not everyone in the valley could make the journey with snow and ice hampering the way, so room wasn't as much of an issue then.

They were more than an hour into the evening's festivities. Burke had little Claire O'Connor in his arms, keeping her happy while her parents were helping see to something. As always, he had been greeted by the town's children who always seemed happy to see him. He appreciated that. For someone who had been quite lonely and afraid as a child, there was a great deal of satisfaction in offering reassurance and welcome to little ones.

He'd been watching the interactions that evening more closely than usual. Sophie's words, as they so often did, stayed with him. What *he* thought of his life and accomplishments needed to be most important. So what did he think? If he were to look at who he was and what he did without regard to other peoples' evaluations, what would he think of it? If he were to set aside those childhood dreams of grandeur, would he be proud of the person and the doctor he had become?

He watched Maura Callaghan with her little child, smiling over at her husband. If not for the medications he had been able to prescribe and the help he'd given her in strengthening her lungs, she would not have survived. He didn't doubt that for a moment.

Bernardo Díaz, a cowboy who worked out at the ranches, was there that night as well. He'd broken his arm early in the spring, and it had needed to be set. Without careful care, it would not have healed properly, and Bernardo would have lost his livelihood, perhaps permanently.

Tiny Lydia O'Connor spun about, taking in the music, and delighting in it. She had been so afraid and so withdrawn when she'd first arrived. He felt confident he had helped her feel safe enough in Hope Springs to blossom.

He'd doctored any number of the local children through various illnesses and injuries. He'd been present to help people as they'd passed from this world to the next, their circumstances not being ones he could help. He'd been in a place to offer them comfort.

Perhaps he hadn't the finest infirmary in the world, or all the luxuries of life, but he had reason to be proud of what he'd done here in Hope Springs. The people he served had come to matter to him, and that was a sign of a life well lived.

At the orphanage, they'd looked after each other and had mattered to each other. But they'd known perfectly well that very few people cared what happened to them. Perhaps that was part of his struggle; he wanted to know if he mattered now. It would be easier to tell if he were richly remunerated for his work or was noticed by big-city newspapers and influential people. But was that truly the praise he needed?

Tavish O'Connor claimed his little girl, thanking Burke for looking after her. "My pleasure. Claire's a little angel."

"Takes after her mother," Tavish said.

"I won't argue with you there."

Tavish chuckled and bounced his girl.

Patrick happened past in the next moment. "If my Eliza runs herself off her feet tonight, promise you'll help me convince her to rest tomorrow," Patrick said to Burke. "She won't listen to her husband, but she might listen to a friend who also happens to be a doctor."

“I’ll do my best,” Burke said with a laugh.

It was only after Patrick continued on that Burke really thought about what he’d said. “A friend who also happens to be a doctor.”

Also happens to be a doctor. Patrick considered him a friend first. That meant a lot to him, even if it didn’t impress anyone else.

Across the way, the musicians began a new tune, and a voice led the singing that hadn’t before. All eyes turned in that direction.

A feather might have knocked Burke over when he saw Sophie standing with the musicians, singing with all her heart. She’d told him she liked to sing, but never allowed herself to indulge in it. Hers might not have been the most refined voice, but it was pleasant.

He watched in awe as she lost herself in the song, enjoyment written on every feature of her face. It was, indeed, bringing her joy. Would she deny herself that pleasure when she returned to Baltimore? He suspected she would, and that broke his heart a little.

But then, he’d also lose some things if he went there. Doctors with fine practices didn’t spend their days at *céilís*, holding children and laughing with innkeepers. He would miss that.

The song ended, and Seamus hopped on a chair in the midst of them, calling all their attention. “Neighbors, we’ve a bit of an announcement from Thomas O’Connor. Lend him your ears.”

Mr. O’Connor stepped out in the center of the room but without climbing atop any furniture. “We thank you all for agreeing to this change of location. It’s been crucial that we were here, otherwise our secret project would never’ve been completed.”

Secret project?

“With so many in and out all evening, it proved the easiest thing to manage what we set out to do,” Mr. O’Connor said. “And with our local doctor being a favorite of the children, it proved even easier to keep him distracted.”

Ripples of laughter filled the room. Tavish nudged Burke with his elbow.

“What have you been up to?” Burke whispered.

“You’ll see,” Tavish said.

“It’s not quite three years since he came to live among us,” Mr. O’Connor said, looking directly at Burke. “And even if we took all night, we couldn’t list all the ways he’s helped us in that time. And even Seamus here, who we’ve no doubt spent a great deal of time kissing the Blarney Stone, could possibly find the words to express how grateful we are. We’ve been thinking these past weeks, and we’ve found a way to help you see that we appreciate you.”

Burke looked around the room. No one was offering any clues.

“Hop on over to your house,” Mr. O’Connor said. “You’ll find our offering there.”

A little nervous and more than a little confused, Burke made his way slowly from the room, feeling all their eyes on him as he went. He stepped out and walked down the porch. Those outside watched him with conspiratorial smiles. Apparently, the entire gathering was aware of this surprise, whatever it was.

He stepped inside his house. Nothing looked different. He hadn’t taken more than a single step inside the sitting room when he stopped in awe. Shelves had been installed precisely where he had eventually meant to put them. A long bench had been placed beneath the far window, just as he’d one day hoped to do. A small bookcase sat beside his favorite chair, with his books neatly set inside.

Aidan O’Connor stood not far from the door, looking sheepish and nervous. “I did my best to tell them what it is you’ve said you wanted. I hope I got it right.”

The boy had helped him any number of times there in the infirmary. Burke hadn’t realized he mentioned these improvements, but he must have.

“It’s perfect.”

Aidan breathed a sigh of relief. “It ain’t all, either. They’ve been working upstairs, too.”

Too shocked to even say anything, he made his way up the stairs. His first convalescing room looked much as it always did, but with a folded set of linens at the foot of the bed. He hadn’t any

extra linens. These, then, must have been brought by the town.

He looked in the second room. A stool, bedside table, and water pitcher had been added. So had shelves along the wall next to the door. That would help him keep the room ready for patients. And, as in the first room, a folded set of extra linens sat at the foot of the bed.

Burke stepped into the last of his convalescing rooms. The bed that Mr. Campo had made and the mattress Burke had stuffed were in place, something he hadn't managed to do yet. The bed was made, with a quilt spread over it and an extra set of linens folded at the foot. And, the room had a stool, a bedside table, and a water pitcher.

He didn't even realize he'd told anyone exactly what he wanted in each of these rooms. But, somehow, they knew. Someone had heard, and someone had remembered. And they, on their own, had made a dream of his come true.

"You aren't always good about accepting their gratitude," Sophie said, having somehow stepped up beside him without him realizing. "I hope you will see this for the sincere expression it is. And I hope you will embrace it. You deserve it."

He set an arm around her shoulders. "And I hope you embrace the freedom you have here and the joy it is to be your true self. You deserve that."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. He looked over the room once more, feeling emotion burn in his throat. He, the unwanted orphan who hadn't ever mattered to anyone, had been given a tremendous gift.

That moment, no matter where life took him, would always mean the world to him.



Chapter Seventeen

Before Sophie's arrival six weeks earlier, Burke had spent as much time at the Archers' as he did at any of the other homes in Hope Springs. But lately, he was there almost more often than he was at his own house.

A few days had passed since the *céili* at which the town had surprised him with the remaining improvements he'd needed to make at his infirmary. He'd spent those days deeply pondering, and he'd finally reached a decision.

And so, he was at the Archers' house. Sophie had been instrumental in helping him sort out what he wanted out of life. He wanted to share with her first what he had decided. Mrs. Archer was also there, and she needed to know, as well.

He was shown inside to where the Archer family and Sophie were gathered in the sitting room. He dipped his head to them all.

"I'm hoping to talk with Sophie."

With speed that was both entertaining and a little bit embarrassing, Katie and Joseph ushered their family out of the room and through the door to the dining room. Burke and Sophie were granted privacy, but there was no doubt the family suspected the feelings that had been growing between them.

If only Burke wasn't coming to deliver difficult news.

"Whatever you've come to say must be urgent," Sophie said. "You look ready to burst."

He nodded. "I've given a lot of thought to the many conversations we've had, and the things that have happened here in Hope Springs. And I've made a decision about the offer Mrs. Archer has extended."

"Well, that's a coincidence. *I* have made a decision about my own future as well."

"You have been pondering your future?" She hadn't mentioned that to him.

"I have been. And I've struggled with it as much as you have."

"What have you decided?"

She shook her head. "You first. I don't think I can endure the suspense of waiting to hear."

"I know I could be a successful doctor in Baltimore. I could do the job well. The doctor whose practice I would take over there would be pleased. The patients I looked after would be well cared for and receive the best medical care I could offer them. And that would mean a lot to me. But I could have that anywhere. I would be a good doctor no matter where I was practicing."

"That's true," Sophie said. She watched him closely, seemingly as interested in his answer as he had been in reaching it.

"But, in Hope Springs, I have more than that. I have family. I lived my whole life without that, so I didn't recognize what I had here for what it was. Only while standing in my infirmary, looking at all they had done for me, did I realize that's what I've found here."

"They really do think of you that way," Sophie said.

“I don’t know that I would have that in Baltimore. I wouldn’t be as much a part of my patients’ lives as I am part of my neighbors’ lives here. And that isn’t something I’m willing to give up.”

Sophie pressed her palms together and rested her fingers against her lower lip.

“I’ve decided to stay in Hope Springs,” he said. “It will never be impressive to some people, but I love what I’ve made here, and I’m proud of the life I’ve built.”

“I cannot tell you how happy that makes me.”

He took her hand. “I’m grateful to you for helping me sort through it. You asked me difficult questions, but they were the ones I most needed to answer. I would still be wallowing in that doubt now if not for you.” Burke raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers softly. “Thank you, Sophie.”

“This makes me so happy,” she said again, squeezing his fingers.

“What is it *you’ve* been debating?” he asked.

She kept her hand in his, but her expression turned heavier. “Actually, your decision complicates mine a little.”

“How so?”

“For a little while now, I’ve been pondering staying in Hope Springs instead of returning to Baltimore.”

His heart leapt in his chest. Was she staying?

“You see, if I stay, and so do you, there’ll be no one to travel back with Mrs. Archer.”

At that, hope bubbled further. “*Have* you decided to stay here?”

“I have. Or I had, anyway. But I can’t leave Mrs. Archer in the lurch.”

Burke set his arms around her. She leaned into his embrace.

“We will think of something,” he said. “We’ll think of a way for both of us to stay here and her to get back home.”

She smiled up at him. “I hope so. That both of us decided independently to stay here is a gift of fate I don’t think we ought to ignore.”

“I can’t imagine fate would offer us this opportunity only to snatch it away so quickly.”

Without warning, the door to the dining room flew open and Mrs. Archer, looking more like a general directing her troops than a society lady visiting her family, directed them all back inside. Her family looked as confused as Burke felt and Sophie appeared to be.

“What is this, Mother?” Joseph asked as he walked past her.

“Let us call it fate intervening once again.” Mrs. Archer gave Sophie a pointed look.

Apparently, their conversation had been overheard.

Burke kept his arm around Sophie and tucked her up against him, hoping to lend her strength as well as communicate to the others that no amount of embarrassment was going to get him to leave her side.

“You might as well sit,” Mrs. Archer told the others. “This might take a while.”

They all sat, except for Emma, whom Mrs. Archer waved over next to her. She put an arm around her granddaughter and squeezed her shoulders. “Now is the time, sweetie.”

“I’m nervous,” Emma said.

Mrs. Archer nudged her forward.

Emma took a breath and squared her shoulders. “I’ve been thinking about something for a while now. It’s not a sudden thought or a whim.”

“What is it?” Joseph asked.

“When Grandmother goes back to Baltimore—” She paused. She swallowed and took a breath. “When she goes back, I want to go with her.”

A shocked silence fell over the room.

Joseph managed to find his voice first. “That is not a journey you can make both directions easily or quickly. And it wouldn’t be a good idea for you to travel back here alone.”

She shook her head. “Papa, I don’t mean I want to go with her as a traveling companion. I want to stay there and live with her.”

The color drained from Joseph’s face. Katie’s eyes pulled wide.

“I like Baltimore. I’ve always enjoyed visiting. And—I’m done with my schooling, and there is nothing for me to do here. I can’t imagine spending the next years of my life sitting around not being needed.”

“Emma, you will always be needed in this family,” Katie said.

“I don’t mean I’m not loved. I know I am. I know that you like having me here. But it’s been a while since I’ve liked being in Hope Springs.” Emma’s voice shook with barely held back emotion. “I haven’t, really, since the fire. It’s hard to be here where I remember that every day.”

Tears began forming in her eyes. The rest of the family had grown tearful as well.

“It hurts to be here,” Emma said, her voice breaking. “I think I need some time away. I need distance. I need some peace, even just a little.”

Burke’s heart ached for the young lady as she echoed the exact sentiments Finbarr had expressed. The fire had occurred long before Burke’s arrival, but the impact of it continued to be felt.

“You would be so far away,” Joseph said.

“But you visit Baltimore regularly. I would still see you. And Grandmother tells me there’s a school there where I could learn to be a teacher. I’ve always thought I’d be a good teacher.”

“You would be an excellent teacher,” Katie said.

“I can’t learn any more here. But I could there.”

Joseph looked to his mother. “How long would it take for her to get her schooling as a teacher?”

“A couple of years.”

Joseph paced away, running his hand through his hair. Burke could only imagine how difficult it was for him to even contemplate the idea of one of his children being so far away for so long.

Ivy spoke for the first time. “What if you like Baltimore so much you don’t ever want to come back?” Her voice shook.

Emma dropped her gaze and didn’t answer. Burke suspected Emma wasn’t planning to come back.

“Oh, this just breaks my heart,” Sophie whispered. “The amount of pain she must be in to be willing to leave her family.”

Burke pulled her closer.

“I know it will be hard, Papa,” Emma said. “But I can’t stay here. It hurts to be in Hope Springs. It has for a long time. If I go with Grandmother, I think I have a chance to start feeling better. I need that more than I’ve ever been able to tell you.”

Joseph returned to where she stood and pulled her into a fierce hug. “This isn’t me agreeing,” he said. “I just need you to know that I love you.”

“I know you do, Papa.”

Mrs. Archer was not a particularly emotional person, but she too had grown teary.

“I suspect we have a lot to talk about,” Katie said.

“Take your time,” Mrs. Archer said.

Joseph walked with his arm around his daughter back to where his wife sat holding their newest little girl. Ivy brought Sean over with her to where they were, and the family sat holding each other.

Mrs. Archer moved to stand next to Sophie and Burke.

“They might not allow her to go,” Sophie said. “But we will make certain you have someone to go back with you.”

Mrs. Archer smiled, a little sadly. "I have every confidence they will let her go. Joseph has told me many times that he can tell she's in pain but hasn't known how to help. And I think Emma is right. She needs to be away from this place where she has suffered so much. She needs peace."

"As someone who was brought into your home broken and hurting and in need of peace, I can say with confidence she couldn't hope for a better place to heal."

Mrs. Archer reached up and patted Burke's cheek, then took hold of Sophie's hand.

"I don't think it's anything short of a miracle that you two found each other. You are good for each other. You make each other stronger and bolder, and that is a fine thing."

Sophie leaned against Burke's shoulder.

"If there is one thing this valley specializes in," he said, "it's hope."



Chapter Eighteen

The inn was busy when Tuesday rolled around. It was the day the stage arrived. Some weeks, the stage that stopped was heading north from the train depot. Some weeks, it was heading south *toward* the train depot. Now and then, one stage going in each direction descended upon Eliza and Patrick's inn on the same day. This was one of those days.

Sophie had helped Eliza often enough that she knew how to do so without needing directions. She carried food out of the kitchen, made certain everyone had water. She helped Patrick where he needed it. She was at home in this inn. And it was a happy place to pass the time.

The stage travelers had been assigned rooms. Meals were served. The musicians were getting ready to begin their weekly entertainment.

Eliza might eventually be able to breathe.

Burke slipped into the inn, having been off checking on a family down the Red Road. He spotted Sophie and smiled. Her heart flipped about as it always did when he looked at her that way. She crossed to him, and he set his arms around her.

"I've missed you," she said.

"And I have missed you." He pressed a light kiss to her lips.

"Keep that up, you two, and I'll send for the preacher," Patrick warned good-naturedly as he passed them.

Burke's chest shook with a laugh. She loved that he enjoyed the teasing. It was yet another sign that he was truly at home in this place.

"The inn's busy tonight," he said.

She nodded. "Two stages stopped here today."

"Well, Patrick might tease, but Eliza will have my neck if I keep you from helping." He gave her another quick kiss. "I'm going to put my bag away and shake a bit of the dust off me. I'll be back."

"Don't take too long," she called after him.

From their place in the corner of the public room, the musicians *ooh'd* and *ahh'd* and laughed. Everyone in town was well aware that their doctor and their newest arrival were quite sweet on each other. Sophie didn't mind them knowing. It made Hope Springs feel less like a "they" and more like a "we."

She stepped back into the kitchen to see what else she could do. Eliza was washing dishes, so Sophie took up the task of drying.

"Thank you for your help today," Eliza said. "We aren't often this busy, but when we are, it's a bit overwhelming."

"I'm happy to help. I don't have many skills, so it's nice to have found something I'm good at."

"The stage heading north arrived with a letter from the stage company," Eliza said. "This area of the country is getting busier. They're hoping to begin sending two additional stages each month."

And this will be an overnight stay for them as well. The crowds will be spread out a little more, but we will be busier.”

“That’s good news.”

“Patrick and I certainly aren’t complaining,” Eliza said. “And we’re wondering if you might consider helping us on a more regular basis.”

“Of course.”

Eliza shook her head. “I don’t mean as a favor. We know you’re planning to stay in Hope Springs, but as far as we’ve heard you don’t yet have a place to live.”

“I don’t. I keep hoping something miraculous will happen.”

“Maybe it’s your prayers that convinced the stage company to add two more runs,” Eliza said. “We have a small room upstairs that we don’t generally offer as accommodations, on account of we’ve only ever used two of our four rooms up there, and the fourth one is the smallest of them. We realize it’s not luxurious, and we wouldn’t expect you to make it permanent. But, if you were willing to work here, at least on those days when the stage comes through, and maybe help in the winter when the *céilís* are held here, you could have the use of that room. And, we’d include you in all our family meals, so you wouldn’t be hungry. We couldn’t offer you pay, which is a little embarrassing.”

“Don’t be embarrassed; I’m grateful. I had nowhere to go and no prospects for supporting myself. This is heaven sent.”

Eliza’s shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath of relief. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that. I had so hoped you’d be willing, but I didn’t want you to feel we were taking advantage of your generosity rather than offering what little we could.”

“You and Patrick are like family to me. I’d never think so poorly of you.”

Eliza dried her hands on a towel and pulled Sophie into a hug, which she returned. “I’m so glad you’re staying, Sophie. The entire town is.”

“I never imagined when I first decided to travel here that so much of my life would change.”

“When I came here from New York, I had the goal of simply being able to support myself and my daughter. But this town changed my life too. This is a magical place.”

“So I am discovering.”

Patrick stepped into the kitchen in that moment. He eyed them both. “I’ll assume the smiles and the hugs means she’s accepted the position?”

Eliza nodded and took up her dishes once more.

“At least until a better ‘proposal’ comes around,” Patrick said with a mischievous smile.

Eliza flicked water at him. “Stop that. You’ll scare her off.”

But Patrick wasn’t deterred. He, too, gave Sophie a quick hug. “We’re glad you’re staying, Sophie. I’m glad you’ll be nearby. You’re a good friend to my Eliza.”

“And she’s a dear friend to me.”

Sophie stepped back out into the public room. Burke entered at the same moment. The musicians ribbed him again, but he’d proven himself a tremendously good sport.

The town had celebrated her decision to stay, continued to express their appreciation for him, while at the same time expressing sorrow as word began to spread that Emma Archer would be leaving. Mrs. Archer had been right about that. The girl’s family was heartbroken to see her leave, but she was hurting more deeply than even they had realized, and they wanted her to be able to heal.

Little Lydia ran over to Burke, and he lifted her into his arms.

“They’re going to play music,” Lydia said.

“I know,” he said. “I’m hoping you’ll dance with me.”

Lydia nodded and grinned.

Sophie took a moment to make certain the stage travelers had what they needed before she took hold of little Eoin and sat in the rocking chair that had recently been placed in a corner for that

purpose. She held the little baby and rocked him as the music began.

Lydia and Burke undertook a rather ridiculous but inarguably joyful dance together. The travelers clearly enjoyed the music as much as the musicians enjoyed making it. Halfway through the second tune, Burke slipped over to where Sophie sat and pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

“What is that for?” she asked, incredibly pleased he’d thought of it.

“Just because I love you, and I think you ought to know that.”

Lydia giggled but didn’t object.

“I love you too, Burke Jones.”

He danced away with his armful. She watched him as the evening continued. He had told her this valley specialized in hope. She was beginning to suspect it also worked miracles.



The Archers and O’Connors were gathered at the inn as they had so often before. This time, however, the mood was more subdued. They were together for the purpose of bidding farewell to Emma. She had grown up in this town. She’d lived here all her life.

Burke hadn’t known her as long as the rest of Hope Springs had, but anyone who had known Emma couldn’t help but love her. And anyone who knew how much her family loved her couldn’t help but grieve for them. It was a difficult thing to be separated from a loved one.

It did help that Emma, herself, seemed excited. There was, of course, sadness and a little nervousness in her expression and posture, but, overall, she seemed happy and even a little relieved. Sophie had told him again and again that the girl couldn’t hope for a better place to heal than Mrs. Archer’s home. And, though no one was sure Emma would decide to return to Hope Springs, they felt that living with her grandmother would tie her back to her family and increase the chances that they would see her again.

Burke could tell that Sophie was going to miss Mrs. Archer and, though she had made the decision willingly, was a little sad at the idea of not living with her anymore.

“Do you regret your choice?” he asked her, standing beside her as the farewell gathering was held.

“No regrets.” She kissed him on the cheek. “None at all.”

He put his arm around her and held her close.

The families that had gathered had little trinkets for Emma, little remembrances. She had received a hand-embroidered handkerchief; a ribbon for her hair. She was given a little bag for carrying her belongings as she traveled. It was all very humble, but heartfelt. Burke knew perfectly well how much those offerings meant to a person.

She had only just thanked the elder Mr. and Mrs. O’Connor for their gift, when an odd scraping sound pulled everyone’s attention to the inn doors.

There stood Finbarr, the tip of his cane on the floor in front of him. He never went anywhere. He attended no parties or gatherings. Even his own family never saw him. And there he was.

Mrs. O’Connor rushed to her youngest son and hugged him quite without warning. “Finbarr, you’ve come!”

“Miss Emma is leaving. I wasn’t going to not say goodbye.”

Not far distant, Emma watched him with unmistakable tears in her eyes. So much of her pain, the entire town knew, was connected to this young man and the difficult history they shared.

She stood and seemed to be shaking a little bit. But with the courage and strength inherent in her, she spoke. “We haven’t seen you in a while.”

“From what I’ve heard, we might not see *you* for a while.”

She took a breath. “Baltimore is an interesting place. I’ll have a lot to do there.”

He nodded, but not in agreement. "You'll likely forget all about us, won't you?"

"I'll try not to."

Finbarr's unseeing gaze shifted in the general direction of the rest of the gathering. "Has she been given a proper sendoff?"

From among them, Tavish called back, "Not yet."

Finbarr gave a quick dip of his head and, using his cane to guide him, moved in the direction of his brother's voice. Madra trailed in behind him, keeping close. "Then, I'm not too late."

"You haven't joined us for one of these in a long time," Mr. O'Connor said.

"This isn't an ordinary goodbye. It needs to be done right."

In a whisper, Sophie said, "I don't think anyone expected him to come."

Burke certainly hadn't. "It seems Emma means more to him than even she realized."

"But to realize that only now that she's leaving..." Sophie sighed.

"At least she knows," he said. "I think it was important that she does."

"Best start us off, Tavish," Mr. O'Connor said. "Choose a tune, and we'll join you."

Emotion touched the faces around them. Burke hadn't experienced one of these farewells for himself, but he could tell it was something important, something personal.

In a clear and strong voice, Tavish began to sing.

Of all the comrades that e'er I had,

They're sorry for my goin' away.

Patrick joined in.

And all the sweethearts that e'er I had,

They'd wish me one more day to stay.

More of the family added their voices.

But since it fell into my lot

That I should rise and you should not,

There was a pause, and then Finbarr, alone, continued.

I'll gently rise and softly call,

"Good night and joy be to you all."

Emma wiped away a tear as the O'Connor family continued on as one.

So fill to me the parting glass

And drink a health what e'er befalls.

Then gently rise and softly call,

"Good night and joy be to you all."

Tears flowed openly around the room. Finbarr had not joined in anything for years, and there he was, among his family, bidding farewell to the nearly grown little girl he'd once loved. Joseph and Katie put their arms around their daughter as the singing continued. This would be a difficult parting, and no one could be certain when they would be reunited. Or if they even would be.

Burke tucked Sophie into a true hug and could feel her emotions as well. No one watching the scene could possibly be unmoved. He kissed the top of her head, then leaned his head against hers.

"Farewells are always so difficult," she said quietly.

"Then let's not ever make any," he said. "Let's promise each other forever. No goodbyes. No partings."

"Agreed." She looked up at him, her smile genuinely happy despite the tears.

"And we'll begin a life here," he said. "Here, in this place where there's hope amongst the sorrows, and miracles amongst the struggles."

“A home and a future.”

“Together.”



Chapter Nineteen

More than a month had passed since Emma and Mrs. Archer left for Baltimore. So much had happened in that time. The stagecoach had made two additional runs that month. Aidan O'Connor had convinced Burke to take him on as something of an apprentice. And Sophie had made every dream Burke had come true by marrying him.

He didn't think he'd ever been happier in all his life.

The stage was stopping at the inn that day. Burke had reluctantly bid Sophie farewell that morning so she could help Eliza and Patrick prepare for the passengers. She loved her work at the inn and being part of Hope Springs. Burke loved building a life with her.

Sometimes he looked back at the dilemma he'd wrestled with mere months earlier and wondered how he could ever have been confused. Hope Springs was home. And family. He belonged here in a way he never had anywhere else. That his beloved Sophie was here further solidified his love of this tiny corner of the world. And that the people here loved her and embraced her increased his love for them.

He swept the afternoon's dust from the entryway and porch as he did every day he was home at this time. And, as happened at least once a week, the sound of the approaching stage rumbled in the distance.

Burke leaned his broom against the side of the building and slipped inside the inn. "Stage is approaching," he announced.

Eliza peeked her head out from the kitchen. "How near is it?"

"Just past the horizon."

Eliza disappeared again, though he heard her call out to Patrick.

Sophie stepped out of the kitchen, wearing the apron she'd adopted for days working at the inn. "I wonder how many passengers we'll have staying tonight."

"It's hard to say." He pulled her into an embrace. "So I'll hold you while I can. You might be incredibly busy in a few more minutes."

She pressed a kiss to his cheek, smiling as happily as she had for weeks now. Even setting aside their happiness together, he was relieved she hadn't returned to Baltimore. That city had been pressing the life out of her, and she, of all the people he knew, deserved to live a full and happy life.

Eliza stepped past them. "Best get that out of your systems, you two. We'll have travelers soon enough."

The town took such delight in teasing them.

Burke pulled his beloved ever closer. "The travelers will keep a bit longer."

Sophie shook in his arms with a silent laugh. "It's a good thing Eliza and Patrick need me here. Otherwise, you'd get me fired."

Not many minutes later, the stage rolled to a stop out in front of the inn. With his arm tucked around her, Burke and Sophie made their way to the inn's front doors to watch the disembarking and

count the arrivals.

Only one person emerged. One, whose appearance pulled a quiet expression of surprise from Burke.

“You know him?” Sophie asked.

“That’s Alexander—Dr. Montgomery, from Chicago.”

She turned worried eyes to him. “Are you ready for him?”

Burke shrugged. “He can think what he will. I’m not ashamed of what I have here.”

He took her hand and moved to the stagecoach. His friend grinned when he saw him. What could have been an awkward reunion proved anything but. Alexander shook his hand firmly and said again and again how good it was to see him.

“The inn, here, will see you settled and comfortable,” Burke assured him. “Then we can catch up a bit.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” He motioned to a crate just then being pulled out of the stage by the driver. “And while I’m settling in, you can sort this out.”

The crate was set on the porch in front of Burke. “What is it?”

“Medicines and powders and a few instruments I thought you might not be able to find out here.”

“Truly?” The crate was not small. Alexander must have brought a lot of things.

“And gladly. We promised each other we’d be good doctors. Part of that is helping each other where we can.”

We promised each other we’d be good doctors. All Burke had remembered was insisting he’d be successful. Alexander had remembered that differently. He’d remembered it better.

Burke waved Sophie over. “Sophie, this is Alexander Montgomery, my friend from Chicago.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Sophie said. “He’s spoken of you often.”

“Burke’s the very best,” Alexander said.

“I agree.” She smiled broadly.

“And how is it you know him so well?” Alexander asked.

Burke could laugh at that. “Apparently my letter didn’t arrive before you left Chicago. Sophie’s my wife.”

At that, Alexander’s face lit with delight. “Now that is the best news I’ve heard in ages.” He shook Sophie’s hand enthusiastically and slapped a hand on Burke’s shoulder. “You have the life you always dreamed of. A family and a home and a practice. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

Eliza took her guest firmly in hand and saw him inside the inn, with the promise that his traveling trunk would be brought up to their very best room, where he would be staying.

Sophie put her arms around Burke. “You were so convinced he would turn his nose up the moment he arrived.”

“I’ve never been happier to be wrong.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“And if he had arrived and found the whole place lacking?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I love the life I have here; no one’s opinion is ever going to change that.”

She leaned into his embrace. “I love the life we have here too.”

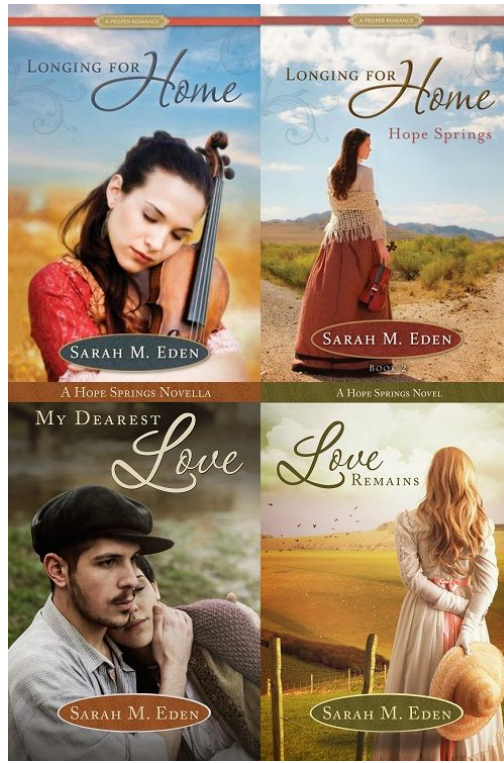
“And it’s only just begun. We have forever to make it everything both of us dream of.”

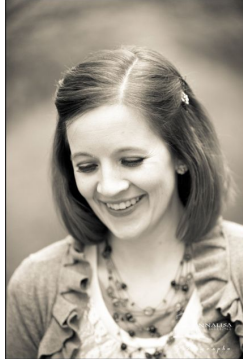
“This,” she said, holding him closer. “This is everything I dream of.”

Everything. Their life together truly was everything he could have wanted.

“I’ve long believed this valley produced miracles. But this, you and I, is my favorite miracle of all. One I plan to cherish forever.”

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SARAH M. EDEN is the *USA Today* bestselling author of multiple historical romances, including Foreword Review’s 2013 “IndieFab Book of the Year” gold medal winner for Best Romance, *Longing for Home*, and two-time Whitney Award Winner *Longing for Home: Hope Springs*. Combining her obsession with history and affinity for tender love stories, Sarah loves crafting witty characters and heartfelt romances. She has thrice served as the Master of Ceremonies for the Storymakers Writers Conference and acted as the Writer in Residence at the Northwest Writers Retreat. Sarah is represented by Pam Pho at D4EO Literary Agency.

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